Adobe Creative Cloud for teams

5 creative management strategies to increase productivity.

Find your creative potential.

When Ryan Hubbard joined SaaS unicorn Intercom as a brand designer, he knew his creativity would be put to the test. Intercom, a maker of customer engagement tools, was known for taking risks. The company's leaders wanted to design a brand that wouldn't look like every other tech company.

Tapping into the company's origin story about friends in Dublin dreaming that online customer service could feel like going to the local coffee shop, Hubbard and his team designed a brand that emits warmth, approachability, and personality with bright colors, cute illustrations, and a logo that looks like it's smiling.

By 2019, Intercom had reached $50 million in annual recurring revenue, growing faster than leading SaaS startups like Shopify and Hubspot. In fact, Slack is the only SaaS startup that ever grew faster. It's hard to imagine Intercom could have pulled this off without a cohesive and appealing brand behind it—thanks to its creatives.

Intercom's success illustrates a pattern documented in McKinsey research, which shows that the most creative companies report better financial performance and achieve greater innovation than peer companies. Among the most creative companies, 67 percent have above-average organic revenue growth, 70 percent have above-average total return to shareholders, and 74 percent have above-average net enterprise value.

Creatives are highly valuable to businesses in both qualitative and quantitative ways. And as a creative leader, it's your job to extract the most creative potential from your team—a task that involves both leading your team and having influence in the broader organization. As you establish the right creative and collaborative ecosystem, your creative team can zero in on business priorities and develop a workflow that drives innovation, customer engagement, and revenue.

These five strategies will help you make that creative shift and get the most out of your team:

1 Free up your creative team to focus on high-value work.

Marketers and creatives spend only [19% percent of their time](#) "on the high-value work they were hired for," says Ben Child, VP of Brand at Quantum Metric. "The rest of their time is eaten up by excessive meetings and emails, administrative and manual tasks, interruptions, and data expeditions."

When you take some of these administrative tasks off your team's plate, they can dedicate more energy to the ineffable creative process: thinking, doodling, tinkering, iterating, and dreaming.

"Creativity is an art that requires a certain amount of reflection," says Stacie Gray, chief creative officer at Stacie Gray Brand Consulting. "Sometimes everyone's searching for that algorithm that will drive the winning creative. But it really doesn't work that way. You still need the creative brain and the passion."

Gray suggests that creatives officially mark off time as a "creative bubble," communicated by a closed door, a sign on the cubicle, a block of time on the calendar, or some other indicator.

To encourage this creative space, creative directors can make it clear that what happens in those bubbles is of paramount value to their teams—and the company as a whole. It's a question of "reminding people to keep it sacred, and to make sure that your team understands that that is their unique role in the process," says Gray.

At creative firm Meraki Vision, each project has a manager who oversees administrative tasks and communications. These managers help creative team members get the most out of their time by determining whether they should attend certain meetings or communicate directly with a client on a particular topic.

"We try to structure workflows so designers and developers spend as much time as possible being creative," says Meraki Vision founder Sabina Sarbu.

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2   Claim or negotiate a seat at the leadership table.

Because creative input is so valuable to business outcomes and the bottom line, it's essential that you, as a creative leader, are in a position to shape decisions and strategize on meeting key goals or resolving issues.

[McKinsey](#) found that the most creative firms incorporate discussion of creative goals at the highest levels. In fact, 30 percent of the most creative firms talk about creativity and innovation at more than half of board meetings, as compared to 20 percent of board meetings at other firms. Critically, 70 percent of the most creative firms see spending on marketing as an investment, not as an expense, while only 40 percent of less-creative firms think that way.

"Creativity solves problems," says Annemarie Beliard, principal product marketing manager, Adobe Creative Cloud for SMB. "Oftentimes design is perceived to be telling a pretty story or making a compelling graphic to draw attention. But I think that designers are problem-solvers first and foremost."

By incorporating more creative-related discussion into high-level meetings and conversations, companies can not only speed up the decision-making process, but also "do so with rigor, by defining specific deliverables as opposed to vague goals, and making clear who is accountable," according to McKinsey.

Beliard sees the centrality of design in problem-solving on a daily basis at Adobe. "When we work with our design team, the questions that they ask are not, 'What color do you like?' They're so much deeper than that. It's really, 'What is the problem that you're trying to solve? What is the real objective?'" Accordingly, she believes creative leaders should participate in more high-level conversations on business goals and directions. Design is central to everything a company does, and giving creative leaders a more prominent voice is critical for business success.

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3   # Mix data-driven insights with creative vision.

While there may be a perception that data and creative vision don't mix, McKinsey's analysis found that the most creative companies make use of advanced analytics, ethnographic research, and behavioral analysis to generate data-driven insights on how customers go about their daily lives and the problems they need to solve.

However, while such insights are useful, creative directors need to be prepared for the inherent tension between data-driven decisions and creative vision—and help their teams take both into account. Paola Dalman, owner and creative director of Filez, a design studio based in Argentina, remembers a time when a client whose website Filez had designed returned with the complaint that site visitors were not clicking where they were supposed to.

"We designed that website and had thought it was amazing," she says. "But obviously there was an issue, and we had to make it work. We recreated a website that almost looked to us like it was for dummies, with big buttons everywhere. That website looked better before. But I do understand the client: People needed to be guided directly to what they are looking for. This is a very clear case of data-driven work."

In such cases, Dalman says, you might "lose the essence of what you're trying to achieve" creatively, but sometimes compromises must be made—especially when the data points to prerequisites for customer success. Creative teams, after all, must use design in service of this goal.

