

MANAGING CREATIVE TEAMS:
VIRTUAL WORK'S IMPACT ON CREATIVE CLIMATE AND CREATIVE PROCESS

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Abstract

The Covid-19 pandemic brought about a profound shift in the workplace, as in-person creative teams dispersed to remote work environments and organizations had to quickly implement ways to sustain creativity. This study examines this transition's impact on two dimensions of creative work: the climate for creativity and the creative process. This research analyzes interviews with eight creative team leaders in various managerial roles, and presents recommendations for technologies and workplace culture to foster creativity among virtual teams.

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Introduction

In the communications industry, the clichéd phrase “the only constant is change” describes our reality. Disruptions have always shaped the way communicators try to get their messages across to audiences and how the public receives and shares information. Sometimes, the disruption is a new technology that is generally seen as a net-positive for humanity: after the printing press, the Internet and the mobile phone are perhaps the most important innovations that changed the practice of journalism forever. Other times, the disruption is the result of an economic crisis that results in agency closures and layoffs, forcing journalists to learn new skills and try new media to earn a living.

The purpose of this research is to understand our current disruption – the Covid-19 pandemic and the shift to going almost entirely digital at work – and its implications for workers in creative roles. Change is a constant in every industry but many adaptations that workers have to make are for positive reasons: to learn a fascinating new technology; for a shot at a new role or promotion; or to simply keep up with fun cultural shifts and try new things. However, the pandemic forced changes to the workplace that were sudden, widespread and unexpected, making this an important context of study.

In 2021, “adapt or die” is more compelling than ever as creative teams cope with working 100% digitally. While it can be enjoyable to adapt in pursuit of a raise, more managerial responsibility, or personal enjoyment. Adapting at work *in response to a global pandemic* is an unusual existential stressor. People are forced now, and scrambling at times, to figure out how to stay creative and innovative while also trying to adapt to the new-normal virtual workplace. While creative teams are challenged and stretched in a virtual environment, some firms realize that they might not need to keep spending money on rented office space and employee travel. The 100% in-person office could be a thing of the past, and it would be beneficial to understand how creative workers can stay productive and successful in the new digital environment. This shift to remote work is durable and here to stay; there is no going back. This particular mode of disruption is a first for all of us and therefore warrants further study.

For many organizations, virtual workplaces or hybrid mixes of remote and in-person work, will solidify into the “next normal,” as outlined by McKinsey researchers (2021). This shift is likely permanent, so it is crucial for organizations to understand how creative teams are doing their work virtually. This research seeks to answer two questions:

RQ1: How did the shift to a virtual work environment affect a creative team’s climate for creativity?

RQ2: How did the shift to a virtual work environment affect a creative team’s creative process?

Review of Literature

Disruption, Defined

When we discuss disruption in a business environment, we first have to begin with a definition. This literature review will start there, then elaborate on how the meaning of “disruption” evolved to apply to the business market. Finally, this review will explain a modern definition of “disruption” and how it applies to this proposed research.

The simple dictionary definition of disruption is “a break or interruption in the normal course or continuation of some activity, process.” The term’s use in business to describe change and its effect on business markets dates to the 1990s (Christensen, 2016). However, interest in this topic among business leaders and scholars existed well before that, even if the term “disruptive” had not yet been coined.

An early researcher in the field of changing business markets was Austrian economist Joseph Schumpeter. As a Harvard University economist, Schumpeter popularized the term “creative destruction” to describe an essential business cycle under capitalism, where old ways constantly die back in order to give life to and make space for new innovations. In Schumpeter’s words, creative destruction is the “process of industrial mutation that continuously revolutionizes the economic structure from within, incessantly destroying the old one, incessantly creating a new one” (Schumpeter, 1942). Numerous tangible examples of this phenomenon exist in technology and media. (Imagine the evolution audio recordings and devices used to play them. Sound recording media evolved through numerous iterations from wax recordings to streaming services; playback devices constantly undergo a similar cycle of creative destruction.)

Scholarly interest in changing business markets continued through the late 20th century, when Clayton Christensen developed the theory of disruptive innovation in his 1997 book *The Innovator’s Dilemma: When new technologies cause great firms to fail*. Building on Schumpeter’s theory of creative destruction, Christensen focused primarily on how the introduction of a new technology into the market

affects established businesses' (or "incumbents") competitive advantage. Christensen's book was a multi-industry study in new technologies disrupting existing business markets. A notable example of a disruptive innovation presented by Christensen include digital photography, which affected incumbent manufacturers like Kodak and Polaroid, and emergent tech companies like Adobe and Apple. Christensen also applied his theory of disruptive innovation to service sectors like healthcare, where the "invention" of professions like nurse practitioners and places to get care like outpatient clinics disrupted the competitive advantage once held by medical doctors and traditional hospitals. An important takeaway from Christensen's work, and relevant to this research, is that a disruptive innovation is not just a new technology, device or appliance; it can be a new way of working and living.

After Christensen, some scholars tended to focus heavily on advancements in computing technology as the disruptors. (Much of the literature can be found in business and engineering management journals.) Regardless of the source of disruption, researchers remained focused on its business effects and outcomes, such as changes to competitive advantage and a corporation's competencies. Building on Christensen's example of digital photography as a disruptive innovation, Danneels defined disruptive technology as "a technology that changes the basis of competition by changing the performance metrics along which firms compete" (Danneels, 2004, p. 249). Simply stated, when a new player in the market introduces a disruptive technology, this changes the basis of competition for established firms and they need to adapt.

Alongside Danneels' research on disruption caused by new devices, Walsh, Kirchhoff and Newbert took a more behavioral and sociological approach to disruptive innovations (Walsh, Kirchhoff and Newbert, 2002). They, like earlier researchers, defined disruption as a force that requires people and companies to adapt. Specific to disruptive innovations, Walsh et al define them as developments that have such "radical newness or emergent character" (p. 343) that the adaptations to make use of them do not yet exist. When people or corporations have fully adapted to a disruptive innovation, they have "crossed the chasm" – meaning, the innovation that was once disruptive has been effectively integrated into a person's

daily life or a business' normal operating strategy. For example, smartphones once represented a radical new disruptive innovation. People had full computing power and high-speed internet in their pockets, and businesses could portray their brands on new social apps. When this technology first emerged, it was radically new; since then, we have “crossed the chasm” by incorporating smartphone technology into everyday aspects of life and business.

From this field of technology- and device-focused research, Kilkki, Mäntylä, Karhu, Hämmäinen and Ailisto represent a modern culmination of research into disruption (Kilkki, Mäntylä, Karhu, Hämmäinen and Ailisto, 2017). Taking a holistic approach, they define disruption as a force on an ecosystem, whereby a substantial number of agents in that system have to adapt and re-design their strategies in order to survive the environmental changes. The disruption could be a new technology, a business model or a global event like a pandemic, and the effects of disruption are not just limited to business but can be felt in society and culture, politics, academia or everyday life.

This research will rely on Kilkki et al's depiction of disruption as a force that affects an ecosystem and forces survival adaptations. This is the definition most relevant to this proposed study, which will look into to how people in marketing communications have had to adapt to their new 100% digital work environments during the pandemic. Their definition is especially relevant to this study because it abandons the implied positive associations of “innovation” (as a thing that is good for just about everyone), and posits that disruption can be neutral, or even negative in its effect.

History of disruptions in the communications industry

In looking at how marketing communications was disrupted during the pandemic, it is helpful to examine past disruptions and their impact on the media industry and the public. The following section will look into two shifts in the industry and broader culture that had a lasting impact on the way marketing communications practitioners do their jobs: the shift toward media convergence; and the shift

from desktop computers to mobile devices with social apps. In looking back, we see that the media industry has a history of adapting to seismic cultural changes and we can learn from this now.

Media is always evolving, and its history of disruption long predates the late 20th century. The 1990s were chosen as a starting point because this decade represents the beginning of *digital* disruptions that forcefully changed the marketing communications industry.

The shift to media convergence

By the 1990s, the communications industry began to notice a shift toward an increasingly participatory culture, where people “maintain a dialogue with the mass media, create their own social networks, learn to think, work and process culture in new ways” (Jenkins, 2006, p. vii). As bandwidth got cheaper and faster, media capabilities expanded, and consumer behavior adapted. The graphical nature of the world wide web (a term that seems quaint today), combined with higher computing power and secure connections, allowed for communications and purchases to happen online. By 1998, most consumer companies were using digital media for relationship-building and selling (Parsons, Zeisser & Waitman, 1998). This shift in media technology and consumer behavior was global, and it forced workers in creative industries to adapt to new job roles and challenges. Journalists, advertisers, marketers and producers of entertainment shifted away from being the top-down media authorities to roles that allowed audiences to share power and participate more in meaning-making and content-creating (Deuze, 2007).

New media: “a power shift to the connected customer”

Sometimes technology advancements occur around the same time as a global crisis, accelerating the disruption and rate of change for both communicators and audiences. This is happening now, with the forced shift to 100% digital because of the pandemic (Callinan & Wong, 2020). Such a confluence of innovation and crisis also happened around 2007-2009, when three changes occurred at roughly the same time to bring about an important shift: the media industry was in flux, technology was advancing, and consumer behavior was evolving. A global economic recession starting in 2007 provided the economic

backdrop to declining media revenues and a rise in people's adoption of smartphones for Internet access (Sumner, 2012; Smith, 2010). Audiences were increasingly using mobile devices with social apps instead of newspapers and websites to get their news and information. By 2012, about half of all smartphone users in Great Britain, the United States, Russia, Czech Republic and Spain used their device for accessing social networks (Pew, 2012). Media professionals, while dealing with an industry in decline and the organizational and operational changes that go along with those workplaces, had to learn new skills and adapt the way they produced content (Weber & Monge, 2014). This climate resulted in a perfect storm of disruption in how communicators crafted their work, and how audiences consumed it.

The research of Schultz and Schultz (1998) focused specifically on how new media technologies in the 1990s brought about a change in communication practices between companies and their audiences. They argued that a spectrum of digital innovations in that decade – low-cost data storage, personal devices with higher computing power, e-commerce, online communities and early social media – enabled corporate communications to transition away from traditional concepts and strong fixations on advertising and public relations toward a more conversational, less transactional relationship with audiences. The “traditional, brute-force, outward bound, marketer-driven communication will no longer succeed as it has in the past” (Schultz and Schultz, 1998 p. 17), and the flow of information between a company and its audience would be more back-and-forth and holistic. Schultz and Schultz also argued that computing innovations would give firms more and better data about audiences' attitudes and behavior, and foretold a shift in the ways corporate communicators would use audience insights to create dynamic messaging and improve targeting. Also in the late 1990s, companies recognized that it takes a variety of communication disciplines – advertising, sales promotion, public relations, graphic design – to clearly and consistently portray a corporation's brand identity. This multi-disciplined approach to communication was eventually adopted as an organizational standard and named “Integrated Marketing Communications,” or IMC (Caywood, Schultz and Wang, 1991, in Schultz and Schultz, 1998).

Portraying a brand's identity effectively is what differentiates marketing communications from other creative professionals in media. The goal of marketing communications is to persuade audiences to construct an accurate, positive image of the firm's brand in their minds, and even take a personal identity stake in that brand image (Keller, 2009). In this new digitally-mediated process of communicating brand identity and brand image, companies and audiences perform a mutual back-and-forth construction of what the brand really is and what it represents. Audiences are no longer passive targets that receive company claims. Ivanov (2012) enumerated how the new media marketplace impacted marketing communications teams' creative work. Internet audiences not only interact with a company to get information and form their impressions of a brand; they consult each other through product reviews, social media, referral programs, and online influencers. Knowing that the company is not the only source of brand information, marketing communications teams have had to adapt their creative strategies to leverage these dispersed sources of information (Ivanov, 2012).

This trend toward greater audience involvement in communications is a phenomenon that author and marketing professor Philip Kotler calls a "power shift to the connected customer." In their book, *Marketing 4.0: Moving from Traditional to Digital*, Kotler, Kartajaya and Setiawan examine how changes in the business landscape affect the nature of brand-customer communications (2017). Driven by the internet, this relationship became more horizontal, inclusive and social, meaning that that companies are no longer in complete control over communication with audiences. Increasingly, people use credible peer influences when forming their own impressions about a brand, and are wary of overt attempts at "marketing to" them. Instead, consumers look to friends, family, fans and followers (what Kotler, et al call "the f-factor") for information (Kotler, Kartajaya and Setiawan, 2017, p. 14). Kotler et al advise modern marketing communications teams to embrace data-driven insights on audience behaviors, and engage in conversations with these "connected customers" wherever they take place online (Kotler, et al, 2017). Creative teams, as a result, have to adapt brands' online tone of voice and visual portrayals in order to effectively reach this new type of connected consumer.

“Because of Covid:” the shift to 100% digital

The disruption in 2020 and into 2021 caused by the Covid-19 pandemic forced adaptations across every aspect of life. Travel, social gatherings and in-person events were severely limited or nonexistent. Our reliance on broadband and mobile devices for work and school, shopping, entertainment and socializing from home got heavier, and continues to accelerate. Because of lockdowns, the radius of our physical lives became smaller, forcing our interactions to go almost entirely online.

Similarly, this seismic shift in daily life impacted creative teams’ work environments and output during the pandemic. In-person meetings have been replaced with video conferencing on platforms like Zoom and Microsoft Teams. Product demonstrations and training courses are being replaced with webinars and digital self-service platforms. Social apps are more important than ever as channels for brand storytelling and audience engagement. Because of this shift, corporate creative teams adjusted the media they created for digital platforms. At the same time, creative teams adapted to pandemic-driven changes in organizational structure and work environment (Steimer, 2020). In particular, creative workers in the marketing communications sector expect the changes in 2020-21 to become permanent, with more unknowns to follow post-pandemic (McKinsey, 2021).

Firms’ responses to disruption: organizing for digital success

Researchers consistently define disruption in terms of change – social, economic, political, technological – that threatens a firm’s competitive advantage. The theme of disruption also forms a foundation for researchers looking at how businesses respond to turmoil and adapt to changing environments. This research seeks to answer how companies, specifically marketing communications organizations, responded to the disruption during the pandemic and how they adapted to survive the changed work environment.

Marketing communications, because it comprises writing, media production, design, advertising and publishing, it is inherently creative work (Department of Culture, Media and Sport, 2001). *Creative*

Success in Teams (2021), Reiter-Palmon added a psychological dimension to the field of organizational strategy as it relates to creative work, especially in complex and disrupted businesses environments. As an organizational psychologist, Reiter-Palmon described a framework for leadership to consider when setting up creative teams for success: 1) managing the creative process, 2) managing creative team interactions, and 3) managing the organizational environment.

According to Reiter-Palmon, leadership can manage the creative process by facilitating and supporting idea generation, problem construction, information sharing, and assisting the team in effective idea evaluation and selection. In order to manage team interactions, she advised leaders to create a climate of psychological safety and trust, showing support for innovation, managing task and relational conflict, and facilitating communication and collaboration. In managing a creative team's organizational environment, leadership should be champions of innovation, create an organizational structure where creative workers can collaborate and communicate within teams and across departments, and to provide creative teams with the right training, resources and tools to meet business objectives.

Literature review leading to research questions

Reiter-Palmon's framework for managing creative teams is appropriate for this research because of its multiple emphases on creative teams' interpersonal interactions, their creative processes, and firms' organizational and managerial activities. It offers three ways of looking at how creative teams and companies – especially marketing communications workers and their employers – create, interact, and organize for success during disruption brought about by the Covid-19 pandemic. Rather than simply looking at ways that workers changed their creative processes, or how companies might have restructured because of the pandemic, this approach lets us investigate how workers create, how creative teams interact, and how organizational structures all adapted to stay successful.

Looking at how creative teams and their organizational structures changed during the pandemic is a new endeavor. These adaptations only started in 2020. They are still underway and are not well

understood, especially in the marketing communications field. Because this specific research topic is so new, this literature review will include both industry and trade publications and scholarly journals. It will also look at how creative teams and organizations in industries other than marketing communications work during the pandemic. Using Reiter-Palmon's approach, this literature review will outline previous inquiry into how companies managed creative teams, creative processes and organizational structure during disruptive times.

Changing technologies and new ways of working were disrupting people's jobs and rendering skill sets obsolete, but our current crisis is accelerating this change and likely to make these changes permanent. A 2020 study by Agrawal, Smet, Lacroix and Reich for McKinsey warns that businesses, to survive, should take steps to reskill workers now in order to be successful post-pandemic (Agrawal, Smet, Lacroix and Reich, 2020). Specifically, companies should adjust their workplace processes to reduce physical interaction and train workers to facilitate working remotely. Citing examples in the healthcare system in the UK, the Agrawal report notes a 93% increase in the use of telemedicine technologies for doctor's appointments. The pandemic has also accelerated people's use of apps for remote banking and order delivery. Shifts like these have forced workers that provide these services to learn the required skills to fulfill customer orders and communicate effectively. To mitigate this, the Agrawal report gives firms advice that closely ties with Reiter-Palmon's emphasis on creative process, team interaction, and organizational structure, beginning with reskilling workers. They advise that firms: expand their ability to operate in a fully digital environment; develop their workers' critical thinking and project management skills so the firm can respond creatively to needs for redesign and innovation; strengthen workers' emotional and social skills so that teams can collaborate effectively; and help workers build adaptability and resilience skills to be able to work during the disruption.

Advice from marketing executives also tracks with Reiter-Palmon's approach on managing creative teams for success during times of turmoil. Ann Lewnes, CMO and Executive Vice President of Corporate Strategy & Development at Adobe, tells marketers to implement strategies that make creative

teams and processes agile and responsive to disruptive times (Lewnes, 2021). Using Adobe as a case study, Lewnes outlined three changes that organizations can make to remain competitive amid Covid's disruptions: by hiring, reskilling and empowering workers; by dismantling the boundaries that separate departments and inhibit creativity and collaboration; and by adopting technology that supports a 100% digital work environment.

The creative teams' climate of creativity

Creative workers are knowledge workers, and are among an organization's most valuable assets. If creative workers come together to form a high-functioning team, they can bring about commercial success and competitive advantage for the business (Banks, Calvey, Owen and Russell, 2002). But in order to become a high-functioning team, individuals must have a working environment that is, as Reiter-Palmon describes, "a climate for creativity" (Reiter-Palmon, 2020, p. 36). Creative team leaders have an important role in building such a climate. They are responsible for fostering a work environment that is, essentially, collaborative and rewarding, and the foundation for this, according to Reiter-Palmon's model, is psychological safety.

In an environment where creative workers feel safe, they can freely share ideas and information. They can also communicate openly and honestly, giving and taking constructive criticism. It is no surprise that these aspects – open communication and sharing of ideas, constructive and honest feedback – are related positively to the marketing communications department's climate for creativity and innovation (Hunter and Mumford, 2007). The interpersonal, people-management aspects of a creative team leader's role focus on fostering this climate for creativity.

According to Reiter-Palmon's model, the climate for creativity also depends on managing the team's interpersonal and task conflicts. The origins of interpersonal team conflicts are too numerous to list here, but common examples in a marketing communications department include unconstructive criticism of proposed ideas, disputes over assignments of exciting or boring projects, power struggles,

negative expressions of emotions, and interpersonal dislike among peers. All of these can hinder social relationships, eventually eroding psychological safety and darkening the climate for creativity (Jehn, 1995). It is the responsibility of team leadership to mitigate these conflicts and restore the creative environment.

Leadership that connects people inside and outside the organization, promotes the team's work and acts as a shield to protect the team is essential to the climate of creativity. We know that connectedness is important to creative teams' success, because idea generation gets a boost from the influx of novel information (Mumford, Loneragan and Scott, 2002). But workers sometimes, because of time constraints or location, do not have the opportunity to find inspiration from connections outside their immediate departments. For this reason, team leadership needs to be networked and well-connected with people in other departments within the company and beyond. This connected leadership brings in new ideas, gathers different perspectives, and helps workers understand their place in the bigger corporate picture (Venkataramani, Richter and Clarke, 2014). In business, Lewnes (2021) calls this the process of "bringing down silos and bringing intelligence to all" (p. 65). Hult (2011) and Reiter-Palmon (2020) call this type of organization "boundary spanning" and imperative to the climate of creativity that surrounds successful teams.

Promoting and protecting workers is also essential to marketing creative teams' success. While creativity for its own sake can be gratifying and valuable, creative work in a corporate environment should be directed primarily toward fulfilling the company's needs. Creative team leaders are responsible for making sure that the team's endeavors support the company's priorities (Venkataramani et al, 2014). It's also the job of creative leadership to make sure that the team's output is appreciated and understood by other departments and the company at large (Howell and Boies, 2004). It's also the job of leadership to foster a creative environment where teams can work without distraction. Morgeson, Derue and Karam (2009) note that while connectedness and networking are important, leaders also need to shield the team from negative outside influences so that they can stay on task.

Another important aspect of the climate for creativity is the actual work involved. When the work itself is challenging and the expectation for creativity is clearly communicated and rewarded, workers respond positively. But creative teams, and marketing communications teams in particular, are considered knowledge workers; the expectation for creativity is often just assumed. In Reiter-Palmon's model, creative expectations need to be more than an assumption. Team leaders are responsible for articulating creative expectations, rewarding creativity from their teams, and should serve as role models for creativity standards (Hunter and Mumford, 2007).

This leads to RQ1: How did the shift to a virtual work environment affect a creative team's climate for creativity?

Enabling a creative teams' creative process

Marketing communications work is inherently creative (Department of Culture, Media and Sport, 2001), creative-process oriented (Blakeman, 2014). Researcher and author Greg Hearn describes marketing communications work as a link in the "creative economy supply chain," (Hearn, 2020, p.4) and one that is especially affected by digital disruptions and changing market contexts. It can be considered among a company's intangible assets and it depends on human knowledge workers for its production – creative communications workers aren't being replaced by artificial intelligence just yet (Hearn, 2020). A marketing communications teams' mission is to accurately portray a company in the market in essentially three ways: 1) employing the correct message about the company or product; 2) placing this message in the right media; 3) using the most advantageous communications approach (Blakeman, 2014). To do this effectively requires attention to aspects of the creative process. As Reiter-Palmon describes, leaders can support the creative process by encouraging team collaboration on idea generation, problem solving, idea selection and evaluation, and information sharing.

A common method for creative ideation and problem solving is brainstorming. In its original conception, brainstorming involved people generating ideas as a group with the specific instruction that

groups conduct the ideation session without criticizing or evaluating the ideas presented there (Osborn, 1953; in Reiter-Palmon, 2020). In creative agencies like marketing communications, the ideation part of brainstorming is often thought of as a freewheeling, no-rules jam session where breakthroughs just happen, and problems get solved. These *eureka!* moments are a myth in most organizations, and communications research about creativity back this up. Productive ideation sessions need systematic constraints in order to generate ideas that are both novel and appropriate to the task at hand (Titus, 2000; Amabile, 1983). In the Reiter-Palmon model, it is leadership's responsibility to add specific instructions to creative ideation and problem-solving endeavors, so that the team stays on task and comes up with actionable concepts and relevant solutions.

Another important aspect of the creative process is idea selection and evaluation. In a marketing communications group, the task at hand often involves visual design, copywriting, photography, and brand strategy – the elements that accumulate into a marketing campaign. As such, it is a multidisciplinary team effort, where peers and colleagues from across departments have a stake in selecting and evaluating a creative idea's marketing worthiness. In this situation, leaders have a unique dual role (Reiter-Palmon, 2020). They can serve as gatekeepers, deciding all by themselves which ideas to move ahead to production and implementation. Conversely, leaders boost creativity by breaking down siloed business information and engaging the team in the decision to go forward with a creative project (Barker, 2019; Zhang and Bartol, 2010).

The creative process is also enabled by leaders who are champions of innovation, advocating in favor of new ideas and building corporate consensus to take risks and to try new things. To do this effectively, leaders need not only to be well-connected, but to have compelling communication, persuasion and negotiating skills (Howell and Boies, 2004).

This leads to RQ2: How did the shift to a virtual work environment affect a creative team's creative process?

Methods

This research uses Reiter-Palmon's framework for managing creative teams to investigate how the Covid-19 pandemic affected the climate for creativity and the creative process in the workplace. From the literature review above, we see some specific themes emerge under the Reiter-Palmon's broader categories of "climate of creativity" and "creative process." This Methods section will elaborate briefly on elements within those themes and describe how this research will attempt to answer RQs through in-depth interviews. It will go on to describe the study's setting and participants, interview logistics, and how data will be analyzed and presented.

Research Question 1 (*How did the shift to a remote work environment affect a creative team's climate for creativity?*) will explore workplace culture elements such as psychological safety, the team's level of openness in communication, how they handle situations of ideation and critique, and the level of connectedness to people inside and outside the organization.

Research Question 2 (*How did the shift to a remote work environment affect a creative team's creative process?*) will explore workplace activities that the team does either individually or as a group in order to create. This including brainstorming, problem solving, information sharing and decision making activities.

Method of inquiry: In-depth interviews

This study will attempt a deep understanding of how creative teams were affected by the forced shift to 100% digital engagement during the Covid-19 pandemic by asking workers how they understood and dealt with the disruption. The specific intent is to discover, through guided conversation, how the creative climate at their workplace might have changed, and how they, and individuals and as a team, may have had to adapt their creative process. Using qualitative methods, specifically in-depth semi-structured interviews with creative people working in the marketing communications industry, this study will look into how practitioners adjusted to a completely digital creative environment.

The shift to a completely digital environment represents a profound change in the lives of creative workers, and one that is bound to evoke deep feelings and judgements. The best way to understand how people in this industry are coping with this shift is through in-depth, unstructured interviews. Brennan (2017, p. 29) describes in-depth interviewing as an appropriate way for researchers to gather information on people's emotions and experiences, and to discover common themes and recurring patterns as articulated by participants. This "conversation with a purpose" (Berg and Lune, 2004, cited in Valos, Habibi, Casidy, Driesener, Maplestone, 2015) is precisely the goal of this study: to get people to open up and describe, in their own words, how their creative climate may have changed during the pandemic's disruption, and how they may have adapted their creative process in response.

The benefits of in-depth interviews as a research method can be found in a number of workplace studies, particularly in research into the ways new technologies affect marketing professionals' creative output. Research by Valos et al (2015) used in-depth interviews to identify common themes in the ways service marketing organizations incorporated new social media in their communication strategies. In a study of how new media changed the creative output of art directors and copywriters, Barker (2019) credited a semi-structured interview format for keeping discussions conceptually on-topic and pertinent while allowing for conversational adjustments with participants with diverse job backgrounds and circumstances.

In-depth interviews have also been used by researchers to get marketing communications workers to describe how they adapt to organizational changes at their firms. In their study on advertising professionals, Blakeman, Haley and Taylor (2020) used in-depth interviews to identify ongoing themes, nuances and common conflicts in the working relationship between advertising account managers and creative directors. By doing in-depth interviews with communications consultants, Platen studied how communications consultants with varying backgrounds had to construct their professional identities, promote themselves as experts to clients and re-skill in a new digital workplace (Platen, 2016).

The appropriateness of unstructured interviews as a research method is grounded in its flexibility. In-depth interviews allow people to freely describe their circumstances and let the conversation flow, exploring topics that cannot be known beforehand. Interviews will be guided by, but not limited to, a list of questions (see Appendix A, Interview Guide). As interviews progress and new conversation topics emerge, the researcher will be able to initiate new questions on the fly.

The key to answering the two research questions in this study (*How did the shift to a virtual work environment affect a creative team's climate for creativity?* and *How did the shift to a virtual work environment affect a creative team's creative process?*) lies in establishing rapport with a diverse set of interview subjects and being able, as a researcher, to tailor a line of questioning that suits individuals and gets them to describe their circumstances at work in an open and honest way. Open-ended, one-on-one unstructured interviews will accomplish this best.

Study setting and participants

This researcher believes that conversations are already taking place among creative teams about Covid-19's disruptions and challenges to creative process and work culture. This professional project attempts to formalize and operationalize those questions, so that creative teams might learn specifically how to maintain a climate of creativity and productive creative process when other disruptions occur. The setting for this study was the virtual work environments of people who do creative work. Interview subjects were creative workers based in the United States and European Union countries, who all worked from home offices during the Covid-19 pandemic and have either remained work-from-home or sometimes return to the office. No one interviewed returned to full-time in-office work. All interview subjects were the researcher's current or former colleagues. Interviews were scheduled directly with subjects via email or SMS message, and conducted and recorded on Microsoft Teams.

In this study, participants will not be identified by their full names to ensure anonymity, maintain rapport during interviews and make sure that subjects felt comfortable enough to answer questions freely. Here is a brief overview of the interview subjects' roles and responsibilities:

1. Communications director manages copywriters, web developers, campaign strategists and outside agencies to execute the company's marketing communications campaigns.
2. Agency owner leads creative teams that include communications strategists, writers, and graphic designers, app developers, account managers and sellers.
3. Marketing communications operations manager analyzes patterns in audience data and builds targeted audience lists from a database.
4. User experience director leads a team of software designers, developers, engineers and analysts.
5. Creative services director manages teams who produce print, digital, video and event marketing material.
6. Chief marketing and creative officer leads groups of writers, designers, strategists, marketing analysts and creative agency contractors.
7. Web development and design manager leads groups of graphic designers, web application developers and software engineers.
8. Strategic communications director leads teams that build campaigns that combine advertising, public relations, sales promotion, digital and social marketing.

This group of interview subjects was selected because they represent a typical roles of a creative team, with varied levels of expertise and experience. This group included a mix of people in management and production (non-management) positions, and each member is directly involved in day-to-day digital operations and creative projects in some way. Of the people interviewed for this study, four have people reporting directly to them and four do not. (Having direct reports or not in no way implies a difference in level of competence or experience.) All hold leadership roles, whether formally defined (with direct reports) or ad-hoc (with project-based leadership appointments). Interview subjects 1-4 did not work with the researcher; subjects 5-8 were the researcher's colleagues at the time of interviews.

By including interview subjects from different disciplines and people with whom the researcher has a working relationship, this study could be replicated in different workplace settings, with creative teams from various industries and sectors.

Study Logistics

To begin the study, interview candidates were contacted via email, SMS or online chat with a brief description of this research, its goals, the types of questions the researcher would ask and the amount of time commitment. Interview subjects were provided with the research proposal (Appendix C) including the list of interview questions (Appendix A) and informed that new questions on the topics of climate for creativity and creative process might arise during the interview. This researcher asked that everyone's interview responses be their own feelings and judgements, and that no collaboration among members take place in advance in order to present the same story during interviews. Unless otherwise agreed, interviews took place during the interviewees' local business hours, Monday through Friday, using the Microsoft Teams video meeting platform. Each interview lasted about an hour, was recorded in Microsoft Teams and transcribed into text using the platform's transcription tools. A link to the interview recording was provided to each interview subject.

