

Why creative friction can lead to better outcomes

In interviews with creative professionals, Adobe found that people's sense of ownership over AI-assisted work tracks closely with the effort and choices they put into it

Key Takeaways

- Creative industries are optimizing for frictionless creation, but removing friction from creative work can lead to lower quality outcomes.
- Removing the challenge can remove a person from “flow,” the state of concentration and inspiration that often produces their best work.
- Creatives are finding career success by treating their AI prompting techniques as a proprietary craft.

One of the central promises of generative AI is less friction and more speed.

Less friction is usually preferable in administrative work, such as when organizing files or formatting deliverables. Instead, we wanted to explore its role in *creative* work, where brainstorming, wrestling, and revising are often the keys to a truly original product.

We asked a group of creative professionals how reducing friction changes the quality of creative output, and how AI affects their sense of creative pride in their work.

Their answers revealed that friction is essential in many ways. As AI makes creation easier and faster, knowing which friction to remove and which to preserve will become an increasingly valuable creative skill.

Effort is often central to ownership

Ownership is the metric most threatened by AI. It determines whether a creative professional claims their work as their creative output. Psychologists who study why people feel a sense of ownership over their work point to three ingredients: influence (did my choices shape this?), depth (do I understand this problem?), and investment (did I put my time, ideas, and emotions into it?). Creative professionals often translate that into their own terms: my idea, my eye, my choices.

Three creative professionals described ownership and how their unique talent and effort make their work stand out.



"What takes talent is actually coming up with a good idea and manipulating it to an educated result as opposed to just taking whatever AI gives you."

—Graphic artist

"Would I get [in front of clients] if I just typed a sentence in? Would I be able to communicate all the thought that went into it?...You're not going to have a random person just type in a short prompt and arrive at that. It's more curated. It's more detailed. That's where ownership lies."

—Creative director

"There are choices in how you deliver the medium that will affect the end result. There's artistic license in that as well."

—Creative director

There's a scientific name for the instinct beneath this: the effort heuristic. People often place more value on work when they believe more effort went into its creation. It helps explain why something won often doesn't match the pride of something earned. According to our interviews, AI can exist in an odd spot: it can help remove exactly the thing people use to measure whether work belongs to them and the amount of pride they feel in the final product.

AI as an unstick tool

We often don't know the value of friction until we've overcome it, which makes defining it in a creative process hard to pinpoint. Several creatives said that they welcomed help getting a faster start and less time staring at a blank page. There are tools built around this idea, including ones that help a writer push through a stalled chapter, or help a musician expand a melody. But getting unstuck usually still requires generating something first. An illustrator still needs a sketch before a system can build out a palette. A writer still needs to write a few pages before an AI model can try to mimic their voice.

In that sense, the prompt bar has emerged as a new form of the blank page. Like sitting down with a pen and a paintbrush, AI still asks something of its user.

While AI can shorten the distance to a finished piece, for many creatives, that distance is often where the work becomes uniquely theirs.

“

"When I [use AI to] create like posters, I don't feel like I did that. Whenever I look at it, I'm like, 'oh I cheated kinda.' It looks good, but it doesn't feel like I spent the time and you know that flow and energy. It's not mine."

—Graphic designer

"I want to work toward my idea, not be constrained by the tool I'm using."

—Graphic designer

A similar case is made in guidelines published by the Lab for AI, Ethics, and Creative Labor at The Parsons School of Design. Their authors write that "struggle, iteration, and ambiguity are an important part of the creative process," and caution that AI should assist without eliminating the moments that lead to meaningful discovery. Those moments, they note, often arrive through detours, wrong turns, and temporary confusion, and smoothing them away too much can mean skipping the point where new insight emerges.

Prompting is becoming a new creative asset

We also observed that as AI use spreads, something else is happening quietly: creatives are starting to treat the effort behind their prompting technique—such as how they build a palette or how they layer a request—like a proprietary craft. They see their process and prompting context as a form of intellectual asset they want to protect.

“

"I think there's still a fingerprint of the artist in it because you're designing the prompt, you're just designing with words instead of the images."

—Creative director

"It's still not my visuals. I didn't create the set of elements that it's pulling from, I'm just directing it to pull kind of what I'm looking for, but it still wasn't generated by me specifically, just the words that prompted it were."

—Creative director

The second quote captures an interesting tension. Even creatives who see prompting as a form of personal curation aren't fully convinced it can stand in for traditional authorship of what a person did entirely on their own. Nonetheless, professionals in our interviews generally spoke of guarding their process and treating their workflow as a professional asset that separates them from others who has access to the same tool.

Getting to a state of flow with (and despite) AI

The state of flow, first defined by the psychologist Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi, is what happens when someone becomes so absorbed in an activity that self-consciousness falls away and time seems to disappear. Among other elements, flow research links intrinsic satisfaction, personal agency, and loss of self-consciousness, and those three overlap almost perfectly with the ingredients of ownership. By this definition, effort is often the on ramp to flow, which may indicate that a flow state is more challenging to reach when using AI tools.

“

“I just want to do everything non-digital nowadays. Like [AI] can do it in two seconds. There’s no point.”

—Creative professional

“It’s almost like you’re detached. I know what’s in my head, what I want, and if it spits it out I could say, ‘Okay that incorporates everything,’ but if I’m working on it, I’m thinking about those emotions. It’s my brain that’s working. [With AI] you’ve lost a lot of that humanity.”

—Creative professional

The takeaway might be a litmus test that creatives can apply by tool and by task. They can ask: Is this AI tool removing friction that makes it easier to produce my best work? Or is it removing the friction that makes the work less mine?

About this research

This article drew on research produced by Adobe Design Research and Strategy, specifically the work of Kimberly Welchons. Her research, conducted in May 2025, gathered structured interviews with creative professionals to understand how they think about ownership, effort, and pride in their work in the context of generative AI.

We also drew on published guidelines from the Lab for AI, Ethics, and Creative Labor at The Parsons School of Design. The Parsons material is a set of published guidelines rather than original data, which we included as an external point of comparison on creative friction.

Known limitations

This analysis reflects the experience of the creative professionals we interviewed, not a representative survey of the broader creative workforce. Our sample skews toward visual disciplines, including graphic design, illustration, and photography, and does not capture experience in broader creative fields, including how writers, musicians, or other creative practitioners may think about ownership and effort. Since the interviews were conducted in May 2025 during a period of fast-moving change in generative AI tools, attitudes may have shifted since.

Sources

An exploration of how creative professionals experience ownership, effort, and pride in their work when using generative AI. Adobe Design Research and Strategy (Kimberly Welchons). May 2025.

AI + Creative Friction (Amrute, S., Lim, J., & Shea, A.). Lab for AI, Ethics, and Creative Labor, Parsons School of Design, The New School. 2025

Toward a Theory of Psychological Ownership in Organizations (Pierce, J. L., Kostova, T., & Dirks, K. T.). The Academy of Management Review. 2001.