"At the end of the day, you need to have data to measure the success of a program," says Beliard. "I think it's important going into any project, whether it's design or other, to really understand: 'What's the problem I'm trying to solve? What are the ways that I can measure it to see if it's successful or not?'"

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4   # Facilitate better collaboration across teams.

You might think that enabling high-value work, vying for a seat at the decision-making table, and taking direction informed by business metrics is already quite a bit on your plate as a creative leader, but you also need to make sure your team is collaborating effectively—with other departments as well as outside clients and partners. One key element of this is ensuring each person on your team focuses on their unique role so they can communicate efficiently.

"I like trying to build a team with different skillsets and mindsets," says Gray. "You have your creatives, who are your idea people, and you might have someone who's more technical, like a graphic designer. And then it's really key to also have someone who's a great communicator and very organized to keep everybody else on track and keep the communications flowing. That's your project manager or your account manager."

Another important element is how you manage use of digital tools for collaboration across teams. With so many options on the market, collaborating digitally can quickly become overwhelming—especially if your team is also working with multiple clients who use different tools. The list of possibilities is endless: Microsoft Teams, Zoom, Slack, Dropbox, Google Drive, Asana, Basecamp, Trello, Click-Up, Wrike, and many more. Creative directors can help their teams proactively manage these digital resources and use them most effectively within the context of each project.

Mark Ramel, co-founder and creative director of Armchair, a digital and branding agency, sees digital synchronization with clients as a foundation to grow a creative vision: "I think storage and admin features and items like that, which seem really mundane and all about project management, are really critical to high-quality creative, and evolving that creative over time."

It's also critical to ensure your creative collaboration tools integrate with existing in-house platforms and solutions and that, ideally, they can sync right out of the box. This not only saves time but it shortens the learning curve and encourages organizational adoption—if teams are already familiar with the foundation, bringing in new features and workflows isn't as daunting.

5   Give the team room to experiment.

It's your job to ensure that your team has the budget, time, and freedom to test and optimize new ideas.

"In the past, creative directors and designers were tasked with coming up with the big idea, the winning idea," says Gray. "Now it's really like, 'What are all the ideas I can come up with that might work? And if this doesn't work, then we have this one ready to go.'"

She emphasizes that the goal for creatives is not to find the perfect solution, but instead to present "a bunch of different ways that might work" and test each.

As a creative leader, you can play an active role by encouraging your team members to generate a wide range of ideas and tweak them over time. You can also manage client expectations by emphasizing that creativity is an iterative process—due to the nature of creative work itself and because business goals, insights about the audience, or other circumstances may change as things progress.

"We always recommend to clients that they will always have to come back and keep doing more updates," says Sarbu. "It could be because we didn't get it one hundred percent right, or that they find out there's a different kind of audience buying their stuff, or that trends start to change."
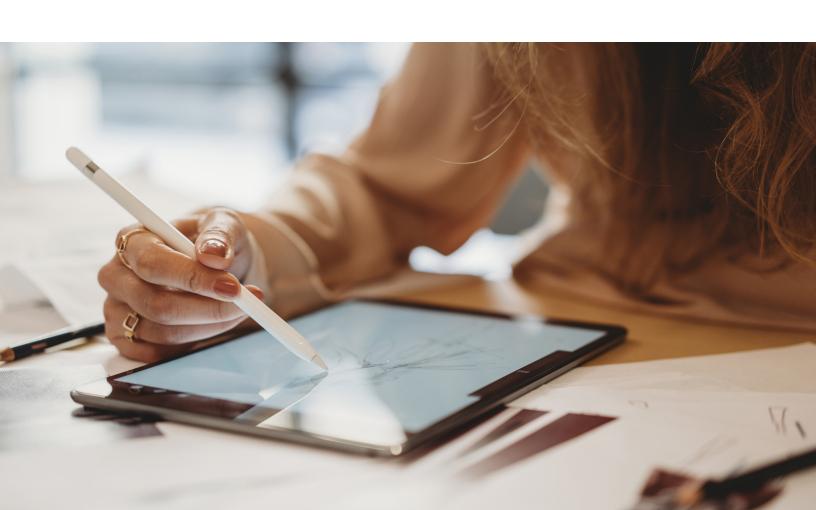
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Creating a design-driven culture.

As the McKinsey analysis found, the most creative companies embrace creativity as an essential element of business operations. They have established "design-driven" cultures that acknowledge the importance of design in customers' lives and make it a priority to discuss it at the highest levels of management. These companies see creativity as a core business function.

Creative leaders can enhance the development of this culture by striving to play an active, contributing role in defining strategic business plans and shaping the customer experience. To do so, they must enable their teams to have the time and space they need for creativity to flourish, the support they need to balance data insights with creative vision, the structures and tools they need to collaborate successfully with others, and the budget they need to test and iterate their ideas to ensure customer success.

With these enabling features in place — and you as a proactive creative leader at the helm of your thriving team — there's no question that your company, too, will be able to tap into creativity that sells.

Adobe can help.

Adobe Creative Cloud for teams gives you the world's best creative apps and services in a single, secure, integrated platform. With 20+ desktop and mobile apps, Creative Cloud Libraries for keeping assets in sync across apps and devices, and 1TB of storage per user, this complete creative software solution is designed to support your business at every stage of growth. Plus, you can count on simplified license management and total control over your software to help your team stay focused on creating great work.

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