Data analysis and presentation

This study analyzed content of interview responses, looking for common themes and patterns across the set of interviews, using qualitative textual analysis techniques. This type of analysis involves looking through a text (in this case, transcripts of interviews) for patterns and common themes across the individuals' answers.

To begin, the researcher listened and read through interview transcripts, noting: where each individual spoke generally about their workplace culture and creative work; and where each individual spoke specifically about the elements outlined in the Reiter-Palmon "climate for creativity" and "creative

process” framework. Interview responses will be encoded according to how they speak to and match up with the topics of the two research categories on climate for creativity and creative process.

After encoding individual interviews by how they speak to and match up with research questions, the study looked into how the interview answers relate to each other. (Again, this researcher will assume that everyone’s answer is their own.) This interview data was examined as a whole for recurring ideas, common answers, and other patterns and similarities that emerge from the body of interviews. Essentially, the analysis of the interview recordings took place in two steps:

1. Individual interviews were examined for how they speak about the climate for creativity and the creative process, noting specific ideas, expressions, words and phrases used;
2. The body of interviews was examined a thematic whole, looking for elements and themes that individual answers about the climate for creativity and the creative process might have common with other interview answers. This phase will rely more on the researcher’s interpretation of the intention and spirit of individual answers, and less on matchups of exact words.

Study Limitations

This study has potential limitations and obstacles. Being a qualitative study, the results represent the answers and insights given by the interview subjects only. These findings will not be not generalizable. Potential obstacles to this study include time zone differences and difficulties with internet connections. Several potential interview subjects live and work in different time zones, and finding an agreeable time for an hour-long interview proved difficult. Also, interview subjects working from home while other family members could also be conducting business or doing virtual schoolwork. Bandwidth on home internet connections might be affected during interviews. In addition, as a creative professional for more than 15 years, this researcher entered the interview process with existing ideas and biases based on work experience. To mitigate biases, every effort was made to stay on topic during interviews and while examining transcripts. This study is limited to investigating the above research questions about how

going digital affected creative teams' creative process and workplace climate for creativity, and does not investigate other Covid-19 related disruptions that interviewees might have experienced, such as balancing work and home life, homeschooling or personal finances or health.

Research Component and Significance

The Covid-19 pandemic rocked everyone's world. For creative teams, it brought about significant disruption to the workplace creative culture, and to creative processes used to generate new ideas and fulfill day-to-day responsibilities.

Creative teams like corporate communications departments craft and convey the brand identity of the companies we work for, with the goal of creating a positive brand image and impression in our customers' minds. Often this is done at live events like conferences, tradeshow and in-person sales meetings, where materials like printed brochures, tradeshow booths and display advertising convey the corporate identity. Communications departments create the material for these events. When Covid-19 hit Europe and the Americas in 2020, it significantly changed the way companies could engage with customers. Because of lockdowns and bans on all but essential travel, interactions with customers now had to take place 100% digitally. This disruption rippled inward at corporations and specifically to creative departments, where teams had to shift our departments' organization and creative output to do business in a world that was all of a sudden completely digital.

In this new world, creative teams in communications departments had to adapt to working remotely and meeting virtually. Many members, especially digital natives, adapted well to the disruption; working environments had already shifted online (at least partially) and some were already creating work specifically for digital spaces like Twitter, YouTube, emails and blogs. But how did people who unaccustomed to working digitally react to this new creative climate? How did workers stay creative remotely? For people whose creative work was primarily oriented toward physical spaces like in-person conferences and print advertising, what was their reaction to going completely digital?

Change isn't easy, especially when it involves threats to people's health and job security. This study intends to provide insights from working professionals who are living through and currently adapting to Covid-19's ongoing workplace challenges. This research interviewed members of creative teams, asking them to explain their thoughts, feelings and judgements about having to pivot their creative process toward digital media, and how the creative process may have been impacted because of the pandemic. Creative team members were asked to share their firsthand experiences and give examples of adaptations that worked well, what did not, and what obstacles they encountered. Insights into how companies handled change during the pandemic is intended to help creative teams adapt and make smoother transitions after future disruptions.

Chapter 4: Findings and professional analysis

The following chapter presents an analysis of themes that emerged during this study's interviews with virtual team leaders about the proposed research questions: (RQ1) How did the shift to a virtual work environment affect a creative team's climate for creativity? and (RQ2) How did the shift to a virtual work environment affect a creative team's creative process?

Participant summaries

Interview subjects are all leaders on teams that work together virtually 100% of the time during the COVID-19 pandemic (2020-2022). They spoke about their teams' creative climates and their creative processes while working remotely from each other during that time period.

Table 1

Study participants and their respective roles

Erin S., creative director at a manufacturer based in the United States. Erin leads a team of writers, graphic designers, strategists and marketing analysts.

Ross B., creative agency owner whose company produces marketing, membership and advertising campaigns for regional sports clubs in the United Kingdom. Ross' creative teams include strategists, writers, and graphic designers.

Laura J., marketing operations director for an online education platform based in Canada. Laura's team produces online educational content for the company's clients in the banking and financial services industry.

Melissa T, director of user experience for an IT services agency. Melissa's team designs and develops bespoke training and helpdesk media for the company's customers.

Naomi W., chief marketing and creative officer for a digital communications agency based in the United Kingdom. Naomi leads teams of writers, designers and strategists who produce recruitment campaigns for the Royal Air Force.

Kat G., director of creative services for a manufacturer based in the United States. Kat's team writes, designs and produces advertising campaigns and marketing materials like brochures and videos.

Tobias M., director of web design and development for a manufacturer based in Germany. Tobias' team includes graphic designers, web application developers and software engineers.

Desiree O., director of field marketing communications for a manufacturer based in The Netherlands; in charge of teams around the world in developing local marketing and advertising campaigns and events.

Themes

An analysis of the subjects' responses revealed eight common themes. This study considers a topic a "theme" if two or more interview subjects brought it up. This chapter will present the themes in ranked order of how many subjects touched upon that theme. The themes discussed by the most participants will be presented first, and proceed in descending order to the theme discussed by the fewest people. The two highest-ranking themes were discussed by all eight interview subjects; one theme was discussed by five of eight people; one theme was discussed by four of eight; the remaining four themes were discussed by 2-3 people. If only one subject discussed a topic, this study does not consider that topic a theme and will not present that topic in these findings. (Appendix A contains the interview guide. Appendix B contains interview transcripts.)

Eight themes emerged in the course of this study's interviews. They are presented below, ranked in order of importance based on the number of interview subjects who broached the topic.

Table 2
Study themes and the number of participants who discussed

Theme name	Participants
Technology impacts the creative process on virtual teams.	8
Leadership techniques and ways of working impact virtual teams' creative process	8
Empowered expertise impacts the creative process on virtual teams	5
Interpersonal relationships affect virtual teams' creative climate	3
Autonomy impacts virtual teams' creative climate	3
Gratifying work sustains the creative climate	3
A psychologically safe environment enables virtual teams' creative climate	2
Documented guidelines and procedures enable virtual teams' creative process	2

Themes 1 and 2 rank highest, having been discussed by all eight subjects. Themes 3-8 were discussed by at least two subjects and as many as five. All themes were discussed by at least two subjects.

Theme 1: Technology impacts the creative process on virtual teams.

In 2020-2022, remote work and virtual teams became a solid reality in creative workers' lives, so it's not surprising that the strongest theme to emerge in this study was the critical impact of technology on virtual teams' creative process. Every interview subject had something to say about the technology platforms and applications they use in their virtual teams and remote work: Zoom and RingCentral for video team meetings; MS Teams for file sharing, unscheduled video or audio calls, online chat and scheduled team meetings over video; Jira, Basecamp and Workfront for online project management, approval process management and file sharing; and asynchronous chat apps like WhatsApp and SMS messaging.

The people interviewed for this study all had different opinions and judgements about the impact of technology on their working life and creative process; there was no agreement that remote-work technology is 100% good or 100% bad for creativity. (Finding consensus on that topic was not a goal for this study.) However, everyone had something to say on the matter.

The eight interview subjects were split evenly, roughly, on whether technology's impact on the creative process was positive, neutral or negative. Three subjects – all digital natives and leaders whose virtual teams were established well before 2020, when the Covid-19 pandemic forced many workers to go remote – described technology as having a positive, enabling effect on the creative process. Three subjects – all leaders whose teams include a varied mix of creative professionals – were neutral on technology's effect. Two subjects – both of whom are at the executive level at their firms, as either as chief officer or agency owner – described technology's negative impact on their teams' creative process.

Technology's positive impact on the creative process

Three subjects gave their positive impressions of technology and creative process. Each subject is a self-described millennial and technophile, all three work in sectors where their primary creative output is

delivered online, and they each head up remote teams that were established years before the start of Covid-19 lockdowns and forced-remote work situations.

TM, a director of web design and development, described the team's use of technology as a smooth experience, where virtual meetings naturally flow from informal catchup conversations to more work-related topics without much interruption. TM explained how this transition happens. Unstructured conversation "is actually the time to bond a bit every day. It's cool. And this is also when we bounce back and forth ideas. At some point in the meeting I just started sharing my screen and we're pulling up the Jira board and this is where we see the tasks and then we'll talk about work stuff." TM's virtual team meetings begin casually then pivot to project and task-related topics without much fuss or formality.

MT, director of UX for an IT services agency, also described technology having a positive impact on the creative process. While MT describes meeting apps like Zoom as "just another platform to get work done," and believes that ideation is more effective in-person, their appreciation for technology is a positive one: "We use Teams like crazy, we're using our cell phones to connect with each other on Instagram. Or, you know, all kinds of other things as a means of connection and peer reviews. And, 'Hey I've got this problem. Does anyone have a thing that they've done or how have you solved this?' And so it's a lot just, like, online activity, and sometimes a phone call, and sometimes a video chat, and every time it doesn't hinder.

"In fact, the times that I did have to go into the office, that feels disruptive."

MT's creative team was already adept at working remotely and could be immediately productive with an influx of new pandemic-related business. When the pandemic hit, MT says, "My clients went from almost always being in-person to now having to operate remotely so my dance card got busier and busier. More and more clients needed to adapt solutions for their companies, their organizations, because they were using platforms that were outdated or antiquated." MT's team specializes in building online

content and user experiences. They are remote-work natives already and adept at virtual collaboration. MT said that technology allowed them to be more creative and productive by comparison to competitors.

Technology enables the creative process; its effect is neutral or a mix of positive and negative

Like MT, LJ also mentioned how technology kept virtual creative teams apace with the increased amount of IT work during the pandemic. “So there's some great things that have happened to enable my teams to be the best versions of themselves in terms of creating ads very easily. Things that we would have to outsource or send to other creative teams.”

MT and LJ both described a faster production pace and their companies, and that’s caused exceptionally high demand on creative teams like theirs, whose primary creative endeavor is building online content and user experiences. In response to this, LJ has a different take on technology’s impact on creative teams. LJ’s teams’ creative process had to go faster because the business demanded it. As a result, actual creativity went down: “We’re doing less and less original content. We’re recreating. We’re mimicking. We’re doing, et cetera, et cetera. So the I also think the balance between inspiration and copycatting has gotten a lot closer.

Have you seen any campaign lately that has inspired you?”

Three subjects (KG, DO and ES) described technology’s effect on the creative process in neutral, descriptive terms: which tools the teams use, how they use them, and what the interaction is like. The subjects in this group explained how creative teams use virtual whiteboards, file sharing apps, and project management platforms.

KG, a director of creative services whose team includes print designers, animators and copywriters, said that the group’s creative process is mostly unchanged because of the shift to remote work. Creative ideation takes place virtually instead of in the real world: “We throw them up on a virtual wall and ask, ‘So how about this?’ And you know, [graphic designer] will quickly sketch something and then share it

with us on the virtual window. Then we talk about it: ‘Well, wait, maybe we could do this. Maybe we could do that.’ But that creative input has pretty much stayed the same.”

DO, director of strategic communications and field marketing, said that virtual teams made heavy use of technology while planning an event in a different country: “For the speaker event, we had a big MS Teams chat going with stakeholders from across Marketing. We were all in there constantly talking about the program: ‘Speakers are confirmed.’ ‘What is the topic?’ ‘What is the actual title of the presentation’ ‘When will the presentation be ready?’ So I created this big project in Workfront where people could share all the presentations. Lots of business marketing colleagues use that project now because I share the updates there.”

The team ES heads up uses technology in a similar way. Like KG and DO, ES did not make any positive or negative statement about technology’s value to the creative process, but simply described how the team did their creative work using shared PowerPoint slides and video calls: “What we’ll do is when there is a problem to be solved, maybe it starts like a 30 minute conversation. And we pull up a slide deck and let’s identify what the problem is, or just a blank sheet to say, like, ‘Let’s just start and let’s just put it on the table.’ You have to take advantage of these new online tools. Throw your ideas in the shared doc right, and then we’ll come together and we kind of talk through it.

“In that particular instance, it’s sort of like you know, bounce it back and forth in a team call but cameras on. On the shared doc, we’re inputting and usually a person takes that work away, does something with it and brings it back to a group for further discussion.”

KG, DO and ES all described situations where their teams’ work would not have been possible without technology. In 2022, nearly everyone agrees that collaboration platforms are absolutely essential tools for remote workers. However, KG, DO and ES all described technology in terms of how their already-functioning in-person teams switched to remote creative work. None of these subjects said that technology was something that either enhanced or diminished the teams’ creative processes.

Technology's negative impact on the creative process

Two interview subjects did articulate this important theme in terms of its negative aspects – how technology does not adequately inspire or capture working teams' creative process. They explained how digital collaboration tools just aren't the same as being in-person, collaborating and brainstorming together in a shared physical space. Describing how their virtual teams use technology in creative sessions, both NW and RB expressed how they prefer in-person interactions. They were not able to feel the same spark on digital platforms.

NW said that virtual teams' creativity depends on members having a strong relationship already. Knowing each other before work demands even begin is key. For NW, creative collaboration is difficult if virtual teams don't have an in-person relationship already: "I think that's harder to have that breakout room mentality when you're not actually in a room together. I think it's a real challenge on teams unless you're a very tight group."

Describing a situation where people who had never met were instructed by a meeting moderator to join a virtual whiteboard session, NW said, "In a situation where you don't know people, it's a bit more awkward. Everyone has such a different dynamic. It's either one person or two people that monopolize that time in the group, or people are too nervous to say anything."

For RB, the thing that comes to mind first when describing the creative process is an extemporaneous in-person interaction with others: "Creativity isn't about sitting at your desk and coming and coming up with an idea. A lot of the time it's around a coffee machine, when you're bouncing ideas off of each other and things like that."

RB expresses excitement and positive energy when working in-person with creative teams, and frustration, loss and fear when working remotely. "I think that when I get creative I get excited. I don't think that can come across as easily when you're on a remote sort of setup. Fifty times a day I would get up and lean over the UX designer's shoulder and have a look at something that they had come up with,

and we would just go, 'Oh yeah, let's just tweak that a tiny bit. Let's just change it. Oh yeah, we could do that.' And then you know someone else might come over and start getting involved. You lose that, you know.

“On video calls, everyone's always conscious about speaking over each other and then if everyone starts shouting ideas out, they're showing as being rude over the top of each other.

“For me personally, I've really struggled with it from a creative point of view. I have naturally become less creative. It impacts my innovation, impacts my personality being home all the time.

Here's another one, right? So I've got to do a presentation next week. I haven't done it for so long. I used to love it. I used to get a buzz off of it. I used to do them all the time. I had no problem standing up in people talking to people through something that I know inside out. I've got to do it next week. I'm scared already. I'm already overthinking it because I haven't done it for so long I'm out of practice. What it's actually done is people who were great in the office love being in front of people, love seeing clients wonder if they'd ever get used to that again.

“I think also creative people work better together quite a lot of the time.”

In summary, every interview subject agreed that remote work is our reality now. All subjects described how they use remote work tools such as Zoom, MS Teams, Jira, project trackers and virtual whiteboards for ideation, collaboration and file sharing. These interviews show that technology does have an impact on the creative process, but subjects did not agree on whether technology's impact was to enhance, hinder or simply enable the virtual teams' creative processes. However, everyone had an insight to share and a story to tell in how they use technology at work now.

Theme 2: Leadership techniques and ways of working impact virtual teams' creative process

The second high-ranking theme that arose during this study's eight interviews was how leadership techniques and ways of working impact the creative process on virtual teams. All eight subjects described

how their formal and informal ways of working, along with guiding leadership principles and techniques, impacted their teams' creative processes. These techniques and ways of working are presented below in three subcategories.

Formal ways of working

Four of the eight team leaders interviewed described some structured ways of working that are impactful to their teams' creative processes. This study categorized these as *Formal ways of working*, and they include: time-bound creative challenges; moderated brainstorming and ideation sessions; industry-standard methodologies to create, develop and execute an idea; and regularly-scheduled meetings with teams and individuals.

NJ described how a structured, time-bound challenge focused the creative team's efforts during a crisis communications situation. The team had to produce written statements for the press in a short amount of time: "The communications team was called to an emergency campaign meeting. Our bosses stated the objective, what we need to achieve. We got put into breakout rooms. Most had all virtually met, but some people had never met before. And then we talked it out: 'OK, so what's the objective? Which part are we taking?' And often it would just be that we had to write four paragraphs. We had to think about the process. We had to think about who we're talking to. So it was never a massive task, but it was all done so, so quickly. And in that situation, it was it was very, very tightly controlled. So, you know, between 8:30 and 9:30, you had to write that paragraph with the six in the room. Gotta get it done."

NW later touched on the topic of structure during a discussion about ideation and brainstorming, describing meetings where a lot of people are in the room but only a few are contributing to the discussion. NW said that sessions like these benefit from a moderator who enforces a rigorous creative process and gets more team members participating in ideation: "Get the process right, and have a very structured environment where you have different people talking."

“If you've got a good facilitator, they will bring out the best of everybody rather than just the people that always talk.”

On the topic adding rigor to the creative process, two subjects – TM and KG – mentioned that they use Agile Development techniques when designing and problem-solving. Agile emerged in the 1990s as a set of values and principles around rapid software development. Since then, its principles and techniques for developing software have been applied to creative teams across all industry sectors.

When asked about how the team works differently now that everyone is remote, both KG and TM brought up the use of Agile development. TM said, “I went on a on a course back then when [former coworker] was still here, together with him on the Scrum Master Course certification and there we learned Agile project development stuff.” TM implemented the Agile technique of 15-minute “standup” team meetings – so called because they’re short enough to remain standing throughout. TM also implemented the Agile principle of problem-solving with a designated team leader or “Scrum master.” KG, director of a design team, said that adding structure to their ways of working was in response to the faster pace brought on by increased company demands for digital materials during pandemic lockdowns. KG’s team was called upon to rapidly produce digital media for sales teams because pandemic-related lockdowns made face-to-face sales calls impossible. KG said, “It made us work, but that was great. We had to work in an Agile manner, which we been wanting to adopt anyway and flex those chops and be able to be more agile. So it's actually was a good thing for this team.” KG’s team implemented standup meetings and iterative development techniques borrowed directly from Agile methodologies.

Other subjects described using the “standup” term and its principle borrowed from Agile, but did not attribute it directly. DO and ES both described how they use shorter, more frequent, more task-oriented meetings with their creative teams. DO emphasized the importance of sticking to a schedule of frequent, short meetings with far-remote regional teams: “I have catch-up calls with Region Türkiye & Middle East, Japan and China. We do keep in touch with lots of calls. Our one-on-one calls are holy to

me, so I never skip them unless there's a really good reason. We talk in meetings all the time.” ES used the word “intentionality” when describing structured meetings with the team and individuals, saying that regular meetings that have a goal and a purpose are essential to the creative process.

LJ uses the structure of regularly-scheduled group meetings and individual calls to give the team specific creative challenges and coaching: “It's a lot of one-to-one meetings and trying to challenge the people around you to think slightly differently and ask the question, ‘What has inspired you lately? Would you purchase this product based off of these communications? What is your data telling you from last four campaigns? Let's try to challenge the way we're currently doing things.’ I think when you remove those barriers for people who are creative, you get a lot more back in return.”

Informal ways of working

Five interview subjects articulated some of their *ad hoc* leadership techniques and ways of working with virtual creative teams. This study categorizes these techniques as *Informal ways of working*, and they include: collaborating with teams in different departments; adapting leadership techniques to individual team members’ working preferences and learning styles; conversational ways of giving feedback; attitudes and behaviors that protect creative teams from outside criticism; and using mantras and mottos to guide decision making. As opposed to *formal ways of working* that involve things like industry best practices and organizational leadership, *informal ways of working* are the attitudinal, conversational, individual reflections of team leaders’ professional experience and personal values.

KG spoke about the creative process in the context of collaborating with teams in different departments. KG’s creative design group talked to a team from the company’s Education and Training department to understand how that team used video in their online training programs. KG issued a creative challenge: “Go out and find some different options and how we might turn our brochures into an interactive digital document.” “The team would come to meetings and one of them would say, ‘Here I

explored this, what do you think?” Eventually the team adopted some of the techniques they learned from outside the department.

In talking about adapting leadership techniques to others’ preferences, MT, a self-described “people and process person,” took on a “whatever works” attitude: “It’s adapting to your team’s way of learning. Do you do better at doing? Do you better reading? Do you do better at listening?” Because of this, MT’s team decided they needed to use multiple software tools while working remotely and not stick to one enterprise standard. RB expressed a similar attitude that creative teams should be allowed to use whatever tools and environment that allows their creativity to thrive: “I think the different characters that were going to adjust, have adjusted just fine.

“I think there are also he people who have characteristics where they’re told they don’t have to go back to the office, but they actually need it. I think they’ll really struggle with, you know mentally, you know, it won’t be great for them. This hybrid model, which is kind of the best of both worlds, which you know, I can totally I can buy into.”

Other informal, unstructured ways of working mentioned in interviews involve how creative team leaders give feedback and protect members from overwork, outside criticism and distraction. MJ describes leadership as having “courageous conversations” with creative team members, and how this is something leaders can learn how to do: “Our culture from my company perspective, one of our core values is to have courageous conversations. Part of it is being humble, having the courageous conversation you’re encouraged to fix it yourself.

“Even if our company did not have that as a core value, I would still be that way. But that’s a personality thing, and that’s a learned trait, right? Like, you have to learn to be comfortable, to provide and reinforce that you’re requesting feedback and it doesn’t mean you have to be careful.”

Continuing on to describe a scenario where leaders give support and feedback, MT told the story of how they give negative feedback in direct and constructive ways. A team member gave a presentation and

MT offered direct feedback afterward: “I'm sure it's shocking to you. I'm kind of the poster child for my team in courageous conversation, in both reinforcing and redirecting feedback. I will literally sit there and someone, one of our teammates – because every Friday one of us has to present. There are some really great presenters and there's some really horrible presenters So I have been known to say, “OK, here's the feedback,” and give it to them.

MT noted that both the giver and the receiver are responsible for their ends of the “courageous conversation;” the giver has to be open and honest, and the receiver has to be accepting of critique: “You also need to make sure that person is going to be receptive to the unpopular idea or the new, novel idea that's shocking but it may turn out to be great.”

Where MT described how leadership supports workers by directing them to help resources, LJ takes a more direct, protective approach when the team experiences distraction or criticism that threaten their creative process: “I will say that my Mama Bear instinct comes out sometimes too, and you know if somebody is trying to break that [creative process], I will do everything in my power to make sure I protect the creative bubble that I've built for the team.”

LJ outlined the careful intentionality of the “Mama Bear” method of shielding the team's creative process: “It just takes more work, right? Unfortunately when it's remote there is no, ‘Hey, can we go sit down and have a chat and prepare for the conversation that's about to happen.’ You have to have a pre-conversation before having the real conversation because people are a lot more sensitive, working remotely.”

Two subjects mentioned how they use mantras and mottos to guide them in their roles as virtual team leaders. NW uses a mantra for guidance and perspective in both personal and professional life: My mantra is something that I've developed over the last few years and it's actually still the same. I have four things that I live by, whether it's myself, whether it's my team. Teamwork, hard work, recognition and success, and they're the four things that are really important to me.” NW also uses the phrase “Fail fast”

for leadership guidance with the creative team. This phrase helps to lend perspective, stay cool under pressure, and not overthink or catastrophize when something goes wrong. NW said, “Fail fast is part of part of my mantra. I use that quite a lot because, what harm you going to do? You get it wrong, it’s OK. You might have just cocked up my campaign, but you know, who really cares?”

LJ described how the motto “People over profits” informs their leadership and decision making style with creative teams and workplace interactions in general. For LJ, this motto makes a person feel safe within a working relationship, regardless of their level of seniority or experience within the organization. LJ said that under this motto, “Communication becomes a lot clearer. The way you make decisions becomes almost uniform, because at least you know what the thought process was to get there.”

Time away from work

Two subjects, ES and LJ, outlined how they, as team leaders, prioritize taking time away from work and show that it’s OK for colleagues to do so Both stated that time away from work impacts the creative process in positive ways.

ES, an American who worked for three years in Sweden, believes that taking time away from work is important to the creative process. First, a virtual team leader can be a role model, showing that it’s OK to take breaks away from the desk during the workday and still be productive. ES explained the Swedish practice of *fika*, where people make time every day for friends and colleagues to share a coffee, have a small bite to eat, and just talk. ES said that this practice, taking up to an hour per day, is highly valued and considered an essential part of Swedish corporate culture, and that team leaders can practice *fika* as a culture-setting example their for creative teams: “From a creative process perspective, I would like to make sure people feel that they've got the freedom to do that and take care of that part of their job as they see fit.”

Likewise, LJ also felt that taking time off was important to the creative process, mostly for igniting creative excitement and finding inspiration. Taking time away from work lets creative teams find an

outside perspective that could result in creative spark. Citing Nike as an example of how corporations take the pressure off of creative teams during pandemic lockdowns by giving extra time off, LJ alluded to their famous “Just to it” tagline, saying, “Just take a break from work.”

Theme 3: Empowered expertise impacts the creative process on virtual teams

Empowerment in a creative workplace has three components, according to Reiter-Palmon: leadership and employees share power, leaders motivate workers, and leaders support workers’ development (2021). On creative teams, empowerment can play out throughout the creative process – decision making, problem solving, ideation and evaluation, task assignments and so forth – and is known to promote team and individual creativity. (Lee, Willis, and Tian, 2018).

Five subjects brought up the theme of empowerment on their virtual creative teams, and described how sharing power with team experts, regardless of their rank, had an impact on the creative process.

TM, a web developer with 20 years’ experience, said that empowering creatives began during the process of hiring the web design and development team. The web design and development team needed more expertise, so TM recruited candidates who would be excited rather than intimidated by the prospect of choosing the technology, system architecture and programming languages they’d use on the job. On a particular situation where the team had to solve a problem with the way a website behaved, TM said, “I have three experts now around me and I’m always astonished by how it got solved in the end just by giving them the freedom that comes back to the recruitment process. Just let them do.”

TM continued to say that letting the team pick and choose the right technology and technique to get the job done is their “base setting.” Further on, TM noted that empowering the creative team not only means trusting their expertise but admitting to oneself that you’re not the authority: “Just let them do their stuff that they are convinced of right from the beginning. And I was wrong. Because I’m now at the stage that I don’t know everything anymore.”

On the theme of empowered expertise, NW expressed frustration with situations where workers are not given autonomy in the creative process. NW leads a large creative team that produces graphic designs and video as well as written content. NW recalled projects that were “management by committee,” where people with rank-authority lacked design knowledge or writing skill but made binding decisions on those topics anyway. “You want to use the skill set that you’ve got and give them the autonomy to make that decision.”

Similarly, MT describes the theme of empowering team expertise as “divide and conquer,” where the team assigns its own project tasks based on whoever has the most knowledge and interest. MT likened the idea of empowering expertise to using the right tool for a job, and recounted a time where the team had to come up with a pitch to a prospective client. The presentation had to include information on different areas of expertise, so MT gave the team the power to decide on task assignments: “OK, we now have our bits. You take this slide, you take that slide, whoever feels passionate about that topic. Sometimes that’s the best way.”

KG spoke about how empowering team members to stretch their skills impacted the creative process. In 2020, sudden pandemic-related lockdowns increased the demand for digital design work and put pressure on creative teams to learn new skills quickly. At the time, KG’s team was focused on print design; they knew principles of design for web and devices, but lacked the skills required to produce animations and video. In response, KG gave the team some freedom to upskill at their own pace, with support and help: “[Senior designer] is now a whiz with animation and video. [Junior designer] actually has the basics down. He’s just a more tentative person by nature and the pace is often intimidating for him on the animation and video, but we’re pulling him along.” As a result, KG’s team could redirect their focus away from print media to digital, and fulfil the company’s increasing demands for online content.

The shift to digital in 2020 also meant creative process changes for the team led by ES. Several workers were events planners, and 2020 lockdowns meant that in-person conferences and symposia were

cancelled. The company had to refocus all communications to digital, and the challenge, according to ES, was to “stay relevant” in the market. Traditional event planners had to pivot to creating virtual experiences, and ES’s communications team had to persuade people to attend those virtual events. ES described a situation where team members chose what new roles to take on, and how to best deal with pandemic-related challenges to corporate communications.

Theme 4: Interpersonal relationships affect virtual teams’ creative climate

Three subjects described in detail how their teams’ interpersonal relationships impact the creative climate, from both positive and negative aspects.

TM, ES, and NW all expressed the importance of getting to know remote teammates on a personal level, and described how having fun with each other can inform the creative climate. In theme 1: *Technology impacts the creative process on virtual teams*, TM described how conversations in team meetings flow naturally from personal topics to the work at hand. They begin with nonwork chat about weekend plans, move on to subjects of shared interest like a new device or something cool they saw online, to design topics, then eventually to the team’s work projects. The teams’ creative climate is informed by getting to know each other as people, according to TM: “This is important as well to set the stage. So we’ll talk about, ‘How many beers do we have? And of course the how was your weekend? How was your last gig?’ for example. This is actually the time to bond a bit every day. It’s cool. And this is also when we bounce back and forth ideas.”

ES also cited team bonding and fun when describing how the team maintains a creative climate, especially in response to working remotely under increased business pressure, during a pandemic. ES spoke about the importance of nonwork related team activities to fostering a creative climate. During the pandemic, in-person meetings were nonexistent, and ES missed that social aspect of the physical workplace. To build team spirit and bond, ES took the opportunity to meet in person, away from the office, when regional Covid restrictions were eased: “I’d worked here for two years before we’d ever had

a team dinner before. It was sort of this environment that suggested, gosh, we've been through a lot together without being together. Let's just get together and have some fun.” ES also emphasized the importance of “pleasantries” and “staying personable” in emails and text chats, where nuances conveyed by tone of voice and body language get lost.

On the flipside, NW and LJ both described how a team’s creative climates can be hindered by a lack of good relationships. In talking about a work relationship characterized by mistrust, NW was careful to de-personalize and keep this topic framed a business context. NW said that a negative impact on company success is a natural outcome of poor relationships: “You need trust. If you don't have that, then people are going to work against each other. Not in a nasty way, not in an actively difficult way, but will naturally happen.”

On this topic, LJ simply stated, “The people who are not succeeding as well as they probably should right now did not foster and did not put the time into forming relationships.” LJ said that she sees the impact of poor relationships playing out on creative teams as people quit their jobs. “Because what virtual teams are craving is a manager that cares.”

Theme 5: Autonomy impacts virtual teams’ creative climate

Three subjects described how their creative teams were afforded autonomy and freedom in when facing creative decisions. As mentioned above in theme three, *Empowered expertise impacts the creative process on virtual teams*, TM said that empowerment begins with the recruitment process, where candidates were told up front that they could choose for themselves the right tools and technologies to use on the job. TM extends this autonomy to the day-to-day operations of the team, noting that, outside of short daily check-in meetings, the team has the freedom to structure their own workdays as they see fit: “I don't know when they start working. I don't know when they stopped working. I can tell that they have been doing something because the outcome is something that is working.” TM also sees micromanaging the team as a hinderance to creative work: “That would drive me crazy and would drive them crazy.”

ES and DO point to times where their teams were given missions to complete, and the teams had the freedom to set out on their own and made decisions on how best to fulfil the mission. Independently of each other, both ES and DO described the attitude on their teams as, “Let’s try.”

DO’s team’s mission was to create something that would engage customers at the first in-person conference since 2019. Social distancing requirements were enforced, so the team had to find creative ways to engage conference attendees without breaking rules about close physical contact. To accomplish this, the creative team built a branded quiz app that attendees could run on their phones for a quick bit of fun during the conference. DO said the team experienced resistance from higher-ups who did not initially support the idea: “First we heard, ‘Well, we’re not sure if it’s worth the technical effort.’ Then, ‘Do we really need this? You already have so much on your plate.’” In developing their quiz app, DO’s team had the creative autonomy to decide how to best support company strategy.

ES reinforced the theme of autonomy in describing how her team worked

during pandemic-related lockdowns. Admitting that collaboration with remote teams can be challenging, ES spoke about the fact that the shift to remote work forced creative teams to act autonomously. Explaining how the 100% digital work environment impacted the team’s creative process, ES said, “It’s giving some folks on the team who embrace it the opportunity to shine. We’re like, ‘OK, I don’t know how this is going to move forward, so let’s try to make some sense of it and come back.’ And we’ve have had some creative solutions to some problems.”

Theme 6: Gratifying work sustains the creative climate

Three interview subjects said that gratifying work is a significant factor in sustaining a teams’ creative climate. Both intrinsic and extrinsic motivations facilitate creativity (Reiter-Palmon, 2021, p 39) and this study’s interview subjects described scenarios that support both.

KG, a creative services director who manages the work of graphic designers and copywriters, strives to establish a creative climate on the team by recognizing that not all creative work will be innovative, cutting-edge or exciting. Sometimes the job of a graphic designer or copywriter, especially for business-to-business firms, is routine and even boring. On fostering a creative climate among the team, KG described a leader's role in terms of balancing:

“So you have to balance. You have to balance the mundane with the challenging. So we get so many requests that there are opportunities for something that is more fun or using that side of the brain a little bit more than adhering to a template and specific content needs and things like that. So you just try to balance the load so that they're having some projects that are a little bit more on the fun side and a little bit of a departure from the norm.”

MT also expressed a virtual team leader's role as one that helps colleagues find balance between work and private time, so that creative teams are not overworked:

“Some of it's just having hyper awareness when it is your responsibility, having hyper awareness and then making sure that people understand they could have work life-balance. Particularly when everybody around you is working like 80 hours a week just, like, busting to get things done and then you know that's when you have to lead by example. I literally had to tell one of the other program leaders in one of the programs we're working on. I said you need to stop sending invitations and emails on Sunday afternoons and Saturdays, stop it because that is not credible.”

MT continued, describing a situation similar to KG's, where a creative team leader needs to load-balance in order to optimize work and keep teams creatively sharp:

“But when you get used to working remotely and you're interacting with your teammates, it's just making sure that the leaders are like, ‘OK, who's busy, who's swamped right now? He's bailing out too much. Send him over me. I'm going to go help out,’ or whatever, and then have that responsibility to just pinch hit, you know.”

For NW, whose team includes a mix of traditional creative roles (graphic designers, writers, media producers) and new-media creative roles (data analysts and) recognition of success is something a creative leader lives by:

“I have four things that I live by, whether it's myself, whether it's my team. Teamwork, hard work, recognition and success, and they're the four things that are really important to me. The team working hard – teamwork is like the biggest thing for me. But the recognition piece is interesting because it comes back to how do you share and “shout out” the good work that the team is doing and obviously being successful.”

One way of keeping a virtual team’s creative climate vibrant is to set quantifiable, achievable goals. For NW’s team, success that is backed by data is key to the gratification that can keep creativity high:

“Gratifying for me is knowing that what you're doing, the campaigns you're putting out there, are making a difference. For me it was gratifying was to go, “OK, in looking at the social media stats for last week in paid search that we did and in the paid advertising we did in certain regions, our cost per click is massively reduced. So we know something is working there.”

Theme 7: A psychologically safe environment enables virtual teams’ creative climate

Two subjects, TM and MT, described the theme of psychological safety as it relates to a team’s climate for creativity. A psychologically safe environment is one where team members trust each other and comfortable enough with each other to share creative ideas, give feedback and handle criticism.

In particular, TM noted that the environment of psychological safety among the virtual team allowed them to overcome fears of criticism during ideation sessions: “The collaboration is very good amongst the team. And yeah, everybody has the feeling that you can come up with stupid ideas and nobody will laugh at you and we can we just try out things and then improve stuff, or we do stuff that we

don't end up using though. That is the team's running gag. It's crazy techie stuff, but it is a very cool thought behind it. This is how we're working.”

MT believes that the team leader has a role in establishing psychological safety by providing support and resources to workers. In theme 2: *Leadership techniques and ways of working impact virtual teams' creative process*, MT spoke about having “courageous conversations.” MT went on to say that part of psychological safety involves letting workers know they have leadership's support when they ask for help: “If you can't fix it or you feel like it is not safe or there's something else going on, then you have multiple avenues for which you can escalate or ask for help.”

To summarize, MT and TM described situations where psychological safety was essential to open communication among virtual teams. Feeling safe supports the open communication that's foundational to a creative climate, and enables the creative process. Open, trusting communication enables ideation sessions to be productive (imagine a “no bad ideas” type of environment) and underpins team relationships where members can be honest when evaluating ideas and giving criticism.

Theme 8: Documented guidelines and procedures enable virtual teams' creative process

Two interview subjects, TM and KG, talked about how their firms' documented guidelines and procedures impacted their teams' creative processes. TM said that processes are a way of protecting the team from distraction, and KG said that guidelines helped to justify creative design decisions.

TMs' web development team operates using an official “change request” process. When the company website needs any kind of change, major or minor, the official process is to enter the change request into the teams Workfront project management system. TM and team then make the relevant task assignments. The reason for using a platform like Workfront is to make sure projects get completed correctly and on time, and that completed work gets recognized. TM described a situation where a colleague made an informal, direct request for a website edit, and TM had to insist on using the

Workfront: “Here is where I need to start to protect the guys and the request process. Unfortunately, as much as I hate them as well, these need to be followed.”

Similarly, KG uses official company guidelines for empowerment when the team needs protection from outside distractions and extra work. KG’s creative services team is an in-house agency that produces print and digital materials for sales, marketing and corporate communications. KG’s team is responsible for creating these materials, but they’re approved by people outside the department. Often, approvers lack design and writing expertise.

KG (with a slight eye-roll) described situations where non-experts were in the power position to approve or reject designs. Creative production leaders then had to justify their design decisions. They used the company’s documented brand and editorial guidelines as evidence that creative decisions were well-founded: “We can push back on something and say, ‘You know, we have our brand parameters, we have guidelines.’ And we’ve come back a couple of times and said, ‘That just doesn’t make good design sense. It’s not a best practice.’”

“So [the term] “best practice” seems to work most successfully with people, usually somebody that’s brought in at the eighth hour that says, ‘I really don’t like that design.’”

Chapter 5: Conclusions and Key Learnings

The future of digital creativity: Insights and recommendations for creative team leadership

In the summer of 2021, the world was still in the full swing of a global shutdown that forced significant changes to our working lives. We were a year into the unexpected new experience of working, going to school, meeting friends, doing practically everything virtually. That's when the inspiration hit for this study. How are creative workers adapting to the new context? How is the shift to digital impacting our creative work – are we struggling, coping, or thriving? What do creative team leaders need to consider as the virtual workplace becomes the expected, even desired, new normal?

Insights from this study tell us that there are ways to foster a creative climate and enable the creative process on virtual teams. While this study focused on the thoughts and experiences of leaders in traditional creative sectors – advertising, marketing communications and graphic design – the creative process happens across all enterprises. All industries and sectors have to create and problem solve. Virtual teams are the new normal and are likely to remain so.

Leadership would do well to take these insights under advisement as they seek to optimize digital work. This study has the following five recommendations for leadership based on themes that emerged during interviews with leaders of creative teams.

Treat technology as essential

The forced shift to remote working in 2020 brought the importance of technology into a new, sharp focus. As workers were almost dispersed into virtual environments, digital divides were exposed; we immediately noticed the limitations of dated technology in trying to communicate, collaborate and be creative. As teams continue to migrate to digital work in 2022 and as workplaces introduce hybrid models, leadership must consider that technology is critical to creativity. The right technology will enable creative work and the wrong technology will hinder it.

For creative teams, technology defines the work experience whether it's in person or 100% virtual. The trend toward dispersion will likely become permanent and if that's the case, technology will become the workplace itself. Effective technology that lets communicate, collaborate and create without disruption will be a determining factor in virtual workplace success.

Corporate leadership needs to treat tech as essential. The findings in this study show that creative workers crave responsibility and seamless engagement with teams. All eight of the team leaders interviewed here spoke about how technology impacts their work; ranging from positive, neutral, to negative. When viewed positively, creative leaders discussed how tools like digital whiteboards, project trackers and chat apps that enable both synchronous and asynchronous collaboration. When viewed neutrally, technology "just works," and feels unobtrusive. When viewed negatively, our experts spoke with frustration when tools are inadequate in capturing working teams' creative process, or when they're simply uninspiring to the creative climate.

It's worth remembering that the creative leaders in this study were using collaborative tech well before moving to virtual environments, just not as a daily way of working. COVID times pressed technology into a demanding new service, where apps and platforms had to be 100% enabling and always reliable. Reviews on technology's impact on creativity were mixed, but everyone had an opinion.

Consider how technology enabled a team of UX developers for an IT service agency. You'd expect them to have positive things to say about the collaborative tools and social apps they use for creative problem-solving. "We use Teams like crazy, we're using our cell phones to connect with each other on Instagram. Or, you know, all kinds of other things as a means of connection and peer reviews. And, 'Hey I've got this problem. Does anyone have a thing that they've done or how have you solved this?' And so it's a lot of online activity, and sometimes a phone call, and sometimes a video chat, and every time it doesn't hinder," said Melissa T, director of user experience for an IT services agency.

"In fact, the times that I did have to go into the office, that feels disruptive."

Neutral views on tech's creative impact still made the demand that the tools just work, without obstructing teams' flow. KG, a director of creative services whose team includes graphic designers, said the group's creative process is mostly unchanged because of the shift to remote work. The same kind of creative ideation that took place in the real office now happens on Microsoft Teams: "We throw them up on a virtual wall and ask, 'So how about this?' The designer will quickly sketch something and then share it with us on the virtual window. Then we talk about it: 'Well, wait, maybe we could do this. Maybe we could do that.' But that creative input has pretty much stayed the same."

Negative views about technology centered around how the creative process is dampened when tools aren't fit for purpose, when they're uninspiring or even a hinderance to creative work. Those who thought tech had a negative impact on creativity thought that the tools were inadequate for replicating the in-person experience. Maybe these workers will feel differently when we eventually get fully immersive, metaverse type work environments? We're far off from that. Nevertheless, they felt that in virtual workplaces, something was still missing.

"I think that when I get creative I get excited. I don't think that can come across as easily when you're on a remote sort of setup. Fifty times a day I would get up and lean over the UX designer's shoulder and have a look at something that they had come up with, and we would just go, 'Oh yeah, let's just tweak that a tiny bit. Let's just change it. Oh yeah, we could do that.' And then you know someone else might come over and start getting involved. You lose that, you know," said Ross B, a creative agency owner.

"For me personally, I've really struggled with it from a creative point of view. I have naturally become less creative. It impacts my innovation, impacts my personality being home all the time. I think also creative people work better together quite a lot of the time."

Implement ways of working that foster creativity and adaptability

The pandemic taught us that adaptability is imperative for an entity's survival, whether that entity is an organism or an organization. A 2021 survey by Adobe Corporation of people in creative industries showed that in the face of significant changes, digital workers showed themselves to be adaptable and resilient. Their study reported that employee confidence rates rose in areas of time management, communication, collaborating across geographies, and dealing with work-related conflicts during the transition to remote work.

This resilience is echoed by the interviews conducted for this study. Almost everyone discussed how they found new ways working, from hybrid workplaces to the Swedish concept of *fika*, and relied on traditional methods, such as regularly-held structured meetings and moderated brainstorming sessions, to maintain the creative climate and keep their teams' creative process going.

“During COVID, we were looking at digital deployment and looking at costs of printing and the fact that 90% of your print documents end up in the trash can,” said Kat G, director of creative services whose team includes designers and writers. She gave her team a creative challenge to lower printing costs by turning printed brochures into interactive digital document. “I said, ‘See what you can find this week. Let's all talk about this in next Wednesday's meeting and see what we might come up with.’ Then we would explore that, get a license if we needed it and play with it in the sandbox with that idea until we nailed something that we thought was workable.”

Creative leaders also mentioned the importance of brainstorming sessions, a traditional ideation activity where teams follow a structured agenda and an impartial moderator rouses everyone to participate while keeping the group on topic. In these sessions, creatives are usually gathered in a room together with a clear goal, purpose and time limit for ideation and problem-solving. “I think that's harder to have that breakout room mentality when you're not actually in a room together. I think it's a real challenge on teams unless you're a very tight group. I think it needs to be very structured,” said Naomi W, vice president of a

creative agency. “Get the process right and have a very structured environment where you have different people talking,” so that the more outspoken personalities don’t dominate the discussion.

Several leaders mentioned that they borrow the Agile philosophy of software development and apply its techniques to their ways of working. Creative managers talked about scrum teams (ad hoc groups of specialists chosen for a particular project based on their expertise and interests) and standups (15- or 20-minute meetings held at the beginning of every work day to discuss the day’s tasks where they need help), and how these formal techniques helped their teams’ creativity and efficiency.

While traditional ways of working continued on in the virtual workplace, some of the leaders interviewed for this study spoke about how this new context inspired them to find novel ways of working that emphasize social connections and informality across levels of the corporation to foster a creative climate on their teams.

Melissa T describes communication among her teams as way to break down the old barriers of corporate hierarchy. “Our culture from my company perspective, one of our core values is to have courageous conversations,” she said. In Melissa’s workplace, a courageous conversation is where you’re free to share opinions and judgements, give negative feedback, and be protected from blowback or retaliation if the conversation is critical of upper management. This honest style, Melissa said, is crucial to her teams’ creative success because it’s never malicious and always with the positive intention of inspiring colleagues to do their best work.

Erin S, a communications director whose team includes writers, designers and planners, said that her teams benefited from a relaxed way of working that she learned about while working in Europe, where time away from the desk is valued as a way to refresh and recharge. During COVID lockdowns when people were working from home, the boundaries between work and home got blurred. Erin’s team adopted the practice of fika, a Swedish business tradition of taking a coffee break with colleagues and intentionally not talking about work. To be creative, Erin S said, “people to have that ability to walk away

and get the juices flowing. From a creative process perspective, I would like to make sure people feel that they've got the freedom to do that and take care of that that part of their job as they see fit.”

We're emerging from pandemic lockdowns in 2022, and it seems as if the forced shift to a 100% digital workplace might be over. Workers will look back on the experience with a range of opinions and emotions, ranging from terrible to wonderful, and definitely a learning experience. Companies – and our broader culture – learned with varying, often stumbling, success how to stay connected and productive in a 100% digital space. Workers now can look forward to taking the learnings of 2020-21 into the future and expect their employers to provide a hybrid workplace, where people can work remotely as they see fit.

About the solitary aspect of working virtually, Ross B said, “Creativity isn't about sitting at your desk and coming and coming up with an idea. A lot of the time it's around a coffee machine when you're bouncing ideas off of each other and things like that.” The shift to an all-virtual workplace represented a huge loss for him and his colleagues in terms of their creative output. If he were a job-seeker now, he said, “I would only apply for a job if there was at least a hybrid model of working.” So it seems the world is opening back up again and workers are taking strong positions on their environment, expecting companies to trust their productivity wherever and however they work.

Enable autonomy and alignment

According to a study done by the Adobe Corporation about digital work, employees who were forced to work from home in 2020-21 have come to expect the kind of flexibility and autonomy that comes with remote work. Creative teams have shown that they can be productive with self-determined hours and changing locations, and they want the chance to flex their expertise in ways they think are best. People have always craved gratifying work, but the forced shift to digital brought this desire into sharper focus. Remote teams want freedom to decide when and where to work, and autonomy to decide how they

apply their skills to company goals. 2020-21 showed us that we can work remotely and still get the job done, so how should leadership react?

First, by realizing that the shift to digital work is turning out to be durable. “Remote work,” once a novelty or a perk, is now just “work.” Next, creative leadership must connect workers’ desire for autonomy with strategies that support the company goals. In many workplaces, this meant reorganizing away from traditional hierarchical organizations toward egalitarian models: instead of telling people what to do, leadership gives context and purpose, and teams make good decisions on the best way to deliver.

Naomi W uses a motto to motivate and keep teams stoked with gratifying work. “I have four things that I live by, whether it's myself, whether it's my team. Teamwork, hard work, recognition and success,” she says. “They're the four things that are really important to me.” Measuring success with plainly-articulated, measurable goals is important to that feeling of accomplishment: “Gratifying is knowing that what you're doing, the campaigns you're putting out there, are making a difference. In the aviation business, we had to bring in a huge amount of pipeline of applications for people that wanted to be a pilot. So for me what was gratifying was to go, ‘We're supposed to hit 1000 leads per week. We're actually up by 200 this week, so we know that next week we can't take our foot off the pedal.’”

For creative people on remote teams, gratification comes from, as two team leaders put it, bringing in cool projects and not micromanaging. For Tobias M, director of a web design and development team, leading creatives means focusing on the applications they build and trusting individuals to manage their own time and decide how best to bring a project to fruition. “I only check with check in with them once a day, perhaps two times a day when we have specifically targeted meeting in the afternoon about something. But other than that I don't know what they're doing. I can tell that they have been doing something because of the outcome is something that is working.”

Desiree O is a communications director whose team includes strategists and planners. For her, “It's good when there's cool factor to an idea. It gets your blood pumping.” Gratifying work for her team

sometime involves risk. “Sometimes it can be very stressful, but then again, I think we all kind of like that. We have that special bone in our body where we’re like, ‘Hey, this is pretty, this is cool. Let’s go for it.’”

But creative work can’t always be thrillingly risky or cutting-edge cool. It’s still work, after all. How can team leaders deal with that? Load-balancing. Everyone does their fair share of uninspiring projects, and when compelling projects come around, those are shared fairly, too. “You have to balance the mundane with the challenging,” advises Kat G. “You just try to balance the load so that they’re having some projects that are a little bit more on the fun side and a little bit of a departure from the norm.”

While digital teams are demanding creative autonomy, leadership still needs to make sure that their teams’ work supports company goals. Just because teams are remote doesn’t mean they’re free of critique from outside their departments. Remote workers also face additional distractions in a virtual work from home environment. How can leaders shield teams from outside scrutiny and keep their creative efforts focused on supporting company goals?

“I’ll bring them into the fold,” Naomi W said. Inviting people from other departments into the conversation, especially ones who are critical of your teams’ work, is important for building rapport and understanding between teams. “There’s always someone that thinks they can do it better. If I heard the head of engineering or one of the engineering guys saying, ‘I think you should work differently,’ I would welcome them into some meetings and bring them into some kind of process heavy meetings where we’re talking about ways of working and how we develop a communications campaign. ‘Tell us about your environment, tell us what’s important to you in engineering and why you think marketing should be doing things slightly differently.’ We may learn something from them as well.”

Desiree O reinforced the idea that consensus-building is critical. Her creative team produces live and virtual healthcare-industry conferences, where hospital administrators, physicians and researchers meet CEOs and sales reps from manufacturers. Her teams deal with a lot of parties that have varying and

sometimes conflicting interests. By establishing credibility and good rapport with people outside her department, and building consensus, she keeps the team's creativity focused on the business: "Everyone, everyone needs to feel good about it and making sure that all the interests of the stakeholders are well represented. We discuss it, we talk about it, we counter a little bit here and there, and then at the end of the day, we have the idea format that we'll keep on polishing."

Even with such a commitment to good rapport at work, collaborative teams are often confronted with stakeholders who are not experts. As workers become empowered to make decisions and solve problems autonomously, they need support in the form of documented processes, standards and guidelines when their creative decisions come under scrutiny. It's leadership's imperative to make sure that processes and guidelines are agreed-upon and widely published among the organization, to make sure that workers feel promoted and protected from critique and distraction.

As the traditional work environment evolved during COVID, Tobias M noticed that coworkers' regard for official process declined somewhat. It seemed that, in the new workplace, people felt more free to ask his team for quick favors in the form of undocumented work or to skirt the rules around work prioritization. "Other people start to get to my team members directly more and more, and want to get stuff done without following the official request process, you know?" He described how he cited official company policies in order to keep his teams' workload in check and prioritized appropriately. "Here is where I need to start to protect the guys and the request process. Unfortunately, as much as I hate them as well, these need to be followed. These little protection things that we have to do, that you wish you didn't have to, but we all should."

For leadership, protecting the team and keeping them focused in the new environment means adhering more closely to the company standards. As creative teams' workflows accelerated during COVID and continue to evolve, workers need leaderships' protection from unrealistic demands from stakeholders. In this creative climate, design director Kat relied on documented brand standards for

guidance and backup to counter unreasonable project requests. “We have our brand guidelines, we have design best practices. But then we still have an executive team that if our answer isn't satisfactory to that stakeholder, they go straight to that person and well, we'll make an exception this time. So we live in a world of exceptions.”

Empower and nurture individual expertise

The shift to remote work is, without a doubt, challenging creative teams in new and unusual ways. The digital workplace is forcing collaborations and bringing together people from different backgrounds, skills, even locations. We're working on projects from ideation to completion, using new technology, often with colleagues we've never even met in person. At the same time, changing business demands is increasing the pressure on creative teams to learn new skills and tools faster than ever.

In this environment, creative teams with varying levels of experience and seniority can sometimes feel somewhat ad hoc and thrown together. In this dynamic and dispersed environment, how can creative team leaders cope to get the best out of each individual and do work that everyone's proud of?

For the creatives interviewed in this study, that means putting people with the right skills and the right people on the task, and trusting their abilities to see things through.

Team leaders also realized that their position in leadership doesn't equate to expertise. A skilled junior associate with a fresh degree in graphic design might have better animation chops than a senior print designer; regional copywriters would understand their local cultural nuances more thoroughly than their global directors. Creative leaders attributed their success to empowering the right person for the task, regardless of seniority or job title.

Naomi W had this advice on empowering individuals to get the best team results: “I think it's just about collaborating in the group. It's knowing who's got the best voice in that situation. You want to use

the skill set that you've got and give them the autonomy to make that decision. As a leader in that environment, I push to use the skill sets within the room.”

For Tobias M, empowering the team’s expertise originates with hiring the right people. It comes with a dose of trust and humility: “Just let them do the stuff that they are convinced of right from the beginning because I'm now at the stage that I don't know everything anymore. I have three experts now around me and I'm always astonished by how problems got solved in the end just by giving them the freedom that comes back to the recruitment process. Just let them do.”

But sometimes a project demands expertise that doesn’t exist yet on the team. As work shifted to the virtual space, so did the ways that businesses communicate with customers; companies saw their in-person meetings and events go 100% online in 2020, and that trend continues today. In response, creative workers have had to reskill and upskill to learn how to live and thrive in this new business environment.

Erin S described how her communications team adapted and grew into new areas of expertise because of the shift to digital in her industry: “Because the stakes have changed, the game is changed a little and they rise to occasion. We have to stay relevant. With my event coordinator, I joked with her like, ‘You're like a comms manager now, right? You have almost no choice but to grow into that.’ And she did it willingly. Our designer stretched a bit and got into some projects that he really likes but doesn't often have the chance to do.”

When the business world shifted to digital, Kat G’s team of graphic designers found it all very exciting. Designers are a naturally forward-looking and curious bunch already, and the shift to digital meant that they got to prioritize and accelerate what they were already interested in learning: “Actually, the move to virtual with COVID has actually helped that because we were anyway seeing the world move to more digital communications. And so we had already started trying to get some animation video chops, for example. Graphic designers are not typically trained in those mediums, and so it's been a good

opportunity over the last couple of years for the team to evolve into that world and develop a lot of those skills that they didn't have before.”

Build trust and conquer fear

Trust is a key component of productive creative teams. It's the basis for collegial bonds among teams, promotes a creative climate and enables their creative process. At the foundation of trust is a place of psychological safety where workers feel okay to speak their minds, be themselves, offer new ideas, make mistakes and acknowledge the potential for failure. All the while, the new digital workplace is still dynamic and fraught with uncertainty.

In the face of this, how can leadership foster trust and conquer fear? The experts interviewed for this study advise leaders to communicate openly, manage projects transparently, and be approachable and vulnerable themselves. Leadership should also remember the humanity of the workforce and invest time and energy into getting to know workers as people with lives outside of work. With this kind of support, workers can deliver high quality work in an environment that's still undergoing constant change.

“Check-ins are really important thing to me that I do in my team as well,” said Naomi W in describing how her team got to know and trust one another. “That's what pilots do. They say, ‘Let's check in. We're in the cockpit so anything that's bothering you, anything that's worrying, you bring it to the table.’

“It's about having that real openness, that ability to show vulnerability. Once you've got that trust and that safe environment within your close team, then you're able to then go, ‘OK, that is a place where I can bring my problems or bring my challenges to,’ and we'll work together as a team.”

On virtual teams, where work can sometimes be isolating or lonely, feeling safe to build interpersonal bonds and show vulnerability can conquer fear and build a climate for creative new ideas.

This kind of trust enables Tobias M's team to solve problems and make the web applications they develop even better.

“This is important as well to set the stage. This is actually the time to bond a bit every day. It's cool. And this is also when we bounce back and forth ideas. Everybody has the feeling that you can come up with stupid ideas and nobody will laugh at you. And then we can we just try out things and then improve stuff.”

Part of conquering fear is recognizing the risks and trying anyway. Being forced to try new things and admitting uncertainty became the norm in 2020, and under these circumstances, creative teams have no choice but to accept failure as an option. Erin S and her creative team were determined to learn from whatever missteps they may make. “Certainly the theme of this past year is, ‘Hey, let's try it, right?’ We might fail, but we've got to try. So everybody, everybody is on board with: if it doesn't work, then we learn. Everything we do in our industry in particular, I think it's just so heavily focused on that idea that it's OK to try something and fail as well. I think that definitely permeated what we did and helped us to take a couple risks last year.”

Conversely, teams that lack interpersonal trust and are fearful of one another are less creative in their problem-solving and less cohesive as a functional unit. Marketing operations manager Laura J notes that lack of trust in leadership what led up to the so-called “Great Resignation” during 2020-21, where people in large numbers got burned out at work and quit their jobs or left their fields entirely. “People who are not succeeding as well as they probably should right now did not foster and did not put the time into forming relationships,” she said. “And I think we're seeing the consequences of that. People leaving. And you know, they had maybe not the same team atmosphere that they were sold. Because what virtual teams are craving is a manager that cares.”

Topics for future research

As this study concluded, creative workers and their employers realize that that a mandatory in-person workplace is a thing of the past for creative teams. This shift to remote work is durable and we're not likely to return to old ways. As remote work becomes normalized, it would be beneficial to understand this new digital environment's implications in other areas.

Creative team leaders in this study indicated their preferences either for or against remote work, saying that they miss the creative spirit and collaboration that happens in person, or that they're more productive when working remotely and without office distractions. In casual follow-up conversations, two study members indicated that their companies have instituted policies making it mandatory to work from the office a few days per month. A new study could explore this topic, surveying human resources executives at companies that have either gone back to in-person work or who allow workers to choose where to work. These HR studies would help us understand their processes, reasons for doing so, and the impact their decision had on the business and its workers.

Another new area of inquiry could focus on young creatives entering the workforce once remote work or hybrid work becomes solidified as normal. This study's participants were all creative team leaders with years of experience; several of them witnessed economic and technological disruptions in their careers already and came to interviews with the attitude that change is constant. Young workers will be entering creative jobs perhaps without this perspective or experience of collective resilience in the workplace. How can educators best prepare them for the virtual workplace or a workplace where the setting is so flexible? Does this new environment need to be taught, or will it come naturally to young workers who are already digital natives? Are the demands of a remote or hybrid workplace more or less challenging to young workers just entering creative fields?

This study focused on workers whose role in the traditional agency model would be called the "creatives," people whose output is typically audience-facing: graphic design, writing, advertising, digital media. This study did not investigate the "account" side of a traditional agency model: people whose jobs

involve business operations, sales, and client relationship management. While not “creatives” in job title, these workers are still *creative* in what they do: they problem-solve, generate and evaluate ideas, and provide intangible value to the firm (Hearn, 2020). In-depth interviews with these workers could reveal similarities or differences in attitudes among people on the business side (as opposed to the creative side) of agency work.

The shift to remote work is a unique mode of disruption. It represents a first for all of us and therefore warrants further study. It's crucial that we continue to investigate the implications of remote and hybrid work on teams, because its impact will be felt throughout the organization for years to come. Because of the shift to virtual work, “Companies are facing a very real urgency to understand and cultivate resilience in their digital workforces in order to retain and attract the talent they’ll need to stay competitive.” (Adobe, 2021) Understanding how workers adapt for resilience is critical to organizations’ success.

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Appendix A

Interview Guide

General questions:

With the shift to 100% digital, how has this affected your overall job and your daily responsibilities?

What's your perspective on disruptions in our industry since you first started your career?

How is your job different in 2020 from what you did in 2019?

How do you think creative teams will work post-Covid, when the world is "opened up" again?

RQ1 Questions: Addressing the creative team's climate for creativity

How has the shift to digital affected your relationship with your creative teammates?

What's communication like with colleagues outside your department?

If communication has gotten more or less open during the pandemic, in what ways has it changed?

What is your team culture like now that the workplace is 100% digital?

How does your team stay up to date on industry trends?

In this new environment, how are creative decisions made among the team?

What's the vibe like in meetings where you have to present new ideas and listen to other people's pitches?

RQ2 Questions: Addressing the creative team's creative process

What's your creative workflow been like during the 2020 pandemic?

What's changed in your workflow now that we've gone digital?

What new creative strategies has your team had to come up with because of the 2020 pandemic?

What new creative challenges have you encountered?

How do you share new ideas with each other?

How does your team decide to try something new?

What's the effect of being completely digital on the ways you brainstorm with your team and by yourself?

Appendix B

Interview Transcripts

Subject 1: Erin S.

Katie Snow

How has the shift to digital affected your relationship with your creative teammates?

ES

For the last three years I've been remote, prior to COVID and with my team. So my team is dispersed. Back then it was like a coming together like a big team kickoff. We did not have a functional organization prior to me joining, so just as a tidbit like prior weed mark on which is 3 people and then we had a, we had people within the business units, but there wasn't a functional marketing organization until I joined. And that's really fun. Like building teams is so fun, right? And and the team is came together so fantastically they all kind of work together. We did a big kick off in 2020 but we had less than one year, so two members joined from other parts of the, you know so wasn't praying till June. We had a full functional marketing org and then by March we're back to being remote right fully remote even those that did work together. So we do a Tuesday, Thursday stand up 15 minutes.

Tuesday, Thursday 9:30 eastern. So it's 8:30 for our folks in Wisconsin and we keep it to 15 minutes, right? It's an opportunity. It's not like a hey, what do you do in today? Like give me your To Do List. It's a more of a here. Keep projects or hate you know what we missed this like, hey Katie, I need to. I didn't tell you about this right? Just a quick come together. A little round Robin. It's an opportunity to share for me to share, but other corporate updates or changes or those sorts of things too. We celebrate successes that way too, like coming off of Astro or you know some.

KS

How has the shift to digital affected your relationship with your creative teammates?

ES

I definitely think you know, part of it is awful, managing different personalities who do engagement differently. You know in some degree were own customers right from the marketing side. When you get to that side of it, right? Because we're just being bombarded by, you know this type of environment a lot, so I don't think we're going back to normal. I don't really think we've skipped a beat. I I do think I'm not, you know, there have been lulls, and there's certainly been times where you know it's. I will say we as a company took a break.

Our CEO gave us like an extra two or three days off around Labor Day last year. Just be like we all did break right? And that I think was really well received. You know, do that with my team to just to be like, you know if you can be done be done right like just take a break, walk away. And I certainly think you

know it's easy for me. Katie, because I don't have children right? But a lot of my team does and so trying to help them especially last year like the first six months of this, I'd say right navigating like recognizing, especially as a female leader who doesn't have children.

KS

What's communication like with colleagues outside of your creative team?

ES

I felt like that's been successful. My team felt like that because we already had that established. Some teams at our company, started working remotely before. We already had a bit of a dispersed team and that has seemed to really work well for us. When things opened back up, I've been to Florida handful at times and to our Wisconsin office earlier this year where things were a little bit better, and that was also good. I think everybody all appreciates that in-person interaction.

Where I notice being back in person was even more so as with my peers. The head of sales and I enjoyed being able to have those even hallway conversations. This person told me so many things. This is why I need to come into the office because now I have a lot more knowledge about what's going on in real life, but I don't think on my team that we're going back to normal.

KS

How do build that creative environment where your virtual team feels safe to share ideas?

ES

Be empathetic to the role that they're in, knowing that I don't not the role but the the constraints that the men and women on my team, right? Or how they because they've got the demands their kids at home. My philosophy is always been like if your job is getting done. That's actually all I care about, right? So if that's you know, if you need to stop working from 1:00 to 7:00 PM because your family's home. Sure, right, but let's make sure we meet our deadlines and I don't you know that. However, that needs to work out. So I think that not every team in our company is had that ethos before.

As a legacy very small company for so long was just like what are your hours or you're on the clock right? And funny things that is more of that they've grown up so I think that flexibility was a really key component as well. Of course we did the thing that everybody did last year in particular, which is like let's have a virtual happy hour right? I mean, we certainly tried for that when I went up to Wisconsin. You almost need to have an icebreaker question or something, because it is sort of just strange. I said, hey, anyone who's comfortable? Let's let's get together for lunch. And so we did. I mean, I think folks came in their shorts and there's a weekday, right? But my team is like I said, six folks that are in that Madison area. And, you know, we sat outside at lunch, grabbed a beer: "Let's just have a day because we're

grownups and needs to not always be focused on work.” I think one of the hardest challenges is, now that everyone is working from home, it's just all work all the time.

KS

As team leader, is your creative environment OK with blurred boundaries between work and home? Or is it like, “I need to shut off my phone and disappear?”

ES

It is a tough balance. I felt like, if the availability is there, they recognize without even being asked. People will check in. It is a little bit different of a culture. I would say where people aren't just innately checking their phones at all hours and responding to emails, which is lovely and that was pre and post. You know pre and during. I guess we're still during COVID. I think they've enjoyed the little bit more of the blurred because again, that flexibility said before, which is yeah, like your kids home and you need to be there with them. That's totally fine. If there is a boundary, let me know so I don't bug. I think the team does do a pretty good job of, at a certain point in the night, just turning off devices.

I had a conversation with the team that since my husband is also working from home, he walks every day at lunchtime and I've tried to do that, too. I'm maybe 40% successful at getting out of the house at lunchtime, which is something I've never done before. I've realized just by even saying that, would it look like a vulnerability? Should I be taking a 15 minute walk during the day and getting out of my house? Is that setting the right example?

But really, It's so mentally helpful for me and after sharing that, two or three people said the same. I don't know if they did that before, because I was never in the office with them. But you know, knowing that it's OK to say, yeah, I stepped away and I went and got some fresh air.

You don't have time to walk between meeting rooms anymore, right? You're going from zoom, zoom, zoom, or teams at teams to teams, right? And so to bake that in and. And I think at a company level people understand that too, like you need to do that and you know early on I think at a corporate leadership level is sort of saying hey guys, do these things take care of yourself right? Like 'cause it was such an unknown because some nuclear is culture was just very. You're always in the office right? The number of people who are remote were very small percentage right? So it was a very big change organizationally.

To be intentional about that is something that I would I will I will do in the future. I don't think it is then stated one way or the other, but even we get back to the office. You know for people to have that ability to be like kind of, walk away and get the juices flowing, yeah?

Bearing in mind that you know, kind of a difference between the US model and maybe in some of our European friends, right? I mean that is very accepted outside the USA workplace, right? I mean my time in Sweden, sure like between 9:30 and 10:00 and 2:00 and 2:30 everyday people are gonna grab a coffee, grab a fika, sit down and have a talk or walk her out right? And I was like.

Many of them, many of the teams, so yeah, so from a creative process perspective, I think it's something that would certainly now that I they said out loud. I would like to make sure people feel that they've got the freedom to do that and take care of you know that that part of their job as they see fit.

KS

When you have to come up with a creative solution to something, what's that like with a virtual team?

ES

Yeah, yeah, what I'm seeing is truly having so oftentimes. What we'll do is when there is a problem to be solved. Maybe it starts like a 30 minute conversation, right? And we pull up, maybe you know whether someone got the slide deck, right? That's already identify what the problem is, or just a blank sheet to say like let's just start right and let's just put it on the table like even for example, Katie, we're naming a new product, right? And you know, that was a good example to or what? And the way this particular situation was and you have to make advantage of these. Take advantage of these new online tools, right? And so it's like alright. Here's a shared doc, right? Here's what we know. Like throw your ideas in the shared doc right, and then we'll come together and we kind of talked through it. And then, you

In that particular instance, it's sort of like you know, bounce it back and forth in a team called, but cameras on right? I mean, think that's certainly something to that, as this is true, like progress or stay on so long, it's lot more cameras on and there were a year ago, right?

Yeah, just to keep the engagement and so we'll do that, but what I'm really, truly seeing in almost all projects is there's this element of cloud like online collaboration.

Shared Doc right where we're inputting or you know, bad and then usually a person takes that work away, right? Does something with it and brings it back to a group for further discussion. Whereas I think some of that could have been achieved, perhaps in a boardroom over, you know with whiteboarding differently, maybe even faster in some cases, but you know it, I think the collaboration is challenged in this environment, I really do, so I think it's a little bit more and only use the word siloed. But I do think there's a little bit more autonomous work to some degree, which isn't bad. That's not innately bad at all, but I do, and I do think it's giving some folks on the team who embrace that the opportunity to shine right 'cause it be like, OK, I don't know how this is going to move forward, right? So let's try to make some sense of it and come back and I do, you know we have had some creative solutions to some problems.

KS

You mentioned talking to peers and not just your team and directing and telling them what to do, but

going outside the team and connecting with leaders in other departments outside your department. What's that been like on a virtual team?

ES

Yeah, well I will say you know you mentioned teams and I will say that we had started using teams prior to go read up slightly. But you know at an inn. Uh, organizational level. Everybody being on the same platform which we were not. There was a lot of multiple systems when I first started joining, so that centralization and in the IM capabilities honestly and some of these teams chats or whatever that. I think has helped with that, especially the peer to peer stuff. That quick hit that you might just get from a hallway conversation, right? It kind of just takes on a Teams chat perspective. The intentionality of setting one on ones right with the team. Both my you know my boss, you know. But also all my direct reports to be able to have that dedicated time so we can catch up and not just about projects like you know.

The intentionality of having that one-on-one time on Zoom, most the time on camera so you can see faces and try and judge to some degree body language – or Tuesday-Thursday check-ins are good. Really even trying to invite more people into different conversations, right? Because they are all teams meetings. But you know, hey, this person normally might just hear that 'cause they're sitting at their desk and the person behind them is involved in this project, right? But now it's maybe a hey, why don't you come and get involved in that? That might go against what I said about some. Some of the autonomy, but I think it's sort of that.

It's a balance, right? Oh, trying to get people to exposure so they're not just sitting there doing their one job right? And this one thing and still continuing to build relationships, and I think that's been. And that is a challenge I think to some degree, you know, people we've onboarded in in this time, right? I have a candidate that interviewed in late February 2020 in our office, met him once a month and it was we hired him in May because we could take a little pause in hiring there. Just when things were just kicking off and weren't sure what was gonna happen. Hired him in May and I've seen in person twice.

Luckily this guy came from the industry a few years ago. Like he hadn't been in the industry the whole time, but he knew enough, and I think without that people could feel really isolated. Having being remote and having to just be on boarded and learn remotely two. So with that trying to make sure that, and I think we do a pretty good job at this, with onboarding folks in this season, which is: What are the functions that this person role could potentially touch? And let's just in that first week or two, let's make a plan to get them to at least meet the people, right? And it's this and it's you know, 30 minutes or whatever, but I think again it's about being intentional and developing those relationships. Like the Teams app on your phone, right? Like somebody can I? I mean, those are the things I'll answer at any hour of the night, right? And it's just as quick hits that you could. People can keep going on about, they might need some information for me to help them keep doing their job or whatever and just trying to maintain those relationships.

You know when I went back we've had a lot of change in this period of time as well, and when I was in Florida. At one point it was those of us there, and these are my peers. You know, we're together like, let's just grab dinner, right? And we all just got together outside. But you know to do that and I'd worked here

for two years before we'd ever had a team dinner before. It was sort of this environment that suggested, gosh, we've been through a lot together without being together. Let's just get together and have some fun, right? So? So yeah, I think.

I mean, it's I know these aren't like super concrete answers, but you know it's a matter of trying to just realizing that relationships are still important and to reach out.

I don't know, I don't think it was mean before, but like a little more personable and like the beginning of the emails or whatever like or the start of a meeting. I said it wasn't getting into the topic but I think that's really important because you can't judge body language as well as you used to write and so just being able to give people the chance to talk because I don't know everyone's home situation. They may be there by themselves. Or maybe they're, you know, dealing with so many stressful things at home just to be able to say hi and building those pleasantries which in my case might have to be intentional.

KS

What ways of working do you think we'll keep doing, post-COVID?

ES

Yeah, I think it's an interesting thing and you know, I know not all marketing or marketing communications team have the same roles within them. But one thing that happened almost by default right then just sort of a necessity of the last year was: If you could think about that way and not dissimilar to some of the folks who've been in those jobs for a long time, they're just all about the shows, all about the events, and this is what they do well.

They bridge that gap of where we are as a company. We have to we have to stay relevant, right? My event coordinator has. I joked with her like you're like a comms manager now, right? Like you should almost no choice but to grow into that. And she did it willingly bright. But then I'm lucky for that. But you know, she was like, OK, like virtual booth now means I'm understanding the content where it goes, how it plays like she's coming up with ideas to help us, like how we could represent some things differently. So I think that again, is you know mentioned earlier. It's some folks have just risen, right?

Because the stakes have changed or the OR the game is changed a little and they rise to occasion and so for me that was a you know this isn't an area she felt comfortable working in and you know we just needed more support. I mean if I were to, you know, shake some of this curiosity.

Kind of did all hands on deck and we started to it wasn't just throw at the wall and see what sticks but we went to a couple very intentional areas and that some of this has stayed with us.

KS

What's an example of how your virtual team decided to try something new?

ES

This common now but in April 2020, we started this virtual expo and conference experience for customers. We had to solve, "How do you get people access to the content in new ways?" So I felt like at the time this was very revolutionary. We pulled this virtual customer experience together in about a month and it was, you know, done in house. You kind of go through by product, by product. So, and this is again our mark on teams is all done in House right?

Our graphic designer who is a print designer had done some digital stuff in his past. I mean, just like you know, boom like, let me then that's not loading quickly. Sorry about that, but you know, you kind of come in here and you can see these things and got to stretch the skill set right? So not just carry on the event side but our design are doing a lot more now in this digital space. You know he hasn't been a digital designer in the past necessarily, right? But how do you take content? We have a ton of content.

So I would say this was more like this is an example of 1 area where you know our designer stretched a bit and got into some projects that he really likes but doesn't know my have the chance to do. I will say from a creative perspective, I'm really thinking about it. So Bob is our graphic designer. He you know when you talk about someone's career and how you doing, you know you know one of the things that he always was looking for is more strategic projects or the creative projects is not just a production designer, right? And he's hands down the best designers I've ever worked with.

From a personality perspective, and creativity, he's excellent.

Ah, but I think that this is the nature of the last year. Necessitated that like you had to think differently, we had to engage in this medium differently, and I think he really rose to the occasion on that too. And in he and our mark on community like Martin Communication started they. I mean, they're an awesome team. They're really, really good.

But I think that that was one area where at from a team development perspective. We needed to look at things differently visually, how do you stand out when everyone else is now in this exact same space right up and doing things online, and webinars and otherwise so. Then also so I think our graphic designer saw a lot of opportunity in that. Again, the event manager being able to really willingly take on a lot more responsibility within what I would consider marketing communications like a true like project manager, more so than even just event manager.

Yeah, that is bonkers and what we started doing though. And again things that we would keep. We started doing local language webinars, which sounds like that's of course a no brainer, but it just hadn't been. I think in the years past. Maybe it would do one or two Spanish webinars a year and we expanded to

German, French, Portuguese, Spanish, Japanese and that is something that really again different time zones to hit these key markets. Again, nothing that's rocket science as a global company, but they just weren't things that.

And in some of the you know, about 40% of our revenue now comes from international markets. But we as an organization had been, I'd believe, historically just a little bit too US centric, right? Everything was English. So what we were able to do is develop these programs with our clinical applications team and kind of deployed some of the same content but in different languages at different time zones and by local person and I really think that has had a really helpful benefit for us and something that we're continuing into the future. Certainly replicated that not the same volume as 2021, 2020, but conceptually making sure we're hitting multiple languages and with local folks.

I actually saw a bit of a culture shift as well that was also necessitated by this. A country like Japan, who historically does not engage in email communication and webinars or not like how they wanted to engage for the lack of personalization. Everything else. I mean, it was maybe a slow ramp up, but man are they just eating it up now. I mean, hundred folds compared to like we just had a webinar on something that product that is small in our portfolio and we had like 80 people in Japan attend this webinar.

That's huge for us, right? I think that some countries culturally have adapted as well, 'cause they've had to. So again, I think we've had, dare I say better traction in Japan because of this, right? Because we got one local guy who now can reach so many people because they're now willing to engage in this environment. Whereas before that was the culturally looked down upon.

You know this. Also, you might you might cry when I show this, but they were targeted so don't cry too much, Katie. There are specific so it's not like all people. I did not send out multiple emails every week to all of our database. I promise you.

KS

What is your creative workflow like on a virtual team?

ES

We had to come up with a new way of a new process for managing our webinar program. In particular, part of that was because the person who was heavily involved in international ones was on maternity leave, so that was sort of a became a blessing because we had to kind of documents and processes. Always good thing and then we started utilizing things like Basecamp differently so Basecamp is a project management tool that we use.

Basically we've got a lot more attention on the process side of it, right? Who was contacting the speakers, right? We need things for each component and that allowed others in the team to help and support so we were able to engage a person who is overseas in the sales organization, but isn't interested in marketing. She was able to jump in and help support. Now have a much more documented process specific for

webinars. She knew what she needed to give. You know we outlined every webinar exactly the same from a content development perspective. Again, not rocket science, but some of that diligence that I think just helped us be able to execute in a much higher level. So we would be able to pull in this person from Portugal and that case again carried from our events team.

They were able to jump in and do these things because we are now very itemized and specific and we just had a very repeatable process, whereas prior it was maybe one of those things you always wanted to tackle right? But it wasn't maybe the biggest priority. This helped us. I think tremendously in in 2020, just to be able to. Again we re-architected the process around it were able to engage more different bodies to help move it through and keep the velocity. 'cause obviously that's a high velocity right there.

Truly how we communicate that type of communication in our space. It's totally similar to yours, but that that getting those clinical voices out there and trying to then increase our program. Likewise, we did a series of virtual events. The "QA Today" series, one of the things that we had to do is make sure we're not over-asking, utilizing the right resource in the right way. Most of these webinars were customer-led webinars, but we did have some internal ones as well.

We have to meet our customers where they are, obviously. We can't go to them physically. So how do we engage them? We tried a couple different platforms for engagement last year so an online tool where you can kind of go in and move through floors and have different little breakout spaces and you have little avatar and you can talk and your cameras can be on. We got really good feedback on it conceptually, but you know, we can probably do probably four or five of those. I got a monthly series that we did for the half of the year, so I've got five of them, maybe six. It was good with engagement, small, and some of that is by design but we were trying to find other avenues that were more dynamic than like a Teams meeting like this.

KS

How do you evaluate what ideas to execute?

ES

Certainly the theme of this past year is like, "Hey, let's try it," right? We might fail, but we've got to try. So everybody, everybody is on board with: if it doesn't work, then we learn. Everything we do in our industry in particular, I think it's just so heavily focused on that idea that it's OK to try something and fail as well. I think that definitely permeated what we did and helped us to take a couple risks last year as well.

One thing that we do differently is producing animations for web and social media (instead of in-person product demonstrations). We started in 2019, so it wasn't because of this environment. We're trying to keep brand recognition and information where the people are, to tell what the product does in a different

way in a different medium. So that's one communication change that certainly is continuing as we come out of the pandemic.

KS

How do you champion your team's ideas outside of your department?

ES

Usually we pitching ideas as though we're trying a new thing to get around the virtual fatigue: "How do we do something that's different that people can engage with?" Especially with events and webinars, think it's going to be all virtual anyway. We found that in webinars, the audiences like these little interruptions. Our next one is with a user, reference customer in Belgium, and we are hosting new and potential customers. We're trying to think how to make that interactive. Whether you're taking poll, adding in these little breakout rooms. We present a different way of thinking through a program and trying to make it engaging.

Subject 2: Ross B.

Katie Snow

How does the shift from going from an in person workplace to remote working?

What's that like now and in terms of how to build a creative climate for your team?

RB

I feel that the best creative ideas and thoughts come from conversation and sharing that physical connection. I know that sounds weird, but like you and I can have a conversation about something creative we could try and bounce ideas off of each other, but there's just not that same vibe when you're not in the same environment. So for me as an example, when I used to have my agency new media code, one of the first things we used to do every day was come in and have a stand up and that stand up used to end up really being sort of an innovation session.

What we were working on. You know we used to have a big board that we would sketch ideas up on and you know people were sat on being bags and it's just a different vibe and you get to know. I mean you get you just get that.

KS

Yeah, that true sort of kind of cool, creative environment where you're relaxed and you feel safe.

RB

Yeah, and I think the word you just used then, safe, is really important. This whole topic of creativity, and I think could be creative if it has to be the right environment. If everybody is remote and they're having a brain storming session in the morning and doing the same thing.

You know my environment's different to your environment. You know you're in a different country. You're at a different point in your day. You're you know you're there for mental levels from where you are in the day might be somewhere else to mine. I might be tired, it might be the afternoon already. We might have different environments but don't create the same.

I think that when I get creative I get excited. I don't think that can come across as easy when you're on a remote sort of setup, so you know you are. You know, I've come up with a really good idea that you bounce off over. Then everyone starts bouncing off of it. Can you do that as easy remotely? I don't think you can on video calls, everyone's always conscious about speaking over each other. And then if everyone starts shouting ideas out and being rude over the top of each other just generally.

The environment you're in gets the best creative results, and I think also creative people, work better together. I think, quite a lot of the time.

Creativity isn't about sitting at your desk and coming and coming up with an idea. A lot of the time it's around a coffee machine when you're bouncing ideas off of each other and things like that.

I certainly think that therefore those are huge loss for me and for the people I work with. huge loss in levels of outputs and outcomes. At the same time, let's use an example that you and I know of, which is look at what we achieved as a team. The minute Covid came into play, and all of a sudden everything went digital and we had to come up with these ideas as a team, instantaneously within however many hours-slash-days. We came up with a whole process, a whole model of how these virtual events were going to be pushed out. Now that's creative, right? Yes it was. For me, I still believe even though we react, we reacted very well. I still believe that we would have probably had better results had we all been not remotely working because of Covid and you know, it's just so much easier.

For example, for me when I when I had my previous media company we used to do a lot of brand designs and developing brands and that would include the most of the online presence and a brand. Fifty times a day I would get up and lean over the UX designer's shoulder and have a look at something that they had come up with, and we would just go, "Oh yeah, let's just tweak that a tiny bit. Let's just change it. Oh yeah, we could do that." And then you know someone else might come over and start getting involved. You lose that, you know. So if it might have been, that means we will design a landing page right? And we're designing a landing page with screen sharing, and we change things and I'll go. "I'll move this here, that there."

Had that been in the environment I was in before, someone else might walk past the open plan office, see what we were doing, leaned over said something really valid. Got involved. You just don't have that now. There's a loss of a loss of that connection.

Personally I've really struggled with it from a creative point of view. I have naturally become less creative. Need to retrain myself to, and I actually feel physically like, that's one of the reasons I'm looking at taking a job instead of doing my own thing at the moment because there's a lack of creativeness and what I'm doing because what I'm doing is totally remote, whereas the thing everything I've gone for, I've got three interviews next week and the only jobs I've applied for one of the main things, I would only apply for a job if it was there was at least a hybrid model of working and anything that was 100% remote. I've just said no thanks, I'm not interested.

KS

In the media company you run, how do you how do you champion innovation and stay sharp now? Seems like everyone is so reactive now and going digital because we have to, not because we wanted to.

RB

Again I don't like and it's not just in the work I do that we've all just become reactive and we react to what needs to be done there and then so you can look like creativity in so many different ways and being creative now.

KS

On your virtual team, how do you make sure the work is gratifying?

RB:

The planning of a campaign or the planning of your road map of all your campaigns that are upcoming. If you're in a less remote environment, again, you're having more conversations and more off the cuff discussions. So these are the things that I think are missed. As I said earlier, the standing around the water cooler or standing around the coffee machine, or you're in the list together on the way into the office, in the elevator and it's changing my morning now. Probably got some info to do today off. Yeah, I've thinking about that. Last night I've got really good idea for that later.

You're planning your road map of your campaigns on your road map of your company goals that then need marketing that's created? You know, I think all of that kind of disappeared a little bit, and I think we have become like really reactive and I think that's in lots of roles and not just creative or digital marketing or anything like that. I think that's a general problem.

KS

So we talked about your climate for creativity, creative environment, creative culture. So what about the process? This is the day-to-day work you were talking about, how you were sitting down physically with the UX designer and saying, "Oh yeah, you know you can tweak stuff," You can't do that anymore.

So how do you deal? How do you do that digitally? You know you said earlier that you hated Microsoft Teams, and everybody does because of what just happened.

How do you critique each other's work? How do you come to make a decision on a creative design or a or a creative? You know, brand message or things like that?

RB

I would jump on a video call for the smallest of things, because then it's going to come across better, because if you cannot physically again, let's use an example, right? So we, you and I have new email created. You know that we're looking at and it's uploaded in work front and people are just. You know, or I went in there and I made 20 comments about what needs changing.

Wow, it's just so much easier to quickly jump on a video call screen share and make the changes whilst you're doing it. 'Cause that's what you would do in the workplace if you were all in the same office, right? Like my example, I said I'd sit around the computer with the UX design there and do the changes.

I do still think that we were all, culturally as a well, heading down the route where everything was done by text message or WhatsApp or whatever else, and you lose that connection of picking up the phone or face to face. We've been pushed even more down that in life. Everything you know, we're all remotely working and it's just a quick chat on a Slack feed or on a Teams feed.

You know I could go on to Teams and quickly send you a chat that says hey, look at this creative for that event, we need to change the following. It's really hard even for you to take what I'm writing and sort of imagine it, picture it, make it right. It's just so much easier, and I think people should as much they possibly can, be jumping on video calls and screen sharing. Because ultimately if you're in the office she would go up that person's desk and stand at their screen and share ideas.

And I definitely do when something came to light on the website stuff. I definitely would, always even from smallest of thing I've found, to get the UX dev on video and be like, "Just want to quickly show you something. Can you open that page?" Screen shared, yeah OK cool, brilliant. "Can you just move that from there to there?"

And then, in a way we were going down that route of you know, people just text and I get so frustrated even my family or text me. And then I won't respond until you're busy at work and then not text me something. Text me again and then tell me again and then I'll get attacked by the end of the day with everything. Well, literally I'll text back, like, "Yeah I'm just busy and if it's really urgent just pick up the phone and ask." You know, actually I was leaving it till the end of the day because I'm going to pick up the phone and have a conversation with you.

But that is just life in general, isn't it? Where it's been going, so it's interesting now.

Somehow people were probably out there solving their creative roles. Getting through, you know, design changes and stuff by literally quickly pinging messages on Slack or Teams or whatever it is to each other, quickly change this and I'll read it and then then then we send it. I'll resend it. Oh actually, I've just looked at it again. Now that you re sent it check this time change this we know what that's like. It's a nightmare. You know when you send it off to like that. But and I think that's you know.

KS

When you have a new idea, how do you pitch that?

RB

Yeah, get on Teams. Share your idea, share your thoughts. You know load loads of people on a call talking at the same time.

And you know from that is ultimately the only resolution, isn't it? That's all we can do, and that's what we just got to, with ourselves realizing we adjusted to that. We just carry on working. Even in hybrid models for companies, you know some companies will go hybrid, but even then you still have to have days where you're on that call having that conversation, pre pitching an idea then asking for peoples feedback, go around the room and you know asking what their opinions are and throwing it all into the table and it's just little things, like, let's take that as an example. If I'd done that in the old days, you know we would have all got together, grab the coffee, got round one of our big boards that we had in our office and it would have been shown it would have been pitched and then we would be up there with pen and marker. Pen and board. Trying to pull the ideas, you know, putting them up there document them.

And I'm sure some people do that and they had someone typing it all out and put it in the notes of the meeting that you know, is it the same? Does that actually happen? If it does, do they then get sent round and just get lost in an inbox, whereas before you would then have this sort of brainstorming session up there on a whiteboard in the office and you know it's their visible to the next few days while still cracking on with the project.

And so you know, now you just you is about being organized, isn't it? Now you gotta fine tune the process that is as close to the reality is what it used to be before. And you've gotta follow that process because otherwise you just don't get the same environment or the same result.

KS

Is any of this is durable? Do you think this is our new way of working where everyone is working 30% from the office? Do you think we're ever going to go back?

RB

No. From a point of actively interviewing and talking to you, not one of them has been, "This is five days a week in the office." And you know what? It suits some people. I just think for others it's just, if you used to do it and then you just do it, you can do it. If you really have found comfort and peace in it, and you really are all good with it. I mean when I say good with that, I mean not just your work capacity, I mean like mentally and that you can still step away from the desk and you can still you really carry separate work and home.

Even though you work from home, if you crack that, good.

So here's an interesting one for you. This is what it's going to work both ways, right? I think the different characters that were going to adjust, have adjusted just fine.

I think there are also people who have characteristics where they're told they don't have to go back to the office, but they actually need it and that their office is shutting down and company decide that it's not worth it to go hybrid. I think they'll really struggle with, you know mentally, you know, it won't be great for them. This hybrid model, which is kind of the best of both worlds, which you know, I can totally I can buy into.

As I said earlier, I think here come the impacts on my creativity. It impacts my innovation, impacts my personality being at home all the time. I can definitely separate home life and work life like you just said, shutting the door. Forget about it. It's you know shut the office door kind of thing. I actually don't have a problem with that, I just think it's that collaboration with your colleagues when you're at work and the results that it brings in the different outcomes that you get from it.

I do believe in general we're on completely, we're definitely on a path now, completely changing our not the human race has two big a bolder word, but you know what I mean?

Here's another one, right? So I've got to do a presentation next week. I haven't done it for so long. I used to love it. I used to get a buzz off of it. I used to do them all the time. I had no problem standing up in people talking to people through something that I know inside out.

I've gotta do it next week. I'm scared already. I'm already overthinking it because I haven't done it for so long I'm out of practice. So it's a weird one where there's it can work in different ways, right? So what it's actually done is people who were great in the office love being in front of people, love seeing clients wonder if they'd ever get used to that again. We've gotta retrain ourselves.

KS

We've seen memes and stuff on the Internet about how this whole new area has hit people especially hard who are naturally extraverts. They need the energy they get from other people. They need that force and that brainstorming. This thing's going to hit people hard, this adaptation, for someone who gets a charge and gets gratification from presenting to people.

RB

Yeah, yeah, exactly that. I spoke to the CEO of a digital marketing agency that I know the other day had a first all company meeting 2 weeks ago.

So he had his team back together for the first time in a social event and he used it to sort of review the last sort, you know, year big cetera. And he actually said the same thing. I told him about, I've got to do a presentation for an interview and then he said the same thing. He used to do it on a daily basis, stand up in front of his organization when he had to do it. It was the first time he's done it in nearly 18 months and he said that he was genuinely scared. He's just like, "Oh my God, I'm a rabbit in the headlights not sure what I'm gonna do." He said he struggled to be natural. He said normally in that environment he didn't need notes. He doesn't need cards. He said he's sort of like it had a moment where he just stood there and sort of chuckled and sort of just apologized 'cause he's just sort of lost his train of thought, what he was there doing had to recompose himself. He just purely because of he hadn't done it for so long.

KS

So how to you handle meetings with people outside your group, when you have to pitch and champion a creative idea?

RB

I don't think you can practice the presentation over and over again. Actually, it's the being out there in front of people and you can't recreate that for practice scenario, right? You've just gotta chill out and crack on with it hopefully. But there is a funny one and like I say this is the thing, right? So it's not just what this scenario is going to continue to do and how people will have to continue to adjust.

As things get back to normal people will re-train themselves and you know remind themselves how their their habits were or their characteristics were, or whatever in in those environments that they haven't been in for so long.

Well, I'll be honest, I'm gonna probably open up on Wednesday with, "You know what guys - this just gives me an absolute buzz doing stuff like this. This is what I used to live for. But this is the first time I've done this in nearly two years. And then yeah, bear with me. I might be a little bit out of touch, so you know."

My pitch is to a sports company so you know I might find a clever line off the Internet, a quote from an athlete who maybe been out the game for a while and was asking for some patients or something maybe and try and find a famous quote an overlap with that I don't know, but that's just one example. And my wife had her first all company social event and meeting 2 weeks ago and she normally did. She's a social butterfly, you know loves those kind of things. It made her really anxious for the first two days like that before it, you know, just kind of see how work colleagues who she used to go to the pub every Friday night.

And that last bit, the scheduling in general with you know this current situation. Continuing the point I was trying to make, and it's a bit deeper than just the creative side of things. There's like, you know, what

is gonna happen if we carry on like this for years and years and years, people are just going to struggle to have face to face communication or they're going to struggle to be, you know, it would all become introverts if that's the right word.

Like some marker that the wrong way round. But I'm yeah introvert, I'm you know we could all end up coming like that where you know we don't like going out to see people as we're so used to. Creative environments will be the first ones to get back in the office.

And this is the thing you gotta look into different looking into sectors, right? So coders and things like that. They prefer to be at home. They want to be at home. They want their headphones in. They want to be focused on what their coding, et cetera. I'm all for that. As a passionate, creative person and who is innovative, likes innovation and stuff like that and any sector that has any of that, then they should be trying to get back to the office and face to face as much.

Somebody can, whether that's as a team or whether that's pitching to clients 'cause this is the other thing, right? It's when you take your lovely new creative idea. Let's say you're an agency. We've gotten them pitched to, and I'm telling you now, pitching it over video is 1000 times harder than it is when you're there. In the room in that environment, because you can't read people, you can't get that natural vibe for when, if your pitch isn't going well. If they're not quite understanding what your creative direction is, you can't feel that.

So it's really important, I feel that these client facing creative sessions, becoming face to face again because they've been so tough to get something. That's probably a really, really good idea. And just because you've had to do it over video, like not quite. You can't see a person sort of shift in their chair or raise an eyebrow like, "I don't understand where this is going."

I read somewhere, 70 to 80% of communication is nonverbal. And when you remove that nonverbal body signals, it's gestures. It's facial expressions, that sort of stuff. When you remove that, you're down to 20 to 30% of the information that you would get from someone in a face to face interaction. You have to run a business and run an agency on 20% of the feedback that you get from a client or a potential prospect.

Subject 3: Laura J.

Katie Snow

We've all adapted to keep the creative process going, to enable the creative process in this new environment. So how do you build a creative climate where people feel safe to share ideas, and their work is promoted, and their work is gratifying?

LJ

We used to be able to throw something on a, you know a whiteboard play with it, draw, et cetera, and then finish it up very nicely within the PowerPoint or whatnot. And I think we almost have to do some of that work ahead of time, whether that's discussions, or on your own or Createspace to be creative. The problem with all of that is that we've gotten busier. We people want more out there. We want more digital content and work, forgetting about creating the space to be creative.

Katie Snow

When you talk about that space to be creative, the jam sessions that you might have or the structured brainstorming sessions in person where you look at a problem. How do you ideate some potential solutions?

LJ

Totally, time is not great. You've probably seen it in your calendar as well. It went from the reasonable type of meeting scenarios to being booked up solid for multiple days or six out of eight hours. You're not allowing time to be creative because you have to do all the work but that takes that space when you're in office, especially in agencies and especially in places where we need those creative juices have to be vibing.

It's hard to say, let's jump in a Zoom Room 'cause you're not there creating together. Even for people who are writers who are people who draw, et cetera, you're forced to do it on paper. That doesn't really transcribe to digital.

So there's some great things that have happened to enable my teams to be the best versions of themselves in terms of creating ads very easily through, like different software that are ready to go. Things that we would have to outsource or sent to our creative teams or whatnot. It's given us that freedom, but we've lost the that time again, right? 'cause you're trying to get it done.

KS

So the expectation about your creative process changed? People expect it to be faster and the timeline of ideation to production got shorter?

LJ

Absolutely. Timelines have speeded up, but it's also my expectation that things happened faster, right? There's the expectation that we've talked about this before, but I'll reiterate it for the project.

The digital revolution has already happened, but then it accelerated. You can talk about a huge product launch if we were to do it in person, it would be this major event, rolling out the big products. The big piece of whatever you're unveiling. It's an experience. Now what's being forced is this experience of, "You have to do something completely creative and *now*."

We also live in that piece of society to that, like everywhere you look, there's some sort of inspiration. However, we're doing less and less original content. We're recreating. We're mimicking. We're doing, et cetera, et cetera. So the I also think the balance between inspiration and copycatting has gotten a lot closer.

KS

So it seems the shift to digital had the effect of *lowering* creativity? How does your team work through that?

LJ

Part of it is moving from a very technology-forward roll to somewhere between portals. I would almost send the question back to you. Have you seen any campaigns lately that have inspired you? I just went through my phone the other day 'cause I switched phones and unsubscribed from like 40 different emails because I was never reading them.

The expectation is on these vanity metrics of how many opens, how many clicks, how many this versus that. Not to say that's not a way to do this. But did we impact people that we were talking to? What is the value of this campaign? What is a message we're trying to push? And it's actually what we're going through right now with my team, reviewing the next half of the year. Instead of doing product-specific campaigns, we're doing themed campaigns that will hopefully *inspire* to sell products. So we're moving more in towards the themes experience, customer journey. Then, "Here's a product. Let me sell it to you."

KS

Sounds like you're facing a huge creative challenge, in terms of the accelerated timelines and that you feel you're lacking original ideas.

What do you do when you see something interesting, and you want to be innovative and try something new on the team?

LJ

It's twofold in my opinion. One is: leadership having balls. Leadership needs the nerve to stop everything we're doing, cancel everything past this and say we're revisiting this strategy. We're looking at themes again, we're looking at customer experience, instead of focusing all we have on a campaign for one product, we're reusing campaign content that's being created right now that we can pull assets from in order to create a theme for selling this product.

The second portion of that is coaching. It's a lot of one-to-one meetings and trying to challenge the people around you to think slightly differently and ask question, "What has inspired you lately? Would you purchase this product based off of these communications? What is your data telling you from last four campaigns? Let's try to challenge the way we're currently doing things."

I think when you remove those barriers for people who are creative, you get a lot more back in return.

KS

This is a good intro to my next question about the climate for creative. How do you build that ideal environment of psychological safety, where your virtual team feels OK about sharing ideas?

LJ

We I think I'm the biggest thing is, I'm in a position in my life where I'm confident with what I bring to the table and I'm confident in the work that I'm doing, and because of that I will choose an environment that I can make a difference in. And if that means if this isn't the right place for me, I will switch. I will find something better and I will take the time to make that happen, you know.

Unfortunately, there's a lot of people who are going to make your environment as difficult as possible because they're not great leaders. I've gotten to a point in my life that I know that I'm confident enough in who I am, what I do, and what I bring to the table to make sure I'm not in that situation. I know it's not always the case and everybody has very different reasons for staying in jobs. But what I try to do as a leader is foster an environment for my teammates, even my leadership, where we as a group to try to be the most dynamic.

I will say that my Mama Bear instinct comes out sometimes too, and you know if somebody is trying to break that cycle, I will do everything in my power to make sure I protect the creative bubble that I've built for the team

KS

Mama Bear, exactly. When you're protecting your team from the outside pressures, distraction and criticism, how do you do that? In things like promoting like championing innovation, championing your team, your teams work and saying, "Hey, you know this digital team over here. They're doing this that miss and fulfilling these objectives and overall you know rising everyone up." So how has the shift to digital either made that harder to do or made it easier?

LJ

I just think it's unfortunately it's boring answer, but it just takes more work, right? Now, I I will say I suffered quite a bit when I wasn't going into the office, when I wasn't meeting with people. I think in general the company that I was previously at didn't spend the time to work on this strategy last year, and I think that hurt the entire organization.

There was no clear mandate, no clear themes. There was no clear strategy for remote creative work. So what ends up happening was just a complete turmoil.

It's just more effort to put the time in to coach people. It's more effort because you have to choose your words very carefully and you always do. But unfortunately when it's remote there is no, "Hey, can we go sit down and have a chat and prepare for the conversation that's about to happen." You have to have a pre-conversation before having the real conversation because people are a lot more sensitive, working remotely. We lost the ability to say, "Let's go have a coffee" when you can tell something's up with them personally.

One of the things that I've taken on as a mantra and hold dear to my heart in my career is, "People over profits." If you make a person feel safe within the relationship you have with them, whether it's a leader to someone further down from yourself to your team, you're creating that dynamic of trust whether you know it or not. And so communication becomes a lot clearer. The way you make decisions becomes almost uniform, because at least you know what the thought process was to get there.

KS

So what I'm hearing is that trust is key to a creative climate on virtual teams.

LJ

I like to foster trust. I like to foster growth and I like to be, you know, it does take work though, but I have someone on my team currently right now. Granted, it's only been two months, but they are not doing what is needed to progress. She's not getting that the work done at the moment and is not where it needs to be. So for me, do more.

I'm spending 50% more time with this individual, so I don't know if things would be different if we weren't all digital. However, there is this expectation of fast timelines. "We've got to send eight email invitations to this event." But again, I'm going back to our campaign themes, customer journey, what we're trying to accomplish, the value that we're proposing with a campaign.

I won't name names, but people who are not succeeding as well as they probably should right now did not foster and did not put the time into forming relationships. And I think we're seeing the consequences of that. People leaving. And you know, they had maybe not the same team atmosphere that they were sold.

Because what virtual teams are craving is a manager that cares.

KS

How has working on a digital team affected your creative process? Of course it has, but in what way?

LJ

I will say I think people right now are tired. In terms of corporate communications, I think people are tired. They've lost that sense of, "I want to do something that's going to change the world." Corporate environments changed it, is what the overreaching, universal issue is.

It changed at my company because we're equipping sales teams with an opportunity to be creative. To be creative with deals. We're equipping engineers to be creative with engineering solutions. That happened in the last three years because of the shift to digital.

Now I'm sure Covid has helped. You know, make that change more universal, but if you ever look at any products, any client sales call you go into with your partners, every role is expected to be creative.

KS

Speaking of other departments like sales and engineering: do you think there's more crossover or like an increase in working outside teams? If so, how do you champion your team's creative ideas to others?

LJ

Ideally, you're looking at a team in general and collaborating outside of silos. I think the one thing that we've forgotten in all of this is that we've all been adapting, adapting, adapting, adapting. While that's wonderful for the people that have been able to do it, it's also been a ton of work.

What makes the spark, that creativity, I think are two things. One is that outside perspective. I think it's a

very hard for you internally to spark the revolution of thought provoking change without somebody coming in – colleagues, an agency, motivational speaker, whatever the case may be.

The second thing too is time off. Just a break from work. Get excited to come back again and you know seeing it in a lot of big companies right now, the Nike just took a whole week off for the start of school. You know, there's a lot of companies big corporations that are taking weeks off.

KS

What's the vibe like in creative meetings now? Before, we were sketching out ideas on the big whiteboard. What do you do now to brainstorm and ideate and decide what to produce?

LJ

Yeah, you know when I'm working by myself up, I end up pulling out my notebook. You know, I end up pulling out 'cause I work better by well and even just drawing like you know. I mean I can't draw with my mouse. I can't like, you know, I do it for me. The process of like putting a design from my head to the computer does not translate well.

It would be nice to do it with a group, but you have to adapt, right? So you still need to get that flowchart online with shared digital whiteboards on Teams and stuff. Let's be honest, you'd have to do it anyways. So you're almost taking that first step differently. For me, who I would call myself more process person than a creative person, I literally just had this talk with someone about how I've mastered that process part. I've mastered how to solve problems of like, “OK, let's think of the solution.” This is my first idea and opening it up. What I have not figured out is having tap into that left side of my brain: “How do we do something that's out of the ordinary? How do we do something that's going to work?”

I'm always a proponent of cleaning up because at the end of the day, you have to visualize things for people, and it's not going to happen on a whiteboard anyways, right so.

Subject 4: Melissa T.

Katie Snow

First broad question: How do you build up that climate in a digital work environment where teams can think creatively where they can have most importantly, a psychological safety to come up with creative ideas and might be open to critique. How do you build that environment where people can do their best in a digital environment?

My second question is broad question is, how does that affect your process? Your actual work process. So for that I mean like when you have to sit down and brainstorm when you have to come up with a solution for a client problem. When you have to evaluate each other's and sort of hear people pitches. But then

somebody else has a different pitch. How do you champion a good idea in a digital environment over Zoom or over email where you don't have that face to face?

MT

Yeah, and so my situation is maybe a little different than others in that I've been a remote worker for the last three and a half years. I've been a remote worker in previous companies and previous jobs. Uhm, when it was still like just starting to become a thing like who can we trust our employees to be at home where we are not going to be able to see what they're doing all day long? I'm like, yeah you can, you can because look at how much more productivity you're getting out of them, and also they're getting work life balance so you know there's measures. There's metrics, there's all kinds of things to be able to do that when you're talking about like productivity or goals or whatever. So for me I've always been remote. Now the difference between what I and let's just call it the times of pandemic, if not the plague.

We'll just refer to it as the plague going forward. Even though I wasn't remote-employ a lot of that was because I traveled to meet with my clients and I would be on site for, you know, a week or sometimes two weeks at a time, or traveling back and forth for two all other countries to different places across the across this country.

Yes, and I actually keep stats on that because I'm that kind of nerd Katie and this is love for me.

You know, for me it's interesting, but the so the difference in contrast was the last business trip that I had taken was the. This exact week at the end of November. I had to travel for the 12th time to Indianapolis that year And then back. Yeah, I was very pleased about that. I mean why couldn't it have been Hawaii?

And then I had a couple of workshops here in Saint Louis. You know that are here, global headquarters at the beginning of 2020, and then everything shut down. So the difference there for me was just I wasn't traveling. I was grounded. Other than being a little twitchy and itchy for some, you know, wanderlust and just to go and meet with clients. I was, I'm used to being exactly like we are right now, Katie.

OK, so personally there were a whole. There's a whole other slew of things that happened from that perspective because everybody was home.

Uh, and so that's a whole different thing and then not wanting to be like everyone zooming with their family and their friends and I'm like, are you ****ing kidding me? I'm not doing that.

KS

Yeah, the novelty of all that kind of wore off pretty quick, didn't it? And so would you say like for you there was no novelty to begin with like this is like a Zoom call is like kind of awful and you all are good.

MT

Well, I to me Zoom is just another platform for me to get my work done. It's this. I actually prefer this in a lot of ways and I will very specifically answered the question about the impact on creativity, and particularly how that not only from a team perspective, that how that impacts my clients and just a second

where impacted me very personally was like now I'm home schooling kids, but not, you know, really. But kind of 'cause we didn't really have virtual programs in our school districts. And, you know, trying to deal with the fact that like now, my dog is my office manager and everybody is home all the time and she's not an effective one at that. And you know, yeah, and just kind of, you know, dealing with the fact that when you never leave the house right? So let's just put that in a box. Personal stuff, man.

I think from a work perspective where I really started to see the change was I would go on site as I as I mentioned to go meet with clients, whether that was for pre sales or you know to go, you know land, an engagement or to encourage an engagement or to work and engagement, or to closeout and engagement and so for is it important for me to kind of explain to you like what I do for my job like what my job is.

But I yeah, I'm, and generally that's on site at their whatever location or maybe multiple locations all over all over the place. Well, now we're not, you know, well everyone is locked down right? No matter where you're at in the whole world, will just say you're locked down and with very limited ability now even to go meet on site. There's a couple of reasons for that, so I'll give you like kind of the cost analysis so that and the business justifications about later.

My clients then went from almost always being in person to now having to operate remotely so my dance card got busier and busier. More and more clients needed to adapt solutions for their companies. Their organizations because they were using maybe outdated or antiquated. You know technology that didn't really give them this stability or of the capacity that they needed to enable of workforce to work from home, and so that's where you started seeing, you know cops something like that had to be on site who started losing money losing lots of productivity loses all kind or people just learning how to work remotely, then had never done it before.

KS

So would you say there was a learning curve for a lot of people like you are adept at it? You're a virtual native already but for teams that weren't, was it kind of a struggle?

MT

Generally you want to do when you're looking at, let's say, a transformation workshop, and you know whatever we change widgets in our facility and improve productivity by whatever. It's more effective to do those kind of ideations sessions in person and justice because you can be more engaging. You can create energy in the room. You get people engaged in and you can tell when someone's you know on camera line focused and participating in all of those kinds of workshops that we were doing in person we had to start doing remotely and so some of those things. Like a traditional business process improvement session or a journey mapping session where you've got like sticky notes all over a whiteboard.

KS

Wait, how do you do that remotely or virtually?

MT

Applications and programs that are literally designed for global collaboration that enable folks to work collaboratively from all over the world at the same time. And like, OK, you get pink stickies. You get purple stickies. Or maybe it's an idea, or however, you might choose to approach it. And then everybody is in the same app and they're like, OK, here's the instruction. This is what we're going to do. And then we're going to go boom, boom, boom. And there's other features that you know, like companies like Cystis like web, Cisco Webex created and which I like to use a lot. I do like Teams, Webex, even Zoom, where you can do breakout sessions so I can assign people groups and UM, like for instance of his.

I'm volunteering as a mentor as part of the Hawthorne School for Girls down here in Saint Louis City and with that would normally be onsite, but obviously I'll everyone's remote so you know we were able to do focus group breakout like everyone come together. Here's what we're going to do now. You're going to go into these breakout sessions. You're going to go do whatever this activity is, and you're going to come back. And then we're going to share and talk. So just like you would in a now, we're going to do a role play activity. You break out into your groups and decide who's going to be. Someone in person two. And here's your script and whatever. So this same kind of activity can occur. It's just two dimensional and that's the difference. And so as long as you've got a really stellar Internet connection, you're not really losing and you're willing to be on camera. I mean, assuming I'm wearing pants right now.

KS

How do you build that safe environment for creativity with your remote teams?

MT

I was coaching and educating other people who hadn't ever done it but like come on it's safe. This is safe and finding new ways and new tools and technology to help us engage and be collaborative and be creative to your point. How do you keep that creative muscle going?

So to the point that I've been remote for what feels like a billion years. My entire team of 70 people all like 70 dudes and like or however many like 70 people and seven women is like team. We are all remote. We're all in totally different ends of the country, so I'm in Hawaii summoned, you know, like some even overseas, and we all get together, and we're able to have like team meetings every week. Even though we have all these times and other stuff that we're doing. So that helps us kind of stay. Stay connected. We use teams like crazy, we, you know we're using our cell phones to connect with each other on Instagram. Or you know all kinds of other things as just means of connection and peer reviews. And hey I've got this problem. Does anyone have a thing that they've done or how have you solve this? And so it's a lot of. It's just like online activity and sometimes a phone call and sometimes a video chat and every time it doesn't hinder in fact.

The times that I did have to go into the office, it feels disruptive.

KS

Since you're virtual team native, you model that for them?

MT

Let me show you how it's OK and you'll get some clients or some folks who won't want to be on camera and they just won't. There's just whole companies. The weirdest thing for me, the whole company is just will not be on video. I did an entire engagement at the beginning of this year with a with a company that is here in Saint Louis and I never saw their faces, ever. They saw mine so I could grocery store at a ball game or whatever, and they'll be like, "Hi, MT!" And I'm like, *who are they?*

That's just part of their culture. That was just what they did, 'cause they were always in person, and so it wasn't really a thing for them to be on video and everyone. So I could tell when I they would feel safe. And once they started the only safe like they come on and be like oh hey, you know on their T shirt and weird here or whatever we like oh wonderful. And then they go back off camera because that felt weird to them about like to expose or something and it is let's say you know.

KS

It sounds like you're saying it takes practice to kind of feel to feel safe and to feel protected by your team leader and to feel like your ideas are going to be at least heard and understood.

MT

Let me even go a little further that if you don't mind me going on a jaunt for a second. The opportunity we have to work with so many different kinds of people or organizations because we have technologies or support that meaning. I'm working with folks that are like in Amsterdam and in the UK and in Hong Kong. It like all over the place. That's because we can and I love that. And then of course, on you're always hoping like, Oh my God, the job that's in San Diego or France, then maybe they're gonna have a thing and we're going to have a workshop. And maybe I'm gonna have to travel and then you're always hoping that right now you're like should I have to get up at like 3:00 o'clock in the morning to meet with my client?

I think that there is almost like a J curve. Like anytime you're going to start something new, right? Things get a little weird at first and then you figure out how to do it and then you get really better at it. And the one thing that I hear people say more than anything else. Just like I don't like, I don't have to commute. I get so much more of my life back because I can go turn over a load of laundry on my way to the bathroom in 5 minutes.

KS

You close the door at the end of the day and you're not in your car for the next hour and a half, and that's valuable.

MT

The bad part is then finding the way to decompress. You know, for a long time, for me it was OK. Office is done. Now I'm gonna start drinking wine and then that was my way to say no, I'm not working anymore. I you know, I sort of like drinking and so I've been able to get over that stupid habit but there was that, "OK, how do I know I'm away and maybe not want to have to deal with whatever else is going on."

Learning healthy behaviors to support a remote lifestyle is also really important.

I think part of the part of the being creative at work is knowing that when you're at work here at work and when you're not, you're not. There are times when you know the boundaries blur, and on a weekend you have to pick up the phone, but having the actual work be gratifying is an important part of that.

KS

OK, that's a nice transition to another question I have. As a leader on a virtual team, how do you make sure that the actual work is gratifying?

MT

So like I guess a couple different things. You know, most of the folks who were in my specific department. I'll almost 70 of us. There were five when I started in 3 1/2 years ago. We have almost 70 in our team now and I've got a staff of 300 that are reporting into me from all over the company, not just my direct team.

I can look at timesheets and be like, yeah? Stop working that much or you know what are you doing. Do you need to be billing more at like what? What are literally are you doing? Maybe not want to be here anymore, you know?

Some of it's just having hyper awareness like when it is your responsibility having hyper awareness and then making sure that people understand that could have work life balance. Particularly when everybody around you is working like 80 hours a week just. But to get things done and then you know that's when you have to lead by example. I literally had to tell one of the other program leaders in in in one of the programs were working on. I said, "You need to stop sending invitations and emails on Sunday afternoons and Saturdays, stop it because that is not credible. They can read it whenever they want. It's their responsibility." And you can set up this handy little feature in Outlook or Google or all kinds of different platforms where it won't actually deliver until it's inside normal business hours.

You are driving your own shitty behaviors and creating work life balance and dissatisfaction of employees that were losing from our company. You know because of your behaviors and that's just one example of the weird behaviors that were happening. It's just recognizing if you see someone struggling, just like you would if you were in my office. "Hey got wind that you've been like you're working four different projects at the same time. How may I help you so that you can actually go spend? You know the weekend with your family. Let me help pick up some of that." Being a team player, highly aware of what your team is doing, which can be difficult when you're working remotely.

But when you get used to working remote remotely enough and you're interacting with your teammates, it's just making sure that the leaders are like, OK, who's busy, who's swamped right now. He's bailing out too much. Send him over me. I'm going to go help out or whatever, and then have that responsibility to just pinch hit, you know.

KS

But it sounds like you rely a lot on the on the on your technology and platforms –

virtual whiteboards and the features in Outlook or Gmail or whatever you're working.

MT

We've created a "deaf factor" where no one even wants to look at information you're sharing anymore, so it really helps to understand maybe the better way to do this is we're going to start leveraging, you know, aboard we're going to start leveraging podcast. We're going to start doing something else to give people information, or they can choose to opt in or opt out one way or the other like it doesn't tell you who's reading it and tells you like how many. So it's really more effective.

It's adapting to your team's way of learning. Do you do better at doing? Do you better reading? Do you do better at listening? A lot of especially adult learners do better at all three of those things at the same time. Listen, learn, do, practice in 10-minute increments. Most adults can only take 10 minutes of instruction before they need to have another thing to move on to. We need more than one platform to be providing information.

KS

OK, that's a good pivot to the topic of ideation and innovation. Taking the new idea like the one you just described, how do you champion those among your team?

MT

It's tools under almost all of it, but some of it is just having the conversation like we are now and then me pulling up, you know, or somebody in the team pulling up? OK, let's just start here and we're going to start taking notes. So like I might pull up a lot of times if we're all ideating look they how are we going to present this information with the client and what are the big chunks? I will literally just pull up a PowerPoint presentation that's blank.

And then the title just start going down, and then title of different page of every single main topic. and then just put big blocks like color blocks in their own, here's the notes from this and here's the notes from that. And then somehow another we all get in there. You share it out so it's all in the cloud, right? And we're all able to get to it through SharePoint or whatever and then we're all able to literally be in the same document as if we were in the same room.

We will use features like Lucidchart if we're going to draw out a big like mural will use a mural wall is one of the other tools and that will leverage and there's like *eleventy billion* to pick from. Teams is a great method for, you know, cross collaborating one for communications but also file sharing and to a specific group.

I am a “people and process” person so for me the right tool. It's like being a mechanic. You need the right tool for the right job, right? You're going to go fix the dishwasher you you're not going to use a tire gauge, right? Like you're probably going to use across in ranch and maybe a what I mean whatever other thing.

So for me it's what is it that we're looking like my processes? I'm gonna meet with Katie. We're going to talk about XY and Z1 is going to be the best platform for us to communicate. Is it just a conversation? And then maybe I pull up on the side of the screen and I just take some notes and then you can see what I'm writing at the same time. And then we're all like kind of involved in human like Oh no, I actually meant like this. I'm like “Oh yeah, yeah, OK cool.”

You know what we need to get our heads out of our asses and start making this presentation happen? Because whatever, so then it's OK. Let's just, you know, and I kind of walked you through that all right to repeat myself on that. But then OK, now we have our bits. You take this slide, you take this slide who feels passionate about what topic, right? And then we split out, divide and conquer. Sometimes that's the best way. Sometimes it's like alright. Here's all the content. One person like you know what I could do some billable hours this week. I will put our presentation together for the group.

It just depends like you were with anything else like I'm gonna meet with Katie is the best way for me to do that at our super crowded restaurant or is it better for me to go to a coffee house? Or should we maybe go rent office space somewhere and have a professional conversation there? You know what I'm saying? So same thing, it's just picking the right tool for the job that you're wanting to do.

Sometimes through teams, sometimes through Webex, sometimes Zoom. Depending on you know what? What the platform the client prefers is the best. Now there's other features that did, you know that Microsoft Word will also do that for you if you have the cloud features and Office 365. If you have a video recording, you can set it up to transcribe any MP4, any of that MP3, MP4 it'll transcribe it right into a Word document for you.

KS

Let's go a little further into the work process and how you take your team's work outside the group. How do you promote their work outside the department, and protect their work from criticism from stakeholders who maybe weren't in that virtual room at the time?

MT

So you know, feet have to ask for feedback, and that's the part that a lot of people don't want. And it can be like, yeah, that was really great, or no, that was really bad.

I normally follow it up with. "Could you tell me what like one or two things you liked or disliked about what we've presented, or sometimes like? Give us your take on the proposal or the presentation." I mean, a lot of times clients can get really emotive, so that's easy. Or they'll say things and they'll just use certain statements or language like, "OK, well we're going to go back and look at that a little bit more, and then we'll let you know."

Keep up the good work you know? OK, that's something a huge brush-off. I can't even believe. You just brought that in my office.

Our culture from my company perspective, one of our core values is to have, like courageous conversations like part of being like being humble, having the courageous conversation you're encouraged to fix it yourself. And if you can't fix it or you feel like it is not safe or there's something else going on, then you have multiple avenues for which you can escalate or have some or ask for help.

I'm sure it's shocking to you. I'm kind of the poster child for my team in courageous conversation, in both reinforcing and redirecting feedback. I will literally sit there and someone, one of our teammates – because every Friday one of us has to present. There are some really great presenters and there's some really horrible presenters So I have been known to say, "OK, here's the feedback" and give it to them.

Outside the group, I do I want to understand the business value of an idea. What's the use case? Why is it important?

Even if our company did not have that as a core value, I would still be that way. But that's a personality thing, and that's a learned trait, right? Like you have to learn to be comfortable, to provide and reinforce that you're requesting feedback and it doesn't mean you have to be careful.

You also need to make sure that person is going to be receptive to the unpopular idea or the new, novel idea that's shocking but it may turn out to be great. We're a technology company. We literally build these platforms. So we have to help stakeholders them understand, "Here's what we do and why it's important."

KS

What is your prediction: Is the shift to virtual teams going to last?

MT

I don't think this is going anywhere. I've been able to sell more engagements, do just as much, if not more work. Get just as many client delight letters improve. How can you possibly justify the expense of going back if what we're doing now works?

I think there's a place and a time where there will be some amount of in-person and travel. Absolutely. When you need to show up, because you have to really be there, there's going to be situations where in-person will have to be the thing. I predict that almost every office building that is an office building that just has office workers like you and me will no longer exist. There will not be desks or offices for people. There will be just like what they've done where I work. You can go in there and you can reserve a space for the day if you feel like you need to work, but you're not getting an office, you're not getting an assigned cubicle. There's probably not going to be like a cafeteria or anything, and so it's meeting space literally for sales teams or for engagements where you have to bring a client on-site. You cannot tell me that there is one possible business justification for being on site when we've been able to prove as a whole human species that virtual just works.

Younger generations are just already looking for that opportunity. They want the flexibility they want the work life balance. They want the opportunity. If you are in this kind of a setup, your company has to have the technology capability to be able to offer that kind of opportunity so that already makes it a little sexier. So now I can live wherever the how I want and still get paid.

What do I think work will look like? People are probably all going to be remote. All the companies that are corporation will say, “You mean I don't have to pay the eleven billion dollars a year for this building anymore and I can just force my employees to work from home? And also I'm not relegated to this area or having to pay moving charges for somebody anymore because now I need him to be here in the office. Oh, I don't have to do that. Oh, and I can make more money. Yeah, let's do that.”

Subject 5: Naomi W.

Katie Snow:

In your virtual team, how do you build a creative climate where people feel safe to share ideas, and their work is promoted, and their work is gratifying?

Naomi W:

I'll start first with what makes up me as a leader. My mantra is something that I've developed over the last few years and it's actually still the same. I have four things that I live by, whether it's myself, whether it's my team. Teamwork, hard work, recognition and success, and they're the four things that are really important to me.

The team working hard – team work is like the biggest thing for me. But the recognition piece, which is interesting because it comes back to how do you share and “shout out” the good work that the team is doing and obviously being successful. And I don't just mean by getting another job. I mean in terms of what you do as a team and the work that you do, is it a success? And if not, fail fast, learn quickly, and talk about it.

I think the hardest thing when we went from lockdown when I had a big team back when I was working in the aviation business. We were so used to it -- the team was global anyway, so we were used to having about ten or fifteen of us in the UK always together. But then there are other people dotted around different parts of the world. There was always that element where we had to make sure that we had that camaraderie and then we kept close together. Then it became better when we went into lockdown because it put everybody on the same playing field.

So where the guys in the US or not so much, Australia, but US or Europe, maybe felt a little bit removed from that big group in the UK, we were all on the same page and we all had the find our feet on screen. So I think in a way it helped. It helped bring the team closer together as well because we brought in a fun element to it. We would have a check in three times a week. It was new for about the first three months would have a Monday, Wednesday, Friday check-in mandatory, at 4:00 PM UK time, so everybody could join and would always start the call with a check in.

You didn't always have to talk if everything was fine – only if you wanted something or wanted to share. But normally, you know, out of that kind of like the 25 people, three or four people would go. Yeah. I wanna check in. And the check-ins are really important thing to me that I do in my team as well.

That's what pilots do. They say, "Let's check in. We're in the cockpit so anything that's bothering you, anything that's worrying, you bring it to the table."

In my case, I had a massive fight with my teenage daughter last night. I'm still going over it in my head. I'm trying to work it out. So my I'm a bit distracted from a work perspective. Someone might say, "I've got this really big challenge at work right now. I'm struggling to work out the stakeholder. Can we mull this over?"

It's about having that real openness, that ability to show vulnerability. Once you've got that trust and that safe environment within your close team, then you're able to then go, "OK, that is a place where I can bring my problems or bring my challenges too, and we'll work together as a team and that's what we massively do with the communications team. Every Friday we have a team meeting and we always check in. We always talk about what's worrying you. We ask how we can help as a team and that's what got us closer together. I think that helps. You asked how we share ideas. I think that helped sharing ideas because if the team trusts each other and shows vulnerability, you are going to share more ideas.

And so I think just in terms of creating that creative climate, for me, it's about teamwork, hard work, teamwork. The other two things that I would say that that helps with camaraderie. And I'm feeling safe in doing so.

And I think sharing ideas, I think I found quite hard at a lecture actually, and I don't think the communication challenge channels are that good here. I think where I've done it in the past. It was from a business perspective, but we had a weekly newsletter and it sounds jazz. It wasn't. It was literally just an email with a few pictures and some words. And we started it in the marketing group.

A number of people in my team found it really hard to gather the content across departments, but after about three months this thing just ran, it just had legs. We would find that all of the newsletter content would come from the rest of the business. They would just email our group to say, "We've just won this deal," or "We've just had this charity walk, we've just done this charity run and we've just raised £3000.00 for cancer care." They would say, "I had this great event where we welcomed X amount of pilots," or whatever it might be, and we found that we would get the images and the content.

We would have to rewrite it and make it on-brand. But we found that when we, the creative marketing group, shared our personal stories and our work achievements, others want to share the business performance and successes. People wanted to talk about their success. It's catching.

When you see that one department or one team or one business line wins a massive deal and they're doing really, really well, you're like, "We can now share our news as well."

I think vulnerability, trust, collaboration helps for sharing ideas and it helps the creative juices flow and checking in really important. We're trying to share outcomes in as many ways as possible.

We never would have seen this way of working before COVID. You know my cat. You've seen my cat walking across the Teams call. You would never have never have seen that before, or the husband popping in, or the child coming home from school. It's. And I think when it first happened we were probably like, "Oh no, no, no. Get out." And now it's like, "Oh, sorry, back in two seconds." Then you deal with the child or the husband.

I think one of the positives out of working the way that we work now is that people have more time for people's lives and their value. The time that we have worked before, it was like: getting the car, get to work, do your job, travel to another country, whatever it might be. That's a theme.

KS

When you promote your team you talk about their success. But what about criticism from outside the department? That's a distraction for your team, so how do you solve that or how do you calm that down?

NW

I'll bring them into the fold. I think in marketing communications there's always someone that thinks they can do it better or someone that has a better way of doing things. And if I did, if I had that the head of engineering or one of the engineering guys saying, "I think you should work differently," I would welcome them into some meetings and bring them into some kind of process heavy meetings where we're talking about ways of working and how we develop an communications campaign or whatever the thing is.

But I'd also bring them into probably other individual team meetings to say, "Tell us about your environment, tell us what's important to you in engineering and why you think marketing should be doing things slightly differently," to adjust course at the same time. We may learn something from them as well.

So it might be like, "We've just gotta tick this box and get them out of here." But actually, often when I've done meetings the past, when you invite other people from different departments to come, you see things from such a different perspective as well and that is helpful unless it's just white noise and you do need to drown it out. That's different. But if it's genuine people wanting to understand why we do things in marketing, how we could do things differently from a different perspective, we should always welcome it in definitely.

KS

How do you keep work gratifying for teams?

NW

Gratifying for me is knowing that what you're doing, the campaigns you're putting out there, are making a difference. So for me, probably why I struggled at Elekta is because the data has not been that readily available. When I worked in the aviation business, we had to bring in a huge amount of pipeline of applications for people that wanted to be a pilot. So for me what was gratifying was to go, "OK, in looking at the social media stats for last week in paid search that we did and in the paid advertising we did in certain regions, our cost per click is massively reduced. So we know something is working there." And then you can go, "OK, so how do we overlay that onto something else, or see that you just done an event that brought 600 leads that have just come through." We can sit on a sales call and say, "We're supposed to hit 1000 leads per week. We're actually up by 200 this week, so we know that next week we can't take our foot off the pedal."

KS

is that right to say that the gratification comes in data, knowing you reached a goal?

NW

Exactly. I think fun is also important as well. Back to that point around trusting the people that you work with. Having an element of fun in your meeting, especially virtually, is really important and we don't do it so much now. Having those are difficult when everyone's on different time zones, but having those kind of like virtual meetups for trivia quizzes, they're important as well. Even if it's two or three times a year with the group is invaluable because it's it brings out completely different characteristics as well.

KS

Let's talk about your creative process and how your team comes up with ideas, evaluates ideas and chooses the ones to execute. We know we're not around a conference table and you don't have a whiteboard to use. How do you come up with and share ideas in a virtual team?

NW

It's been a bit more awkward actually, but in the last couple of years when I've either done a course for work or I recently did a chaperoning course with the Council because I chaperone at my daughter's theatre. I had to do this online course and for both that situation and with work, we go into virtual breakout rooms, which I'm sure you've done before. And I think in a situation where you don't know people, it's a bit more awkward. Everyone has such a different dynamic. Is either one person or two people that monopolize that time in the group, or people are too nervous to say anything.

I think virtual breakout rooms for teams only works for a proper team, like our global communications team. Everyone pretty much knows each other. They feel comfortable. Everyone knows who is who, who the talkers are, who are the quieter ones. The facilitator could bring out the quieter one. Like with [CS, a communications specialist on NW's team]. She's quite subservient. She's got so much to say, but she doesn't say it because her voice is quite quiet. So I would say, CS, what are your thoughts? To bring her in.

And so I think I think teams breakouts work more for an established team, not for a new team. A thing that works actually just came to mind. On the last one of the town halls, the Christmas game where we had to count the elves in the slide deck? It built camaraderie and creative thoughts as well. You know, big group of marketers that don't know each other well, at a good time of the year when you're feeling festive. That kind of helped.

I think that's harder to have that breakout room mentality when you're not actually in a room together. I think it's a real challenge on teams unless you're a very tight group. I think it needs to be very structured. Get the process right and have a very structured environment where you have different people talking. I always hate it when you have one person addressing a room and it's just one person talking for 90 minutes. I think you need to break it up between lots of different people to get different opinions. Facilitation is really important. If you've got a good facilitator, they will bring out the best of everybody rather than just the people that always talk.

KS

How do you select ideas to take from ideation to execution?

NW

A good example I have is when the Prime Minister made an announcement that affected our industry, and the communications team was called to an emergency campaign meeting. Our bosses stated the objective, what we need to achieve. We got put into breakout rooms. Most had all virtually met, but some people had never met before. And then we talked it out: "OK, so what's the objective? Which part are we taking?"

And often it would just be that we had to write four paragraphs. We had to think about the process. We had to think about who we're talking to. So it was never a massive task, but it was all done so, so quickly. And in that situation, it was it was very, very tightly controlled. So, you know, you knew between 8:30 and 9:30, you had to write that paragraph with the six in the room. Gotta get it done.

And then we all came back to the big group for advice: "We're done," or "We're struggling here." "OK, change it. Go and then carry on."

That whole day it was completely structured. I wouldn't recommend that all the time, but sometimes I think that sometimes get it might work on stuck projects. Our boss could say, "In the next two days, everybody clear in their diary," and don't give any pre warning. Have it completely structured, break people up and go, "Right, you're focus on this. You're focused on that. You'll focus on that."

KS

How do you go about go about evaluating and saying yeah, would that idea is a go or no-go?

NW

I think it's just about collaborating in the group. It's knowing who's got the best voice in that situation. So it depends if you're talking about what creative looks best or if you're talking about what headlines work best. It depends what the content is.

I would lead with either someone who's done it before or someone has experience, someone who's been there longer, or someone who's got outside work. I would pick the strength of the person that I think should help lead that decision. And you don't want management by committee. You want to use the skill set that you've got and give them the autonomy to make that decision. And that's a frustration I have here that there's too many people making decisions and not enough autonomy given to people further down in the group to make those decisions and live by them. As a leader in that environment, I push to use the skill sets within the room to help push it forward and make the decision.

If I was part of that group and not leading it, I would step up if it was in my skill set. I would also back off if it wasn't. I'd say this is not in my wheelhouse and happy to support, but I'm not going to lead this one.

KS

So I'm hearing that you rely on people's expertise and trust that they know what they're talking about.

NW

And their intellect as well. I've got some great relationships with people, but there's some other business lines and areas that are quite a challenge. There isn't any trust because there's no great relationship. And so you need trust. If you don't have that, then people are going to work against each other. Not in a nasty way, not in an actively difficult way, but will naturally happen.

KS

About innovation and how your team stays sharp on the latest: how you champion that on your virtual team?

NW

I'm a big learner, so if there's anything, I'm not afraid to ask if I don't understand something – which is a lot of the time. So I'll say, “What is that? I don't get it all.” I'm literally Googling when people are talking about something I should know. I'm literally Googling it up and I don't think there's anything wrong with that, because we can't all be the font of all knowledge. I mean, my husband's ridiculous. He knows bloody everything, but if you don't know something, that's fine too. Look it up.

I hate to admit but I was on a webinar other day and they were talking about the metaverse is like. I don't even know what the metaverse is, so I Googled it. Since then, I've had a couple of emails where I've been retargeted. But I read the stuff that's been sent to me, which has been really useful.

So I think it's a combination of, yeah, using what's at your fingertips, constantly looking to understand what's been discussed. I'm a member of the Charles Institute of Marketing, so I get a lot of webinars through them. I look at their website a lot, and get quite a lot of insight from there. And I also tried to keep up with things like PR trends and stuff as well. So just general stuff, nothing to do with specifically healthcare more I get like a weekly or daily email to see the movers and shakers and what's happening. If there's conversation at a high level at work, they'll say, “Do you know anything about XYZ?” And at least then I'll have a comment to make.

And I think it's also about listening to the rest of the team, because we all have different interests. Certain things interest me that might not interest other people, so I might have something to bring to the table. Other people definitely do as well.

I think innovation is a combination of your own research in your own looking about, as well as listening to other people's, because then you can build your knowledge that way.

I think it's hard, though, unless you're naturally wired that way to always want to seek out more, which I'm not. I'm not naturally wise to always want to learn. My husband is. He's that kind of person that you want in a pub quiz because he just knows **** about everything. Stuff that that makes no sense whatsoever. He'll pick it out of his brain and his sons exactly the same. Whereas I'm not at all. I'm more practical and more about people; empathetic, that kind of thing. And that's where we differ. But I think it's about the combination of everything to be innovative. It is quite hard because you get bogged down with everything that you do.

KS

You mentioned learning from failure, failing quickly and evolve. What is that like on your virtual team?

NW

Yeah, “fail fast” part of part of my mantra. I use that quite a lot because, what harm you going to do? You get it wrong, it’s OK. You might have just cocked up any my campaign, but you know, who really cares?

Subject 5: Kat G.

Katie Snow

In your virtual team, how do you build a creative climate where people feel safe to share ideas, and their work is promoted, and their work is gratifying?

KG

So in our team pretty much already built that environment. We have met daily since I took over so there's been a daily team brief, if you will, where we go through not just like hot projects and bandwidth and things like that, but also if there is something that's new and different, we throw it out there and it's not unlike what we did when we were all together and we would go into a room and we would throw ideas up on the wall.

We throw them up on a virtual wall and ask, “So how about this?” And you know, [graphic designer] will quickly sketch something and then share it with us on the virtual window. Then we talk about it: “Well, wait, maybe we could do this. Maybe we could do that.” But that creative input has pretty much stayed the same. It has been more dampened by this new brand messaging process than anything, because we've been in limbo while they nail represent.

I would say that in the virtual world, our creatives’ meetings have been pretty much the same as they were when we were in a physical presence. It's just up on the window versus whiteboard and it's not as fast because you're waiting for that back and forth virtually. Whereas if you're all in the same room, somebody's running up and sketching something else on the whiteboard and that kind of thing. So it's just a little bit slower process.

KS

Do you do this asynchronously where you have a virtual board and in the morning you'll go make a comment, then later another designer will come in and have a look and check?

KG

It's just actually, it's just a MS Teams document that's a shared document in teams and people will go in and sketch around with it. We try not to do that in Workfront because now that we're more transparent and in Workfront, that gets very confusing for stakeholders. So that's pretty much offline from the process shared with stakeholders and the person sponsoring the project and all of the business line entities and regulatory entities that become involved in projects.

KS

How do take your work and promote it outside your virtual team? When you have to say, “Hey, this is the great work we've done and this is our process.” Everyone thinks they're designer, every stakeholder wants to have a say. How do you how do you handle that? Like how do you handle that with a virtual team?

KG

There's no way. There's no way to prevent it. In our corporate world, there's no way to prevent it, because we can push back on something and say, “You know, we have our brand parameters, we have guidelines.” And we’ve come back a couple of times and said, “That just doesn't make good design sense. It's not a best practice.”

So “best practice” seems to work most successfully with people, but there's no way that we can avert it completely because they’re always going to. It’s usually somebody that's brought in at the eighth hour that says, “I really don't like that design.”

I know it and well and say, “What don't you like about it?”

“Well, I don't know.”

Things like that are very disheartening from for a designer. It's very frustrating for a designer when they have a brief, they develop on that brief, and somewhere along the line the brief evolves. And changes; that is just a frustration for designers that will never be completely fixed.

It depends on who that that stakeholder is that's requesting the update and what the request is. So we have our brand guidelines, we have design best practices. But then we still have an executive team that if our answer isn't satisfactory to that stakeholder, they go straight to that person and well, we'll make an exception this time. So we live in a world of exceptions.

KS

So I'm hearing is that you have you have to sort of vocabulary or a certain set of design best practices to shield and promote your team’s work when it comes to a pushy stakeholder.

KG

There are. There are companies and usually there are larger companies that here are the brand standards. You do not deviate from the brand standards, but that's not our reality but that's where what we're striving towards. Katie. Yeah.

KS
Aspirational.

KG
Yes.

KS
So in that environment you, how do you make sure that the work for design for your creative team is gratifying? Work can't be fun all the time, but it should have a gratifying feel.

KG
So you have to balance. You have to balance the mundane with the challenging. So we get so many requests that there are opportunities for something that is more fun or using that side of the brain a little bit more than adhering to a template and specific content needs and things like that. So you just try to balance the load so that they're having some projects that are a little bit more on the fun side and a little bit of a departure from the norm.

KS
Where you could like maybe learn something different or try out a new thing that you saw someplace?

KG
Right. Actually the move to virtual with COVID has actually helped that because we were anyway seeing the world move to more digital communications. And so we had already started trying to get some animation video chops, for example.

Graphic designers are not typically trained in those mediums, and so it's been a good opportunity over the last couple of years for the team to evolve into that world and develop a lot of those skills that they didn't have before.

I mean, my senior designer is now a whiz with animation and video. My junior designer actually has the basics down. He's just a more tentative person by nature and the pace is often intimidating for him on the animation video, but we're pulling him along. And then we have of course our third designer that we rely on is freelance and he's got the basics down really well too. And then we do have a vendor. Actually we have two vendors who are good with animation and video so every time they do something for us, we include like a tutorial, a mini session with them. How did you do that? So that's pulling the team along there too.

KS
That's a nice intro into the next question I have about championing innovating, new ideas, new technique. How do you bring in stuff that you see in the outside world and select ideas might be cool to use on your projects?

KG

So the team is really good about that, about keeping their finger on the pulse of what's happening out there and what others are doing, not just in our space but outside of our space and pulling that in and saying, hey, this is really cool.

And then we look at how we can incorporate that. [RC, director of public relations] also pulls in a lot of things that she sees in social media. She says, hey, take a look at this. I don't know how we could do this, but this sounds like a cool idea. Maybe we can play with it. So those are the sorts of things we like to toss around, too.

KS

Yeah, yeah, I've seen on Instagram stories, especially the little QA sessions and the banners. I look at that and I know the Creative Services team did this as was part of the build for an event trade show or something.

Working with creative people, like people who are design oriented in general already, what's your process for taking in those new techniques and evaluating them, kicking around ideas and brainstorming? What's your process?

KG

During Covid we were looking at digital deployment and looking at costs of printing and the fact that 90% of your print documents end up in the trash can.

So we started looking at interactive media, and so the guys were actually challenged to go out and find some different options and how we might turn our brochures into an interactive digital document. And so we explored. We explored what we could do within our Adobe development environment. The team would come to meetings and one of them would say here I explored this, what do you think of this? And we would say, well, if we could do this and this and this, that would be really helpful.

Another example is Seismic when we were looking at Seismic Tiles for digital docs.

That seems to hold the most promise, because that's something that the digital comms team is also adopting.

The guys can came in and said I said, "See what you can find this week. Let's all talk about this in next Wednesday's meeting and see what we might come up with." Then we would explore that, get a license if we needed it and play with it in the sandbox with that idea until we nailed something that we thought was workable.

KS

Would you say COVID accelerated the pace of what was already happening anyway?

KG

It has definitely escalated the process, what we thought would be five years down the road was one year down the road type of thing. So it made us work, but that was great. We had to work in an agile manner, which we been wanting to adopt anyway and flex those chops and be able to be more agile. So it's actually was a good thing for this team. We do miss that face to face, but it it's been good for us in other ways so.

KS

Right, that's. That's what I'm kind of hearing. Every job has had to pivot, creative-wise during COVID. It compresses your timeline. What you wanted to do 2 years, you have to do in five months or by the end of the quarter. Or your five-year plan became your one-year plan.

KG

Well, and also since we're having to move into other realms, how do we pull the design capabilities into those other formats that maybe aren't quite as comfortable or we're not quite as adept at what do we, what do we need to consider? What is really important? And so we're capitalizing on the capabilities that we do have.

Subject 7: Tobias M.

Katie Snow

In your virtual team, how do you build that creative climate where people feel safe to share ideas, and their work is promoted, and their work is gratifying?

Tobias M

In in my team it starts or started already when in the hiring process. When I first talked to the candidates because that's I think how I got them joined to join the team because I told everybody that we have some projects to do. But we have total freedom about the technology, the infrastructure, the programming languages that we want to use in order to get the job done. This is somewhat frightening to people that know only little about their job and are seeking for strong advice and mentorship and so on. But the candidates that are hired, you know, the guys, they're not freshmen. They have some experience on a different level in the market already. So when I told them, yeah, if you tell me this is the way to go because you know that this is cool and this is working, then then we'll do it like that.

And luckily I'm of the opinion that we in the web team are in the position that we can just pick whatever we want, so this is the base setting I guess. And then how do I promote that safe climate.

KS

Yeah, because you guys all work remotely. Even if you did work remotely before, the situation is still different. Now that everyone's working remotely, so tell me a little about that.

TM

Luckily I went on a on a course back then when our old developer was still here, together with him on the Scrum Master Course certification and there we learned Agile project development stuff and one integral part of that is the daily standup and even though you cannot really stand up in a digital meeting or of course you can, but nobody does that. And normally it also is only 15 minutes every day, where the people are gathering, stand up and they tell about yesterday what went wrong with the obstacles they hit and how the scrum master can help them to overcome the obstacles to, and so on, and also to ask for the status. And this is what we're doing here in our team as well. Every day 10:00 o'clock CET we meet half an hour because normally half the time is just private stuff.

And this is important as well to set the stage. So we'll talk about how many beers do we have? And of course the how was your weekend? How was your last gig, for example? The jam session. How's this guitar going on? And one guy moved house. So how he's proceeding here and now? He's a house owner. And I don't know that much about the new UX designer, but this is actually the time to bond a bit every day. It's cool. And this is also when we bounce back and forth ideas.

At some point in the meeting I just started sharing my screen and we're pulling up the Jira board and this is where we see the tasks and then we'll talk about work stuff. I mean, the collaboration is very good amongst the team. And yeah, everybody has the feeling that you can come up with stupid ideas and nobody will laugh at you and we can we just try out things and then improve stuff, or we do stuff that we don't end up using though. That is the team's running gag. It's crazy techie stuff, but it is a very cool thought behind it. This is how we're working.

KS

Yeah. So you have a foundation. You said 15 minutes or you meet the first couple minutes of a call. It's supposed to be a 15 minute stand up turns into 30. Would you say that that's the environment that you work in you know each other as people, you know each other as guys who have important private lives?

TM

Yeah, I think this is somehow compensating the lack of really personal interaction in a virtual team, because this way I know my guy's favorite hobbies, what he's doing in his free time and so on. If we were to just force ourselves to talk for one hour every Friday about that, it wouldn't be the same, so this constant but short. Private stuff is, I think compensating the lack of bonding that you normally have in virtual teams.

KS

Yeah, interesting. Are the little short bits are more a more foundational than a one hour per week where everybody talks about what they're doing tomorrow or over the weekend?

TM

Exactly. I mean, I like it in the broader team or Friday ones of course, but it wouldn't work in our small team.

KS

I know Web work can be kind of like, you want to change this again you know the easy stuff, the little boring stuff or the stuff that is cool but doesn't get used. How do you inspire someone to get past that and think, OK the work is is generally gratifying, but at the same time, you're gonna get frustrated? How do you on as virtual team leader, manage and figure that out?

TM

OK. I mean, we had several occasions. So for example, yeah, other ones example, this is not totally in vain because we can reuse it in the future and our DevOps got to know quite a bit more of how the AWS infrastructure works, so it's he's building up knowledge and the next time we need something, he has there on the shelf already. So it's never lost and this is also something that is I think vital. It's not only in in the web development world where you have to have the mindset to be, yeah, I don't know everything, but I know where to look it up.

I don't want Google or somewhere else. That's the most important stuff. I'm not fixed to a programming language. I don't know one programming language to 100%, but I know 30 to 40% for example and that's more important. And so I think it's knowledge building. Nothing is ever really lost here. Another example: our UX guy created a new design for something and it's looking very much better than we currently have on [company website], but it's not in line with current site. So I thought, "Oh shoot, it's looking good, but how do I tell him we can't do that?" And I told him, "Well, I really like it, but unfortunately it's not consistent with the rest of the website. But please keep it in your idea pocket so when we do a full revamp then we can perhaps apply it throughout the website."

Just letting them do. So they are also building up knowledge and a pocket of cool stuff, rather than saying, we can't use that. Uh, no, we can't use that.

KS

So that's a nice shift into my next question, which is about ideas like that in your creative process. You have the environment in which you come up with ideas. How do you evaluate ideas, like a thing that you can or can't use a situation where there's a need for something and someone comes along and says, hey, we need something that does this? There's probably 10 different ways to do it. Old ways of doing it, new ways of doing it.

TM

Yeah. Normally we just bounce it between all of the group members, all of the team members, and because that's the cool thing because we have somehow a bit of overlap all the time, a front end developer knows some bits of backend developer, backend developer knows some bits of a DevOps specialist and so on so they can go hand in hand and when we talk about the possible solutions.

Somebody says, yeah, what if we did it that way? So we come up with the best solution then in the end really I think. But when it comes to an example, a great example is the Algolia search index, when our developer joined.

I had some knowledge about how this thing is working and I wanted to transfer my knowledge so he can get started and do the stuff and I told him, yeah, you normally do it like this and that. And then he had a look at it and said, yeah, but tell me that's what if we did it another way? And I, in the beginning, I was. I wasn't sure whether this is the right way. So we always did it one way. And it was something that I needed to learn. Just let them do their stuff that they are convinced of right from the beginning. And I was wrong. So because I'm now at the stage that I don't know everything anymore.

In in these area I mean I have three experts now around me and I'm always astonished by how it got solved in the end just by giving them the freedom that comes back to the recruitment process. Just let them do.

KS

Right. It sounds like there's a trust involved there too, where you have experts on your team.

You're not the expert. They are. They're here for a reason and that reason is: your ideas are good.

TM

Exactly. And that's somehow frightening when I got all these cool guys on the team. Otherwise I'd be micromanaging and be behind their back all the time and that would drive me crazy and would drive them crazy.

KS

Do you have a structured process where you brainstorm ideas? For example, where a moderator says, OK, we have we have 10 minutes on this topic and then we're gonna solve it and move on. Do you have a similar thing?

TM

It's total freeform and it oftentimes it happens that these daily standups turn into one hour long. We first talk about the stuff that's currently going on, and then we shift into just doing stuff that is a most important. Sometimes then the other two guys drop off and then we're just in the flow. So it's totally free form, yeah.

KS

How do you take it ideas, evaluate them and go OK, that idea is the good one. That's the one we're gonna run with.

TM

We normally bounce back and forth with the ideas. It's always a project that finally needs to be done by one person. So it's either front end, back end or DevOps/

We're bouncing back and forth, but in the end I say, OK, this is the way I think works best. And this is somehow the consensus already, but I would like to say and I hope it is the case, that the subject matter expert has the final say of how to implement it. He needs to live with it in the end and he needs to take care of it in the end as well.

KS

So you have a caretaker of it, and if it if it's something that that caretaker disagreed with from the beginning. That's a hard thing, to be told to build and keep running something you think's awful. Like, this wasn't my idea.

TM

Exactly. Yeah, you're right. Trust is also very big thing, I guess in our team because I don't know when they start working. I don't know when they stopped working. I only check with check in with them once a day, perhaps two times a day when we have specifically targeted meeting in the afternoon about something . But other than that I don't know what they're doing. I can tell that they have been doing something because of the outcome is something that is working.

And I tend to be not very pushy. If something is important, I'll let them know that and it gets done as soon as possible. That's hasn't been a problem ever. if I think that a project is going is too slow then I just keep asking all the time.

KS

So your guys just completed a huge thing, couple of huge things across a lot of departments. Product launches and entire website redesign. So how do you take your team's ideas outside the department and champion their ideas?

TM

When I think about the new online locations map, for example, that still hasn't gone live unfortunately, but this is an example of where we came up with something and then we need to get the buy in from marketing and from the business lines.

Because the UX guys created it in such a great way in in such a user friendly way and it gets exactly the job done that it was supposed to be along with some improvements that he came up with, we just present it and they're like, oh, cool, that's nice. Let's use that.

That's the best case scenario, of course. The potential problem here is other people start to get to my team members directly more and more. and want to get stuff done without following the official request process, you know? And here is where I need to start to protect the guys and the request process. Unfortunately, as much as I hate them as well, these need to be followed. And just today, for example, someone asked for a website change on Teams. I said, "Yes, but send a request ticket please."

"Yeah, but it needs to go out today."

"Yeah. I'm gonna take care of it. But send a change request ticket please."

These little protection things that we have to do, that you wish you didn't have to, but we all should.

KS

How do you build that spirit or be the champion for innovation? And by that I mean doing things you haven't tried before in your industry? We kind of talked about that already but I want to know what you think.

TM

Bigger project that involves everybody where you can then really join the forces and work on something cool together. This is unfortunately rare these days because, as mentioned several times we are caught up in the little things. When we then have such a big project, it's really where everybody can excel and bring everything to the table that that person has.

So my vision still is to work on a progressive web apps -- web based application that runs and looks as if it would be native on an iPhone, for example, or on an Android with additional functionality. And this is something where we need everybody: UX to do the design and the front end, developers to do the data management, the flows of it all, then DevOps will come up with the infrastructure for the databases, for the API gateways and for scaling the architecture depending on how many users we have.

And I once was close to just write to the VP of comms and say, my team is now complete. So cool. We'll soon have capacity to do a progressive web app.

And then the comms director said, yeah, no, let's not do that. You focus on the roadmap first. But I always have that that progressive web app in mind whether it makes sense or not. But this would be one cool thing where we can really prove what we can do.

KS

That sounds like, again, an idea, concept, building blocks that you have in your minds, somewhat built

already and when the time comes, just bring it out and say, “Here we go. We have a we have a firm foundation on which to build a progressive web app.” For example we have the knowledge and expertise and some of the actual pieces. Now give us time.

TM

Exactly that, yeah.

Subject 8: Desiree O.

Katie Snow:

In your virtual team, how do you build a creative climate where people feel safe to share ideas, and their work is promoted, and their work is gratifying?

DO

Part of my role of global field director is one hand working with the regions. On the other hand, managing the trade show events teams. So what I've been doing with the regions and of course I already established some relationships with all of them because they used to be my brand ambassadors. But ever since the pandemic hit, I made sure to really invest in the personal relationships, to reach out.

I have catch-up calls with Region Türkiye and Middle East, Japan and China. With any region, we start off the call by sharing: “Hey, how are you doing? What's it like for you in your country?” We share anything you want to share and make it very like very open. Nothing is taboo and everything can be put on the table.

In addition to that also I tried to keep on finding ways to build in some fun with the regions like organizing Christmas parties. Very geeky. We did a couple of really cool quizzes. I am actually missing that. keep on saying like we have to bring those back because it really bonds and it's just so much fun for the team to have a laugh. We dressed for Halloween. Having that fun element, I think, provides nice and safe environment where you can actually speak your mind and you feel valued by your by your colleagues.

You have your regular marcomms touch-base calls where you talk about projects and programs and strategies. But like I said, there's always time for that personal element. I think especially during the first year of the pandemic, we organized all these virtual geeky Christmas parties with trivia questions in there about festivities around the world. We talked about Diwali, Hanukkah and any holiday that people are celebrating in the month of December, to create a little more understanding. We put a lot of research and fun into that. And it helps to bond and to laugh. Some of these relationships, I think, are built from life. So I think that's really, really good and.

KS:

How do you make sure the work is gratifying?

DO

I have an example right now where we're slowly going back to normal, doing in-person events even though right now China is again lockdown and they still can only work from home. The “coming back to life” after COVID, with full events and a big exhibition, was madness. But it was also very, very good to see the activity, the buzzing and the positive vibes. But in order to get there, as you know, it really takes a village to put big events and everything together.

One of my key learnings was that there were too many people involved in creative approvals. So we'll reshape that process again for next time, but sometimes also decisions have to be made. And will my goal is always to have the lion share of the team feel good about it. I've also realized that as long as the major stakeholders are happy, then we're going to push through.

KS

Tell me about that working remotely and how you come up with creative ideas in that space, and choose what ideas to execute.

DO

We had the idea to use this Vox Vote app during a dinner trivia event at a tradeshow, to create more engagement. From managers we heard, “Well, we're not sure if it's worth the technical effort.” We got the app to work the day of the event but we had some hiccups.

This was actually a question where was like, “What shall we do?” So I asked the team because there are all kinds of disciplines there. The majority voted to go for it, use the app for the trivia game. That's a good example of like a process: let's make sure we get everyone's input. And then we're going to make a decision and go for it.

It cannot always be that way. Sometimes, I feel like we are in good shape and that's when we get something out of left field, someone saying, “No, it has to be *this* way.” And at the end of the day just tell myself, “OK, take a deep breath. We're just gonna make it happen.”

KS

That sounds gratifying but also a little bit risky, like you're taking a leap. When you want to try something new, what do you find is good way to champion that idea?

DO

The pushback to the Vox Vote app was more like a concern: “Do we really need this? You already have so much on your plate.” I’m like, “Yeah, but it’s cool too. It’s fun.” So it’s good when there’s cool factor to an idea.

KS:

Let’s talk about the ways that you look at new ideas and how you choose a good idea.

How do you kick around ideas? Do you have a process and brainstorming, or do you just freeform?

DO

So let me let me take the evening event as an example of how we how we put ideas together.

So with the events, what we’ve tried to do this year is, we took the corporate brand theme and said, “Let’s really go with that patient angle.” We ran that these across all our comms channels and trade show, with the new brand refresh. For our events for the most part, that theme was already decided. It was decided between me and the events content person, and my team list from the region.

Another angle for the evening event was to hear testimonial speakers and the team was excited. We invited a speaker that our Marketing Communications and Corporate Communications people have already worked closely with. So that’s how the evening event with speakers came to life. Corporate Communications teams also had this amazing idea of trying out a talk show format that they used for a product launch press event.

My team’s spoke to a customer who was interested in speaking at our event, and a sales colleague reached out to a patient survivor, who was also willing to speak at the event. We orchestrated everything and did lots of rehearsals on site and cue the speakers when it was their turn to talk.

Onstage we had the VP of corporate communications as the moderator, and our speakers showing some slides on screen but not death by PowerPoint, more in a conversational style. And then the patient survivor came on stage again we had some images to support her story. Then we had group questions where MT would go back and forth between talking to guest, like a mini Stephen Colbert Show type of setting. So that was really, really fun, really fun to try something different, something to wow our audience and just do a little bit of like the unexpected. Our audience wanted more.

This is how we work together across departments to hold an in-person event. It was a team effort with all these virtual teams: the corporate communications team with the speaker talk show; the creative services

team with videos and visuals; the digital communications team created the email and social campaign. So really, everyone was involved.

Yeah, it gets your blood pumping, right? Sometimes it can be very stressful, but then again, I think we all kind of like that. We have that special bone in our body where we're like, "Hey, this is pretty, this is cool. Let's go for it."

KS

When you have to be a champion for your team's ideas, and they're innovative, how do you do that?

DO

Everyone, everyone needs to feel good about it and making sure that all the interests of the many, many stakeholders are well, are well represented there. We discuss it, we talk about it, we counter a little bit here and there, and then at the end of the day, we have the idea format that we'll keep on polishing.

For the speaker event, we had a big MS Teams chat going with stakeholders from across Marketing. We were all in there constantly talking about the program. "Speakers are confirmed." "What is the topic?" "What is the actual title of the presentation?" "When will the presentation be ready?" So I created this big project in Workfront where people could share all the presentations. Lots of business marketing colleagues use that project now because I share the updates there.

KS

Do you think the changes that we saw to virtual teams in the last two or three years are durable?

DO

Yeah, I think hybrid is here to stay because also it offers a it offers our customers and prospects other ways to engage with us. We still have travel restrictions because of the pandemic or here in Europe there's a big war going on between Ukraine and Russia that does have effect on people traveling. Plus there's a huge backlog in hospitals. So sometimes clinicians, our customers, are simply not allowed to travel.

think we need to keep on working on the digital components, so to make sure that we can engage with customers regardless the channel. We'll have to see, because right now we're all very optimistic. Almost like COVID never happened, but we're still going to see how things are looking like after the summer.

It is so different and harder to find ways of making sure that I stay close like to my personal teammates. I have not seen some teammates in person for a really long time. It's too bad. But we do keep in touch with

lots of calls. Our one-on-one calls are holy to me, so I never skip them unless there's a really good reason. We talk in meetings all the time. We always have our chat lines open. We do try to have something to bond over a little bit.

When we're all remote, it's not always easy. To be very candid about some of my team members, the relationship grows organically and we all get along, and with some others it's a little bit more challenging. Sometimes we have a little bit of clashing of personalities. We're only humans at the end of the day. And I think we all mean well and we want the best. So that's how we try to overcome it.

Appendix C: Original Project Proposal

MANAGING CREATIVE TEAMS:
DISRUPTIONS FELT BY CREATIVE TEAMS DURING COVID-19

A Project presented to
the Faculty of the Graduate School
at the University of Missouri-Columbia

In Partial Fulfillment
of the Requirements for the Degree
Master of Arts

by

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Jim Flink, Committee Chair

Jon Stemmler, Committee Member

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Introduction

In the communications industry, the clichéd phrase “the only constant is change” describes our reality. Disruptions have always shaped the way communicators try to get their messages across to audiences and how the public receives and shares information. Sometimes, the disruption is a new technology that is generally seen as a net-positive for humanity: after the printing press, the Internet and the mobile phone are perhaps the most important innovations that changed the practice of journalism forever. Other times, the disruption is the result of an economic crisis that results in agency closures and layoffs, forcing journalists to learn new skills and try new media to earn a living.

The purpose of this research is to understand our current disruption – the Covid-19 pandemic and the shift to going almost entirely digital at work – and its implications for workers in creative roles. Change is a constant in every industry but many adaptations that workers have to make are for positive reasons: to learn a fascinating new technology; for a shot at a new role or promotion; or to simply keep up with fun cultural shifts and try new things. However, the pandemic forced changes to the workplace that were sudden, widespread and unexpected, making this an important context of study.

In 2021, “adapt or die” is more compelling than ever as creative teams cope with working 100% digitally. While it can be enjoyable to adapt in pursuit of a raise, more managerial responsibility, or personal enjoyment. Adapting at work *in response to a global pandemic* is an unusual existential stressor. People are forced now, and scrambling at times, to figure out how to stay creative and innovative while also trying to adapt to the new-normal virtual workplace. While creative teams are challenged and stretched in a virtual environment, some firms realize that they might not need to keep spending money on rented office space and employee travel. The 100% in-person office could be a thing of the past, and it would be beneficial to understand how creative workers can stay productive and successful in the new digital environment. This shift to digital is durable and here to stay; there is no going back. This particular mode of disruption is a first for all of us and therefore warrants further study.

Since February 2020, creative teams these questions every day: How has the forced shift to 100% digital affected the creative culture? What is the pandemic's disruption doing to relationships with coworkers? What other adaptations are needed to stay creative in the 100% digital environment? For many organizations, these daily questions will define this "next normal" as outlined by McKinsey researchers (2021), so it is crucial to understand how creative teams are doing their work during Covid-19 pandemic's forced shift to 100% digital.

Review of Literature

Disruption, Defined

When we discuss disruption in a business environment, we first have to begin with a definition. This literature review will start there, then elaborate on how the meaning of "disruption" evolved to apply to the business market. Finally, this review will explain a modern definition of "disruption" and how it applies to this proposed research.

The simple dictionary definition of disruption is "a break or interruption in the normal course or continuation of some activity, process." The term's use in business to describe change and its effect on business markets dates to the 1990s (Christensen, 2016). However, interest in this topic among business leaders and scholars existed well before that, even if the term "disruptive" had not yet been coined.

An early researcher in the field of changing business markets was Austrian economist Joseph Schumpeter. As a Harvard University economist, Schumpeter popularized the term "creative destruction" to describe an essential business cycle under capitalism, where old ways constantly die back in order to give life to and make space for new innovations. In Schumpeter's words, creative destruction is the "process of industrial mutation that continuously revolutionizes the economic structure from within, incessantly destroying the old one, incessantly creating a new one" (Schumpeter, 1942). Numerous tangible examples of this phenomenon exist in technology and media. (Imagine the evolution audio recordings and devices used to play them. Sound recording media evolved through numerous iterations

from wax recordings to streaming services; playback devices constantly undergo a similar cycle of creative destruction.)

Scholarly interest in changing business markets continued through the late 20th century, when Clayton Christensen developed the theory of disruptive innovation in his 1997 book *The Innovator's Dilemma: When new technologies cause great firms to fail*. Building on Schumpeter's theory of creative destruction, Christensen focused primarily on how the introduction of a new technology into the market affects established businesses' (or "incumbents") competitive advantage. Christensen's book was a multi-industry study in new technologies disrupting existing business markets. A notable example of a disruptive innovation presented by Christensen include digital photography, which affected incumbent manufacturers like Kodak and Polaroid, and emergent tech companies like Adobe and Apple. Christensen also applied his theory of disruptive innovation to service sectors like healthcare, where the "invention" of professions like nurse practitioners and places to get care like outpatient clinics disrupted the competitive advantage once held by medical doctors and traditional hospitals. An important takeaway from Christensen's work, and relevant to this research, is that a disruptive innovation is not just a new technology, device or appliance; it can be a new way of working and living.

After Christensen, some scholars tended to focus heavily on advancements in computing technology as the disruptors. (Much of the literature can be found in business and engineering management journals.) Regardless of the source of disruption, researchers remained focused on its business effects and outcomes, such as changes to competitive advantage and a corporation's competencies. Building on Christensen's example of digital photography as a disruptive innovation, Danneels defined disruptive technology as "a technology that changes the basis of competition by changing the performance metrics along which firms compete" (Danneels, 2004, p. 249). Simply stated, when a new player in the market introduces a disruptive technology, this changes the basis of competition for established firms and they need to adapt.

Alongside Danneels' research on disruption caused by new devices, Walsh, Kirchoff and Newbert took a more behavioral and sociological approach to disruptive innovations (Walsh, Kirchoff and Newbert, 2002). They, like earlier researchers, defined disruption as a force that requires people and companies to adapt. Specific to disruptive innovations, Walsh et al define them as developments that have such "radical newness or emergent character" (p. 343) that the adaptations to make use of them do not yet exist. When people or corporations have fully adapted to a disruptive innovation, they have "crossed the chasm" – meaning, the innovation that was once disruptive has been effectively integrated into a person's daily life or a business' normal operating strategy. For example, smartphones once represented a radical new disruptive innovation. People had full computing power and high-speed internet in their pockets, and businesses could portray their brands on new social apps. When this technology first emerged, it was radically new; since then, we have "crossed the chasm" by incorporating smartphone technology into everyday aspects of life and business.

From this field of technology- and device-focused research, Kilkki, Mäntylä, Karhu, Hämmäinen and Ailisto represent a modern culmination of research into disruption (Kilkki, Mäntylä, Karhu, Hämmäinen and Ailisto, 2017). Taking a holistic approach, they define disruption as a force on an ecosystem, whereby a substantial number of agents in that system have to adapt and re-design their strategies in order to survive the environmental changes. The disruption could be a new technology, a business model or a global event like a pandemic, and the effects of disruption are not just limited to business but can be felt in society and culture, politics, academia or everyday life.

This research will rely on Kilkki et al's depiction of disruption as a force that affects an ecosystem and forces survival adaptations. This is the definition most relevant to this proposed study, which will look into to how people in marketing communications have had to adapt to their new 100% digital work environments during the pandemic. Their definition is especially relevant to this study because it abandons the implied positive associations of "innovation" (as a thing that is good for just about everyone), and posits that disruption can be neutral, or even negative in its effect.

History of disruptions in the communications industry

In looking at how marketing communications was disrupted during the pandemic, it is helpful to examine past disruptions and their impact on the media industry and the public. The following section will look into two shifts in the industry and broader culture that had a lasting impact on the way marketing communications practitioners do their jobs: the shift toward media convergence; and the shift from desktop computers to mobile devices with social apps. In looking back, we see that the media industry has a history of adapting to seismic cultural changes and we can learn from this now.

Media is always evolving, and its history of disruption long predates the late 20th century. The 1990s were chosen as a starting point because this decade represents the beginning of *digital* disruptions that forcefully changed the marketing communications industry.

The shift to media convergence

By the 1990s, the communications industry began to notice a shift toward an increasingly participatory culture, where people “maintain a dialogue with the mass media, create their own social networks, learn to think, work and process culture in new ways” (Jenkins, 2006, p. vii). As bandwidth got cheaper and faster, media capabilities expanded, and consumer behavior adapted. The graphical nature of the world wide web (a term that seems quaint today), combined with higher computing power and secure connections, allowed for communications and purchases to happen online. By 1998, most consumer companies were using digital media for relationship-building and selling (Parsons, Zeisser & Waitman, 1998). This shift in media technology and consumer behavior was global, and it forced workers in creative industries to adapt to new job roles and challenges. Journalists, advertisers, marketers and producers of entertainment shifted away from being the top-down media authorities to roles that allowed audiences to share power and participate more in meaning-making and content-creating (Deuze, 2007).

New media: “a power shift to the connected customer”

Sometimes technology advancements occur around the same time as a global crisis, accelerating the disruption and rate of change for both communicators and audiences. This is happening now, with the forced shift to 100% digital because of the pandemic (Callinan & Wong, 2020). Such a confluence of innovation and crisis also happened around 2007-2009, when three changes occurred at roughly the same time to bring about an important shift: the media industry was in flux, technology was advancing, and consumer behavior was evolving. A global economic recession starting in 2007 provided the economic backdrop to declining media revenues and a rise in people's adoption of smartphones for Internet access (Sumner, 2012; Smith, 2010). Audiences were increasingly using mobile devices with social apps instead of newspapers and websites to get their news and information. By 2012, about half of all smartphone users in Great Britain, the United States, Russia, Czech Republic and Spain used their device for accessing social networks (Pew, 2012). Media professionals, while dealing with an industry in decline and the organizational and operational changes that go along with those workplaces, had to learn new skills and adapt the way they produced content (Weber & Monge, 2014). This climate resulted in a perfect storm of disruption in how communicators crafted their work, and how audiences consumed it.

The research of Schultz and Schultz (1998) focused specifically on how new media technologies in the 1990s brought about a change in communication practices between companies and their audiences. They argued that a spectrum of digital innovations in that decade – low-cost data storage, personal devices with higher computing power, e-commerce, online communities and early social media – enabled corporate communications to transition away from traditional concepts and strong fixations on advertising and public relations toward a more conversational, less transactional relationship with audiences. The “traditional, brute-force, outward bound, marketer-driven communication will no longer succeed as it has in the past” (Schultz and Schultz, 1998m p. 17), and the flow of information between a company and its audience would be more back-and-forth and holistic. Schultz and Schultz also argued that computing innovations would give firms more and better data about audiences' attitudes and behavior, and foretold a shift in the ways corporate communicators would use audience insights to create dynamic messaging and

improve targeting. Also in the late 1990s, companies recognized that it takes a variety of communication disciplines – advertising, sales promotion, public relations, graphic design – to clearly and consistently portray a corporation’s brand identity. This multi-disciplined approach to communication was eventually adopted as an organizational standard and named “Integrated Marketing Communications,” or IMC (Caywood, Schultz and Wang, 1991, in Schultz and Schultz, 1998).

Portraying a brand’s identity effectively is what differentiates marketing communications from other creative professionals in media. The goal of marketing communications is to persuade audiences to construct an accurate, positive image of the firm’s brand in their minds, and even take a personal identity stake in that brand image (Keller, 2009). In this new digitally-mediated process of communicating brand identity and brand image, companies and audiences perform a mutual back-and-forth construction of what the brand really is and what it represents. Audiences are no longer passive targets that receive company claims. Ivanov (2012) enumerated how the new media marketplace impacted marketing communications teams’ creative work. Internet audiences not only interact with a company to get information and form their impressions of a brand; they consult each other through product reviews, social media, referral programs, and online influencers. Knowing that the company is not the only source of brand information, marketing communications teams have had to adapt their creative strategies to leverage these dispersed sources of information (Ivanov, 2012).

This trend toward greater audience involvement in communications is a phenomenon that author and marketing professor Philip Kotler calls a “power shift to the connected customer.” In their book, *Marketing 4.0: Moving from Traditional to Digital*, Kotler, Kartajaya and Setiawan examine how changes in the business landscape affect the nature of brand-customer communications (2017). Driven by the internet, this relationship became more horizontal, inclusive and social, meaning that that companies are no longer in complete control over communication with audiences. Increasingly, people use credible peer influences when forming their own impressions about a brand, and are wary of overt attempts at “marketing to” them. Instead, consumers look to friends, family, fans and followers (what Kotler, et al

call “the f-factor”) for information (Kotler, Kartajaya and Setiawan, 2017, p. 14). Kotler et al advise modern marketing communications teams to embrace data-driven insights on audience behaviors, and engage in conversations with these “connected customers” wherever they take place online (Kotler, et al, 2017). Creative teams, as a result, have to adapt brands’ online tone of voice and visual portrayals in order to effectively reach this new type of connected consumer.

“Because of Covid:” the shift to 100% digital

The disruption in 2020 and into 2021 caused by the Covid-19 pandemic forced adaptations across every aspect of life. Travel, social gatherings and in-person events were severely limited or nonexistent. Our reliance on broadband and mobile devices for work and school, shopping, entertainment and socializing from home got heavier, and continues to accelerate. Because of lockdowns, the radius of our physical lives became smaller, forcing our interactions to go almost entirely online.

Similarly, this seismic shift in daily life impacted creative teams’ work environments and output during the pandemic. In-person meetings have been replaced with video conferencing on platforms like Zoom and Microsoft Teams. Product demonstrations and training courses are being replaced with webinars and digital self-service platforms. Social apps are more important than ever as channels for brand storytelling and audience engagement. Because of this shift, corporate creative teams adjusted the media they created for digital platforms. At the same time, creative teams adapted to pandemic-driven changes in organizational structure and work environment (Steimer, 2020). In particular, creative workers in the marketing communications sector expect the changes in 2020-21 to become permanent, with more unknowns to follow post-pandemic (McKinsey, 2021).

Firms’ responses to disruption: organizing for digital success

Researchers consistently define disruption in terms of change – social, economic, political, technological – that threatens a firm’s competitive advantage. The theme of disruption also forms a foundation for researchers looking at how businesses respond to turmoil and adapt to changing

environments. This research seeks to answer how companies, specifically marketing communications organizations, responded to the disruption during the pandemic and how they adapted to survive the changed work environment.

Marketing communications, because it comprises writing, media production, design, advertising and publishing, it is inherently creative work (Department of Culture, Media and Sport, 2001). *Creative Success in Teams* (2021), Reiter-Palmon added a psychological dimension to the field of organizational strategy as it relates to creative work, especially in complex and disrupted businesses environments. As an organizational psychologist, Reiter-Palmon described a framework for leadership to consider when setting up creative teams for success: 1) managing the creative process, 2) managing creative team interactions, and 3) managing the organizational environment.

According to Reiter-Palmon, leadership can manage the creative process by facilitating and supporting idea generation, problem construction, information sharing, and assisting the team in effective idea evaluation and selection. In order to manage team interactions, she advised leaders to create a climate of psychological safety and trust, showing support for innovation, managing task and relational conflict, and facilitating communication and collaboration. In managing a creative team's organizational environment, leadership should be champions of innovation, create an organizational structure where creative workers can collaborate and communicate within teams and across departments, and to provide creative teams with the right training, resources and tools to meet business objectives.

Literature review leading to research questions

Reiter-Palmon's framework for managing creative teams is appropriate for this research because of its multiple emphases on creative teams' interpersonal interactions, their creative processes, and firms' organizational and managerial activities. It offers three ways of looking at how creative teams and companies – especially marketing communications workers and their employers – create, interact, and organize for success during disruption brought about by the Covid-19 pandemic. Rather than simply

looking at ways that workers changed their creative processes, or how companies might have restructured because of the pandemic, this approach lets us investigate how workers create, how creative teams interact, and how organizational structures all adapted to stay successful.

Looking at how creative teams and their organizational structures changed during the pandemic is a new endeavor. These adaptations only started in 2020. They are still underway and are not well understood, especially in the marketing communications field. Because this specific research topic is so new, this literature review will include both industry and trade publications and scholarly journals. It will also look at how creative teams and organizations in industries other than marketing communications work during the pandemic. Using Reiter-Palmon's approach, this literature review will outline previous inquiry into how companies managed creative teams, creative processes and organizational structure during disruptive times.

Changing technologies and new ways of working were disrupting people's jobs and rendering skill sets obsolete, but our current crisis is accelerating this change and likely to make these changes permanent. A 2020 study by Agrawal, Smet, Lacroix and Reich for McKinsey warns that businesses, to survive, should take steps to reskill workers now in order to be successful post-pandemic (Agrawal, Smet, Lacroix and Reich, 2020). Specifically, companies should adjust their workplace processes to reduce physical interaction and train workers to facilitate working remotely. Citing examples in the healthcare system in the UK, the Agrawal report notes a 93% increase in the use of telemedicine technologies for doctor's appointments. The pandemic has also accelerated people's use of apps for remote banking and order delivery. Shifts like these have forced workers that provide these services to learn the required skills to fulfill customer orders and communicate effectively. To mitigate this, the Agrawal report gives firms advice that closely ties with Reiter-Palmon's emphasis on creative process, team interaction, and organizational structure, beginning with reskilling workers. They advise that firms: expand their ability to operate in a fully digital environment; develop their workers' critical thinking and project management skills so the firm can respond creatively to needs for redesign and innovation; strengthen workers'

emotional and social skills so that teams can collaborate effectively; and help workers build adaptability and resilience skills to be able to work during the disruption.

Advice from marketing executives also tracks with Reiter-Palmon's approach on managing creative teams for success during times of turmoil. Ann Lewnes, CMO and Executive Vice President of Corporate Strategy & Development at Adobe, tells marketers to implement strategies that make creative teams and processes agile and responsive to disruptive times (Lewnes, 2021). Using Adobe as a case study, Lewnes outlined three changes that organizations can make to remain competitive amid Covid's disruptions: by hiring, reskilling and empowering workers; by dismantling the boundaries that separate departments and inhibit creativity and collaboration; and by adopting technology that supports a 100% digital work environment.

The creative teams' climate of creativity

Creative workers are knowledge workers, and are among an organization's most valuable assets. If creative workers come together to form a high-functioning team, they can bring about commercial success and competitive advantage for the business (Banks, Calvey, Owen and Russell, 2002). But in order to become a high-functioning team, individuals must have a working environment that is, as Reiter-Palmon describes, "a climate for creativity" (Reiter-Palmon, 2020, p. 36). Creative team leaders have an important role in building such a climate. They are responsible for fostering a work environment that is, essentially, collaborative and rewarding, and the foundation for this, according to Reiter-Palmon's model, is psychological safety.

In an environment where creative workers feel safe, they can freely share ideas and information. They can also communicate openly and honestly, giving and taking constructive criticism. It is no surprise that these aspects – open communication and sharing of ideas, constructive and honest feedback – are related positively to the marketing communications department's climate for creativity and

innovation (Hunter and Mumford, 2007). The interpersonal, people-management aspects of a creative team leader's role focus on fostering this climate for creativity.

According to Reiter-Palmon's model, the climate for creativity also depends on managing the team's interpersonal and task conflicts. The origins of interpersonal team conflicts are too numerous to list here, but common examples in a marketing communications department include unconstructive criticism of proposed ideas, disputes over assignments of exciting or boring projects, power struggles, negative expressions of emotions, and interpersonal dislike among peers. All of these can hinder social relationships, eventually eroding psychological safety and darkening the climate for creativity (Jehn, 1995). It is the responsibility of team leadership to mitigate these conflicts and restore the creative environment.

Leadership that connects people inside and outside the organization, promotes the team's work and acts as a shield to protect the team is essential to the climate of creativity. We know that connectedness is important to creative teams' success, because idea generation gets a boost from the influx of novel information (Mumford, Lonergan and Scott, 2002). But workers sometimes, because of time constraints or location, do not have the opportunity to find inspiration from connections outside their immediate departments. For this reason, team leadership needs to be networked and well-connected with people in other departments within the company and beyond. This connected leadership brings in new ideas, gathers different perspectives, and helps workers understand their place in the bigger corporate picture (Venkataramani, Richter and Clarke, 2014). In business, Lewnes (2021) calls this the process of "bringing down silos and bringing intelligence to all" (p. 65). Hult (2011) and Reiter-Palmon (2020) call this type of organization "boundary spanning" and imperative to the climate of creativity that surrounds successful teams.

Promoting and protecting workers is also essential to marketing creative teams' success. While creativity for its own sake can be gratifying and valuable, creative work in a corporate environment

should be directed primarily toward fulfilling the company's needs. Creative team leaders are responsible for making sure that the team's endeavors support the company's priorities (Venkataramani et al, 2014). It's also the job of creative leadership to make sure that the team's output is appreciated and understood by other departments and the company at large (Howell and Boies, 2004). It's also the job of leadership to foster a creative environment where teams can work without distraction. Morgeson, Derue and Karam (2009) note that while connectedness and networking are important, leaders also need to shield the team from negative outside influences so that they can stay on task.

Another important aspect of the climate for creativity is the actual work involved. When the work itself is challenging and the expectation for creativity is clearly communicated and rewarded, workers respond positively. But creative teams, and marketing communications teams in particular, are considered knowledge workers; the expectation for creativity is often just assumed. In Reiter-Palmon's model, creative expectations need to be more than an assumption. Team leaders are responsible for articulating creative expectations, rewarding creativity from their teams, and should serve as role models for creativity standards (Hunter and Mumford, 2007).

This leads to RQ1: How did the shift to a virtual work environment affect a creative team's climate for creativity?

Enabling a creative teams' creative process

Marketing communications work is inherently creative (Department of Culture, Media and Sport, 2001), creative-process oriented (Blakeman, 2014). Researcher and author Greg Hearn describes marketing communications work as a link in the "creative economy supply chain," (Hearn, 2020, p.4) and one that is especially affected by digital disruptions and changing market contexts. It can be considered among a company's intangible assets and it depends on human knowledge workers for its production – creative communications workers aren't being replaced by artificial intelligence just yet (Hearn, 2020). A marketing communications teams' mission is to accurately portray a company in the market in essentially

three ways: 1) employing the correct message about the company or product; 2) placing this message in the right media; 3) using the most advantageous communications approach (Blakeman, 2014). To do this effectively requires attention to aspects of the creative process. As Reiter-Palmon describes, leaders can support the creative process by encouraging team collaboration on idea generation, problem solving, idea selection and evaluation, and information sharing.

A common method for creative ideation and problem solving is brainstorming. In its original conception, brainstorming involved people generating ideas as a group with the specific instruction that groups conduct the ideation session without criticizing or evaluating the ideas presented there (Osborn, 1953; in Reiter-Palmon, 2020). In creative agencies like marketing communications, the ideation part of brainstorming is often thought of as a freewheeling, no-rules jam session where breakthroughs just happen, and problems get solved. These *eureka!* moments are a myth in most organizations, and communications research about creativity back this up. Productive ideation sessions need systematic constraints in order to generate ideas that are both novel and appropriate to the task at hand (Titus, 2000; Amabile, 1983). In the Reiter-Palmon model, it is leadership's responsibility to add specific instructions to creative ideation and problem-solving endeavors, so that the team stays on task and comes up with actionable concepts and relevant solutions.

Another important aspect of the creative process is idea selection and evaluation. In a marketing communications group, the task at hand often involves visual design, copywriting, photography, and brand strategy – the elements that accumulate into a marketing campaign. As such, it is a multidisciplinary team effort, where peers and colleagues from across departments have a stake in selecting and evaluating a creative idea's marketing worthiness. In this situation, leaders have a unique dual role (Reiter-Palmon, 2020). They can serve as gatekeepers, deciding all by themselves which ideas to move ahead to production and implementation. Conversely, leaders boost creativity by breaking down siloed business information and engaging the team in the decision to go forward with a creative project (Barker, 2019; Zhang and Bartol, 2010).

The creative process is also enabled by leaders who are champions of innovation, advocating in favor of new ideas and building corporate consensus to take risks and to try new things. To do this effectively, leaders need not only to be well-connected, but to have compelling communication, persuasion and negotiating skills (Howell and Boies, 2004).

This leads to RQ2: How did the shift to a virtual work environment affect a creative team's creative process?

Methods

This research uses Reiter-Palmon's framework for managing creative teams to investigate how the Covid-19 pandemic affected the climate for creativity and the creative process in the workplace. From the literature review above, we see some specific themes emerge under the Reiter-Palmon's broader categories of "climate of creativity" and "creative process." This Methods section will elaborate briefly on elements within those themes and describe how this research will attempt to answer RQs through in-depth interviews. It will go on to describe the study's setting and participants, interview logistics, and how data will be analyzed and presented.

Research Question 1 (*How did the shift to a virtual work environment affect a creative team's climate for creativity?*) will explore workplace culture elements such as psychological safety, the team's level of openness in communication, how they handle situations of ideation and critique, and the level of connectedness to people inside and outside the organization.

Research Question 2 (*How did the shift to a virtual work environment affect a creative team's creative process?*) will explore workplace activities that the team does either individually or as a group in order to create. This including brainstorming, problem solving, information sharing and decision making activities.

Method of inquiry: In-depth interviews

This study will attempt a deep understanding of how creative teams were affected by the forced shift to 100% digital engagement during the Covid-19 pandemic by asking workers how they understood and dealt with the disruption. The specific intent is to discover, through guided conversation, how the creative climate at their workplace might have changed, and how they, and individuals and as a team, may have had to adapt their creative process. Using qualitative methods, specifically in-depth semi-structured interviews with creative people working in the marketing communications industry, this study will look into how practitioners adjusted to a completely digital creative environment.

The shift to a completely digital environment represents a profound change in the lives of creative workers, and one that is bound to evoke deep feelings and judgements. The best way to understand how people in this industry are coping with this shift is through in-depth, unstructured interviews. Brennan (2017, p. 29) describes in-depth interviewing as an appropriate way for researchers to gather information on people's emotions and experiences, and to discover common themes and recurring patterns as articulated by participants. This "conversation with a purpose" (Berg and Lune, 2004, cited in Valos, Habibi, Casidy, Driesener, Maplestone, 2015) is precisely the goal of this study: to get people to open up and describe, in their own words, how their creative climate may have changed during the pandemic's disruption, and how they may have adapted their creative process in response.

The benefits of in-depth interviews as a research method can be found in a number of workplace studies, particularly in research into the ways new technologies affect marketing professionals' creative output. Research by Valos et al (2015) used in-depth interviews to identify common themes in the ways service marketing organizations incorporated new social media in their communication strategies. In a study of how new media changed the creative output of art directors and copywriters, Barker (2019) credited a semi-structured interview format for keeping discussions conceptually on-topic and pertinent while allowing for conversational adjustments with participants with diverse job backgrounds and circumstances.

In-depth interviews have also been used by researchers to get marketing communications workers to describe how they adapt to organizational changes at their firms. In their study on advertising professionals, Blakeman, Haley and Taylor (2020) used in-depth interviews to identify ongoing themes, nuances and common conflicts in the working relationship between advertising account managers and creative directors. By doing in-depth interviews with communications consultants, Platen studied how communications consultants with varying backgrounds had to construct their professional identities, promote themselves as experts to clients and re-skill in a new digital workplace (Platen, 2016).

The appropriateness of unstructured interviews as a research method is grounded in its flexibility. In-depth interviews allow people to freely describe their circumstances and let the conversation flow, exploring topics that cannot be known beforehand. Interviews will be guided by, but not limited to, a list of questions (see Appendix A, Interview Guide). As interviews progress and new conversation topics emerge, the researcher will be able to initiate new questions on the fly.

The key to answering the two research questions in this study (*How did the shift to a fully virtual work environment affect a creative team's climate for creativity?* and *How did the shift to a virtual work environment affect a creative team's creative process?*) lies in establishing rapport with a diverse set of interview subjects and being able, as a researcher, to tailor a line of questioning that suits individuals and gets them to describe their circumstances at work in an open and honest way. Open-ended, one-on-one unstructured interviews will accomplish this best.

Study setting and participants

This researcher believes that conversations are already taking place among creative teams about Covid-19's disruptions and challenges to creative process and work culture. This professional project attempts to formalize and operationalize those questions, so that creative teams might learn specifically how to maintain a climate of creativity and productive creative process when other disruptions occur. The setting for this study will be the virtual work environments of people who do creative work. Interview

subjects will be creative workers based in the United States and European Union countries, all currently working from home offices during the Covid-19 pandemic. The pool of interview subjects will be a mix of the researcher's current or former colleagues, as well as people not known to the researcher yet but recommended for this study by the School of Journalism. Interviews with individuals known to the researcher will be set up directly via email or SMS message. For interviews with individuals not yet known to the researcher, contact will be made via an introduction through a shared contact at the School of Journalism. The reason for including a mix of people known and not known to the researcher is to get perspectives on how Covid-19 workplace changes affected creative teams in a variety of industries and workplaces.

Participants will not be identified by name in order to ensure anonymity, maintain rapport and make sure that subjects feel comfortable enough to answer questions freely. Here is a brief overview of the potential interview subjects' roles and responsibilities:

9. Integrated marketing manager develops communications campaigns that combine advertising, public relations, sales promotion, digital and social marketing based on company business goals.
10. Digital marketing director manages copywriters, web developers, campaign strategists and outside agencies to execute the company's marketing communications campaigns.
11. Creative services director manages production of the company's print, digital and video marketing collateral.
12. Visual designer creates imagery for the company's print, digital and video marketing collateral.
13. Communications operations manager analyzes patterns in audience data and builds targeted audience lists from a database.
14. Marketing communications agency owner conceives and implements strategic communications plans for corporate clients.
15. Media relations director oversees the company's public and investor relations plans and represents the company to industry press.
16. Other creative team leaders from various firms, as recommended by School of Journalism professors.

This group of interview subjects was selected because they represent a typical roles of a creative team, with varied levels of expertise and experience. This group includes a mix of people in management and production (non-management) positions, and each member is directly involved in day-to-day digital operations and creative projects in some way. Of the known candidates listed above, four have people reporting directly to them and four do not. (Having direct reports or not in no way implies a difference in level of competence or experience.) Interview subjects 1-4 are the researcher's current colleagues; subjects 5-8 are people who do not work with the researcher. By including interview subjects from different disciplines, people with whom the researcher has a working relationship, and people with whom the researcher is not acquainted, this study could be replicated in different workplace settings, with creative teams from various industries and sectors.

Study Logistics

To begin the study, interview candidates will be contacted via email, SMS or online chat with a brief description of this research, its goals, the types of questions asked, and the amount of time commitment. If people agree to the terms and consent to be interviewed, they will be provided with this research proposal (including the list of interview questions in Appendix A) and informed that new questions on the topics of climate for creativity and creative process might arise during the interview. This researcher will ask that everyone's interview responses be their own feelings and judgements, and that no collaboration among members take place in advance in order to present the same story during interviews. Unless otherwise agreed, interviews will take place during the interviewees' local business hours, Monday through Friday, using the Microsoft Teams video meeting platform (or audio only if connections are too slow). Interviews are expected to last about an hour and will be recorded in Microsoft Teams and transcribed into text using the platform's transcription tools. A file of the recording will be provided to the interviewee.

Data analysis and presentation

This study will analyze the content of interview responses, looking for common themes and patterns across the set of interviews, using qualitative textual analysis techniques. This type of analysis involves looking through a text (in this case, transcripts of interviews) for patterns and common themes across the individuals' answers.

To begin, the researcher will listen and read through interview transcripts, noting: where each individual spoke generally about their workplace culture and creative work; and where each individual spoke specifically about the elements outlined in the Reiter-Palmon "climate for creativity" and "creative process" framework. Interview responses will be encoded according to how they speak to and match up with the topics of the two research categories on climate for creativity and creative process.

After encoding individual interviews by how they speak to and match up with research questions, the study will look into how the interview answers relate to each other. (Again, this researcher will assume that everyone's answer is their own.) This interview data will be examined as a whole for recurring ideas, common answers, and other patterns and similarities that emerge from the body of interviews.

Essentially, the analysis of the interview recordings will take place in two steps:

3. Examine individual interviews for how they speak about the climate for creativity and the creative process, noting specific ideas, expressions, words and phrases used;
4. Examine the body of interviews as a thematic whole, looking for elements and themes that individual answers about the climate for creativity and the creative process might have common with other interview answers. This phase will rely more on the researcher's interpretation of the intention and spirit of individual answers, and less on matchups of exact words.

This study could uncover more enabling elements of the climate for creativity and the creative process that Reiter-Palmon's framework did not foresee, and these could become an area for future study. Knowing more about how to enable creative teams at work will be beneficial across industries.

Study Limitations

This study has potential limitations and obstacles. Being a qualitative study, the results represent the answers and insights given by the interview subjects only. These findings will not be not generalizable. Potential obstacles to this study include time zone differences and difficulties with internet connections. Several potential interview subjects live and work in different time zones, and finding an agreeable time for an hour-long interview could be difficult. Also, interview subjects are working from home while other family members are also conducting business or doing virtual schoolwork. Bandwidth on home internet connections might be affected during our interviews. In addition, as a creative professional for more than 15 years, this researcher comes into the interview process with existing ideas and biases based on professional experience. To mitigate biases, every effort will be made to stay on topic during interviews and while examining transcripts. This study will be limited to investigating the above research questions about how going digital affected creative teams' creative process and workplace climate for creativity. This study will not investigate other Covid-19 related disruptions that interviewees might have experienced, such as balancing work and home life, homeschooling or personal finances or health.

Research Component and Significance

The Covid-19 pandemic rocked everyone's world. For creative teams, it brought about significant disruption to the workplace creative culture, and to creative processes used to generate new ideas and fulfill day-to-day responsibilities.

Creative teams like corporate communications departments craft and convey the brand identity of the companies we work for, with the goal of creating a positive brand image and impression in our customers' minds. Often this is done at live events like conferences, tradeshow and in-person sales meetings, where materials like printed brochures, tradeshow booths and display advertising convey the corporate identity. Communications departments create the material for these events. When Covid-19 hit Europe and the Americas in 2020, it significantly changed the way companies could engage with

customers. Because of lockdowns and bans on all but essential travel, interactions with customers now had to take place 100% digitally. This disruption rippled inward at corporations and specifically to creative departments, where teams had to shift our departments' organization and creative output to do business in a world that was all of a sudden completely digital.

In this new world, creative teams in communications departments had to adapt to working remotely and meeting virtually. Many members, especially digital natives, adapted well to the disruption; working environments had already shifted online (at least partially) and some were already creating work specifically for digital spaces like Twitter, YouTube, emails and blogs. But how did people who unaccustomed to working digitally react to this new creative climate? How did workers stay creative remotely? For people whose creative work was primarily oriented toward physical spaces like in-person conferences and print advertising, what was their reaction to going completely digital?

Change isn't easy, especially when it involves threats to people's health and job security. This study would provide insights from working professionals who are living through and currently adapting to Covid-19's ongoing workplace challenges. This research will interview members of creative teams, asking them to explain their thoughts, feelings and judgements about having to pivot their creative process toward digital media, and how the creative process may have been impacted because of the pandemic. Creative team members will be asked to share their firsthand experiences and give examples of adaptations that worked well, what did not, and what obstacles they encountered. Insights into how companies handled change during the pandemic would help creative teams adapt and make smoother transitions after future disruptions.

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Appendix A

Interview Guide

General questions:

With the shift to 100% digital, how has this affected your overall job and your daily responsibilities?

What's your perspective on disruptions in our industry since you first started your career?

How is your job different in 2020 from what you did in 2019?

How do you think creative teams will work post-Covid, when the world is "opened up" again?

RQ1 Questions: Addressing the creative team's climate for creativity

How has the shift to digital affected your relationship with your creative teammates?

What's communication like with colleagues outside your department?

If communication has gotten more or less open during the pandemic, in what ways has it changed?

What is your team culture like now that the workplace is 100% digital?

How does your team stay up to date on industry trends?

In this new environment, how are creative decisions made among the team?

What's the vibe like in meetings where you have to present new ideas and listen to other people's pitches?

RQ2 Questions: Addressing the creative team's creative process

What's your creative workflow been like during the 2020 pandemic?

What's changed in your workflow now that we've gone digital?

What new creative strategies has your team had to come up with because of the 2020 pandemic?

What new creative challenges have you encountered?

How do you share new ideas with each other?

How does your team decide to try something new?

What's the effect of being completely digital on the ways you brainstorm with your team and by yourself?

Appendix B

Professional Skills Component

I will fulfill the professional skills component of this project through my work as a digital marketing campaign manager for Elekta, a global medical device manufacturer. My daily responsibilities are to plan digital content campaigns from the idea stage through to their execution and implementation. My department, Digital Marketing Communications, serves all five Elekta business lines as the internal marketing and creative services agency for all of Elekta's five business lines.

As digital marketing campaign manager, I publish content that promotes Elekta on the company's public digital properties (the company website, video channels and social platforms) and directly to customers via email and messaging apps. Campaign content production is a team effort that includes copywriters, graphic designers, event planners, market researchers, and public relations professionals. My daily responsibilities are to make sure that Elekta's email marketing, social media posts and news about events are published on time and in compliance with corporate editorial standards. My weekly responsibilities include managing campaign deliverables, discussing marketing campaign goals and execution strategies with product managers, and writing digital campaigns. At the conclusion of digital campaigns, usually monthly, I give feedback and ideas for improvement to Elekta product marketers.

My typical digital campaign management workload is approximately eight short-term campaigns (3-4 weeks in duration) per month, and two long-term campaigns (2-6 months in duration) per month. Short-term digital campaigns are usually time-bound, with the intention of promoting interest and participation in Elekta virtual events – webinars, virtual conferences and symposia. Long-term campaigns are not time-bound, and are intended to promote the Elekta brand, products, partnerships with hospitals and researchers, and scientific developments in the field of cancer treatment.

In this role I work 35-50 hours per week, Monday through Friday. I report to a director of marketing communications.

Appendix D

Article for trade magazine publication

The future of digital creativity: Insights and recommendations for creative team leadership

Introduction

In the summer of 2021, the world was still in the full swing of a global shutdown that forced significant changes to our working lives. We were a year into the unexpected new experience of working, going to school, meeting friends, doing practically everything virtually. That's when inspiration hit for a study on creativity at work. In the fall of 2021, I asked eight creative professionals how they're adapting to this new context, and how the shift to working remotely impacted our creativity – are we struggling, coping, or thriving? What do creative team leaders need to consider as virtual workplaces become the expected, even desired, norm?

Insights from this study tell us that there are ways to foster a creative climate and enable the creative process on virtual teams. While this study focused on the thoughts and experiences of leaders in traditional creative sectors – advertising, marketing communications and graphic design – the creative process happens across all enterprises. All industries and sectors have to create and problem solve. Leadership would do well to take these insights under advisement as they seek to optimize digital work.

Here are five recommendations for leadership based on themes that emerged during these interviews.

1. Treat technology as essential

The forced shift to remote working in 2020 brought the importance of technology into a sharp new focus. As workers dispersed into virtual environments, digital divides were exposed; we immediately noticed the limitations of dated technology in trying to communicate, collaborate and create. As teams

continue to migrate to digital work in 2022 and as workplaces introduce hybrid models, leadership must consider that technology is critical to creativity. The right technology will enable creative work and the wrong technology will hinder it.

For creative teams, technology defines the work experience whether it's in person or 100% virtual. The trend toward dispersion will likely become permanent and our tech will be the workplace itself. Effective technology that lets us communicate, collaborate and create without disruption will be a determining factor in virtual workplace success.

Corporate leadership needs to treat tech as essential. The findings in this study show that creative workers crave responsibility and seamless engagement with teams. All eight of the team leaders interviewed here spoke about how technology impacts their work; ranging from positive, neutral, to negative. When viewed positively, creative leaders discussed how tools like digital whiteboards, project trackers and chat apps that enable both synchronous and asynchronous collaboration. When viewed neutrally, technology “just works,” and feels unobtrusive. When viewed negatively, our experts spoke with frustration when tools are inadequate in capturing working teams’ creative process, or when they’re simply uninspiring to the creative climate.

A team of UX developers for an IT service agency, not surprisingly, had positive things to say about the collaborative tools and social apps they use for creative problem-solving. “We use Teams like crazy, we're using our cell phones to connect with each other on Instagram. Or, you know, all kinds of other things as a means of connection and peer reviews. And, ‘Hey I've got this problem. Does anyone have a thing that they've done or how have you solved this?’ And so it's a lot of online activity, and sometimes a phone call, and sometimes a video chat, and every time it doesn't hinder,” said Melissa T, director of user experience for an IT services agency.

“In fact, the times that I did have to go into the office, that feels disruptive.”

Others interviewed simply demanded that tech tools just work, without obstructing teams' flow. Kat G, a director of creative services whose team includes graphic designers, said the group's creative process is mostly unchanged because of the shift to remote work. The same kind of creative ideation that used to take place in a real office now happens on Microsoft Teams: "We throw them up on a virtual wall and ask, 'So how about this?' The designer will quickly sketch something and then share it with us on the virtual window. Then we talk about it: 'Well, wait, maybe we could do this. Maybe we could do that.' But that creative input has pretty much stayed the same."

Negative views about technology centered around how the creative process is dampened when tools aren't fit for purpose, when they're uninspiring or even a hinderance to creative work. Those who thought tech had a negative impact on creativity believed that tools were inadequate for replicating the in-person experience.

"I think that when I get creative I get excited. I don't think that can come across as easily when you're on a remote sort of setup. Fifty times a day I would get up and lean over the UX designer's shoulder and have a look at something that they had come up with, and we would just go, 'Oh yeah, let's just tweak that a tiny bit. Let's just change it. Oh yeah, we could do that.' And then you know someone else might come over and start getting involved. You lose that" in a virtual setting, said Ross B, a creative agency owner.

"For me personally, I've really struggled with it from a creative point of view. I have naturally become less creative. It impacts my innovation, impacts my personality being home all the time. I think also creative people work better together quite a lot of the time."

2. Implement ways of working that foster creativity and adaptability

The pandemic taught us that adaptability is imperative for an entity's survival, whether that entity is an organism or an organization. A 2021 survey by Adobe Corporation of people in creative industries showed that in the face of significant changes, digital workers showed themselves to be adaptable and

resilient. Their study reported that employee confidence rates rose in areas of time management, communication, collaborating across geographies, and dealing with work-related conflicts during the transition to remote work.

This resilience is echoed by the interviews conducted for this study. Almost everyone discussed how they found new ways working, from hybrid workplaces to the Swedish concept of fika, and relied on traditional methods, such as regularly-held structured meetings and moderated brainstorming sessions, to maintain the creative climate and keep their teams' creative process going.

“During COVID, we were looking at digital deployment and looking at costs of printing and the fact that 90% of your print documents end up in the trash can,” said Kat G. She gave her team a creative challenge to lower printing costs by turning printed brochures into interactive digital document. “I said, ‘See what you can find this week. Let's all talk about this in next Wednesday's meeting and see what we might come up with.’ Then we would explore that, get a license if we needed it and play with it in the sandbox with that idea until we nailed something that we thought was workable.”

Creative leaders also mentioned the importance of brainstorming sessions, a traditional ideation activity where teams follow a structured agenda and an impartial moderator rouses everyone to participate while keeping the group on topic. In these sessions, creatives are usually gathered in a room together with a clear goal, purpose and time limit for ideation and problem-solving. “I think it needs to be very structured,” said Naomi W, vice president of a creative agency. “Have a very structured environment where you have different people talking,” so that the more outspoken personalities don't dominate the discussion.

Several leaders mentioned that they borrow the Agile philosophy of software development and apply its techniques to their ways of working. Creative managers talked about scrum teams (ad hoc groups of specialists chosen for a particular project based on their expertise and interests) and standups

(15- or 20-minute meetings held at the beginning of every work day to discuss the day's tasks where they need help), and how these formal techniques helped their teams' creativity and efficiency.

While traditional ways of working continued on in the virtual workplace, some of the leaders interviewed for this study spoke about how this new context inspired them to find novel ways of working that emphasize social connections and informality across levels of the corporation to foster a creative climate on their teams.

Melissa T describes communication among her teams as way to break down the old barriers of corporate hierarchy. "Our culture from my company perspective, one of our core values is to have courageous conversations," she said. In Melissa's workplace, a courageous conversation is where you're free to share opinions and judgements, give negative feedback, and be protected from blowback or retaliation if the conversation is critical of upper management. This honest style, Melissa said, is crucial to her teams' creative success.

Erin S, a communications director whose team includes writers, designers and planners, said that her teams adopted the Swedish tradition of fika, a relaxed way of working where daily breaks are valued as a way to refresh and recharge. To be creative, Erin S said, "people to have that ability to walk away and get the juices flowing. From a creative process perspective, I would like to make sure people feel that they've got the freedom to do that and take care of that that part of their job."

On the solitary aspect of working remotely, Ross B said, "Creativity isn't about sitting at your desk and coming and coming up with an idea. A lot of the time it's around a coffee machine when you're bouncing ideas off of each other and things like that." The shift to an all-virtual workplace represented a huge loss for him. If he were a job-seeker now, he said, "I would only apply for a job if there was at least a hybrid model of working."

3. Enable autonomy and alignment

It seems as the world opens up again, workers are taking strong positions on their environment. They expect companies to trust their productivity wherever and however they work. According to a study from the Adobe Corporation about digital work, employees who were forced to work from home in 2020-21 have now come to expect that flexibility and autonomy. People have always craved gratifying work, but the forced shift to digital intensified this desire to a critical mass. Remote teams want freedom to decide when and where to work, and autonomy to decide how they apply their skills to company goals. So how should leadership react?

First, by realizing that the shift to digital work is turning out to be durable. “Remote work,” once a novelty or a perk, is now just “work.” Next, creative leadership must connect workers’ desire for autonomy with strategies that support the company goals. In many workplaces, this meant reorganizing away from traditional hierarchical organizations toward egalitarian models: instead of telling people what to do, leadership gives context and purpose, and teams make good decisions on the best way to deliver.

Naomi W uses a motto to motivate and keep teams stoked with gratifying work. “I have four things that I live by, whether it's myself, whether it's my team. Teamwork, hard work, recognition and success,” she says. “They're the four things that are really important to me.” Measuring success with plainly-articulated, measurable goals is important to that feeling of accomplishment: “Gratifying is knowing that what you're doing, the campaigns you're putting out there, are making a difference.”

For creative people on remote teams, gratification comes from, as two team leaders put it, bringing in cool projects and not micromanaging. For Tobias M, director of a web design and development team, leading creatives means focusing on the applications they build and trusting individuals to manage their own time and decide how best to bring a project to fruition. “I only check with check in with them once a day, perhaps two times a day when we have specifically targeted meeting in the afternoon about something. But other than that I don't know what they're doing.”

Desiree O is a communications director whose team includes strategists and planners. For her team, gratifying work sometimes involves risk: “It's good when there's cool factor. Sometimes it can be very stressful, but then again, I think we all kind of like that. We have that special bone in our body where we're like, ‘Hey, this is pretty, this is cool. Let's go for it.’”

But creative work is still work, after all. How can team leaders deal with that? Load-balancing. Everyone does their fair share of uninspiring projects, and when compelling projects come around, those are shared fairly, too. “You have to balance the mundane with the challenging,” advises Kat G. “You just try to balance the load so that they're having some projects that are a little bit more on the fun side and a little bit of a departure from the norm.”

Remote workers also face additional distractions in a virtual work from home environment. How can leaders shield teams from outside scrutiny and keep their creative efforts focused on supporting company goals?

“I'll bring them into the fold,” Naomi W said. Inviting people from other departments into the conversation, especially ones who are critical of your teams' work, is important for building rapport and understanding between teams. “There's always someone that thinks they can do it better. If I heard the head of engineering or one of the engineering guys saying, ‘I think you should work differently,’ I would welcome them into some meetings and bring them into some kind of process heavy meetings where we're talking about ways of working and how we develop a communications campaign. We may learn something from them as well.”

Even with such a commitment to good rapport at work, collaborative teams are often confronted with stakeholders who are not experts. As workers become empowered to make decisions and solve problems autonomously, they need support in the form of documented processes, standards and guidelines when their creative decisions come under scrutiny. It's leadership's imperative to make sure

that processes and guidelines are agreed-upon and widely published among the organization, to make sure that workers feel promoted and protected from critique and distraction.

As the traditional work environment evolved during COVID, Tobias M noticed that coworkers' regard for official process declined somewhat. It seemed that, in the new workplace, people felt more free to ask his team for quick favors in the form of undocumented work or to skirt the rules around work prioritization. "Other people start to get to my team members directly more and more, and want to get stuff done without following the official request process, you know?" He described how he cited official company policies and processes to manage and prioritize his teams' workload. "These little protection things that we have to do, that you wish you didn't have to, but we all should."

For leadership, protecting the team and keeping them focused in the new environment means adhering more closely to the company standards. As creative teams' workflows accelerated during COVID and continue to evolve, workers need protection from unrealistic demands from stakeholders. In this creative climate, design director Kat G relied on documented brand standards for guidance and backup to counter unreasonable project requests. "We have our brand guidelines, we have design best practices" to shield the design team from non-designer critiques.

4. Empower and nurture individual expertise

The shift to remote work is challenging creative teams in new and unusual ways. The digital workplace is forcing collaborations and bringing together people from different backgrounds, skills, even locations. We're working on projects from ideation to completion, using new technology, often with colleagues we've never even met in person. At the same time, changing business demands is increasing the pressure on creative teams to learn new skills and tools faster than ever.

In this environment, creative teams with varying levels of experience and seniority can sometimes feel somewhat ad hoc and improvised, In this dynamic and dispersed environment, how can creative team leaders get the best out of each individual and do work that everyone's proud of?

For the creatives interviewed in this study, that meant putting people with the right skills and the right people on the task, and trusting their abilities to see things through. They realized that their position in leadership doesn't equate to expertise, and attributed their success to empowering the right person for the task regardless of seniority or job title.

Naomi W had this advice on empowering individuals to get the best team results: "It's knowing who's got the best voice in that situation. You want to use the skill set that you've got and give them the autonomy to make that decision."

For Tobias M, empowering the team's expertise originates with hiring the right people. It comes with a dose of trust and humility: "Just let them do the stuff that they are convinced of right from the beginning because I'm now at the stage that I don't know everything anymore. I have three experts now around me and I'm always astonished by how problems got solved in the end just by giving them the freedom that comes back to the recruitment process. Just let them do."

But sometimes a project demands expertise that doesn't exist yet on the team. As work shifted to the virtual space, so did the ways that businesses communicate with customers. In response, creative workers have had to reskill and upskill to learn how to live and thrive in this new business environment.

Erin S described how her communications team adapted and grew into new areas of expertise because of the shift to digital in her industry: "Because the stakes have changed, the game is changed a little and they rise to occasion. With my event coordinator, I joked with her like, 'You're like a comms manager now, right? You have almost no choice but to grow into that.' And she did it willingly. Our designer stretched a bit and got into some projects that he really likes but doesn't often have the chance to do."

When the business world shifted to digital, Kat G's team of graphic designers found it all very exciting. Designers are a naturally forward-looking and curious bunch already, and the shift to digital meant that they got to prioritize and accelerate what they were already interested in learning: "Actually,

the move to virtual with COVID has actually helped that because we were anyway seeing the world move to more digital communications. And so we had already started trying to get some animation video chops, for example. Graphic designers are not typically trained in those mediums, so it's been a good opportunity.”

5. Build trust and conquer fear

Trust is a key component of productive creative teams. It's the basis for collegial bonds among teams while promoting a creative climate and enabling the creative process. At the foundation of trust is a place of psychological safety where workers feel comfortable to speak their minds, be themselves, offer new ideas, make mistakes and acknowledge the potential for failure. All the while, the new digital workplace is still dynamic and fraught with uncertainty.

In the face of this, how can leadership build trust and conquer fear? The experts interviewed for this study advise leaders to communicate openly, manage projects transparently, and be approachable and vulnerable themselves. Leadership should also remember the humanity of the workforce and invest time and energy into getting to know workers as people with lives outside of work. With this kind of support, workers can deliver high quality work in an environment that's constantly changing.

“Check-ins are really important thing to me that I do in my team as well,” said Naomi W in describing how her team got to know and trust one another. “That's what pilots do. They say, ‘Let's check in. We're in the cockpit so anything that's bothering you, anything that's worrying, you bring it to the table.’”

“It's about having that real openness, that ability to show vulnerability. Once you've got that trust and that safe environment within your close team, then you're able to then go, ‘OK, that is a place where I can bring my problems or bring my challenges to,’ and we'll work together as a team.”

Remote work can feel isolating or lonely. Teams need to feel safe enough to build interpersonal bonds. A show vulnerability from leadership can conquer fear and build a climate for creative new ideas. This kind of trust enables Tobias M's team to solve problems and make the web applications they develop even better.

During team meetings, he says, "this is actually the time to bond a bit every day. It's cool. And this is also when we bounce back and forth ideas. Everybody has the feeling that you can come up with stupid ideas and nobody will laugh at you. And then we can we just try out things and then improve stuff."

Part of conquering fear is recognizing the risks and trying anyway. Being forced to try new things and admitting uncertainty became the norm in 2020. Under these circumstances creative teams have no choice but to accept failure as an option. Erin S and her creative team were determined to learn from whatever missteps they may make. "Certainly the theme of this past year is, 'Hey, let's try it, right?' We might fail, but we've got to try. I think that definitely permeated what we did and helped us to take a couple risks last year."

Conversely, teams that lack interpersonal trust and are fearful of one another are less creative in their problem-solving and less cohesive as a functional unit. Marketing operations manager Laura J notes that lack of trust in leadership what led up to the so-called "Great Resignation" during 2020-21, where people in large numbers got burned out at work and quit their jobs or left their fields entirely. "People who are not succeeding as well as they probably should right now did not foster and did not put the time into forming relationships," she said. "And I think we're seeing the consequences of that. People leaving. And you know, they had maybe not the same team atmosphere that they were sold. Because what virtual teams are craving is a manager that cares."