

COLLABORATION IN THE WORKPLACE

How to Overcome 7 Common Challenges

The
**CREATIVE
TEAM** of the
FUTURE

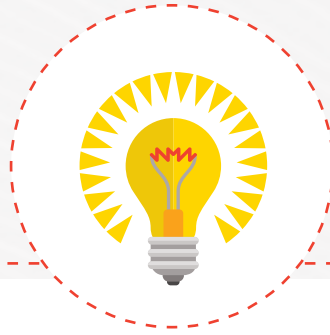


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Public relations. Information technology. Business operations. Creative professionals might not be experts in what these departments do, but there's a good chance they'll get better insight on the inner workings as they partner more frequently with them in the future.

Each year, [The Creative Group](#) (TCG), a leading creative staffing agency, teams up with [AIGA](#), the professional association for design, to find out what trends will impact creative teams in the coming years. [The Creative Team of the Future](#) project is part of [INitiative](#), the AIGA | TCG program to support in-house designers.

As part of the research, we surveyed more than 800 in-house design professionals and interviewed creative veterans from leading organizations to get their take on the state of the industry and where it's headed. A recurring theme we heard loud and clear was the need for greater collaboration in the workplace, especially between creative and technology teams, in order to achieve better outcomes for the business.

Case in point: As organizations kick off strategic initiatives, in-house designers are finding themselves involved more often in the early planning. More than one-quarter of in-house designers we surveyed said they are tapped for input at the initial stages of a project all the time. In the next two years, nearly one-third of respondents expect they will always be brought in during project kickoffs and thus will interact more frequently with cross-departmental peers.

The not-so-good news: Creative professionals continue to face challenges communicating and clarifying expectations with and earning respect from colleagues outside their department. And obstacles to breaking down silos is a universal frustration.

To help you build stronger cross-departmental relationships, we've collected actionable tips for overcoming seven of the most common collaboration challenges. You can find additional information about The Creative Team of the Future, including our latest survey data and expert interviews, on the [TCG Blog](#).



“They don’t understand our role and capabilities.”

It’s common to have little idea of what it takes for other departments to actually do their jobs. But, increasingly, creative professionals are collaborating with teams like information technology (IT) to tackle projects that demand both creative and technical skill sets. A [survey](#) of advertising and marketing executives by The Creative Group revealed that a common barrier to smooth collaboration between these two departments is insufficient understanding about what the other party does or what their industry jargon means.

SOLUTION: Begin breaking down silos by taking the time to share what your team can and cannot do at the outset of a project, and ask the same of other departments. And while jargon can’t always be avoided, try to keep the creative lingo and acronyms to a minimum. If you don’t understand a term, politely ask for an explanation. “Particular phrases and terminology have their place, but when certain words are overused, people tend to lose interest and stop paying attention,” says Diane Domeyer, executive director of The Creative Group. “Avoiding buzzwords can help creative professionals better convey their ideas and distinguish themselves as strong communicators and business partners.”

→ QUICK TIPS ←



Schedule a meet-and-greet with those in other departments to describe what goes into key joint projects and provide helpful information for collaboration.



When your team is presenting to other departments, **jump in if anyone uses jargon** to make sure everyone is clear on what’s being said. Always ask if there are questions at the end of the talk.



Use concrete examples to convey your thoughts. For instance, instead of discussing the benefits and drawbacks of “static” versus “dynamic” websites, pull up a few sites to review the various features.



“They regard us as order-takers.”

For collaboration in the workplace to be productive, all parties must have an equal stake in projects from the get-go. When creatives are not consulted to help shape strategy, they are cast as order-takers.

SOLUTION: This was once the case for Michael Lejeune, creative director for Metro Los Angeles, the organization responsible for the nation’s third-largest transportation system. He found that restructuring and growing his team helped reposition the department as a partner. “Once upon a time, people would come in and ring a bell that was on a desk outside our department. We were working ‘in the back,’” he says. “Today, we have grown into three subspecialties and offer all the capabilities of an agency. We are the brand stewards, the keepers of the voice, and we design all things visual.”

While you may not be in a position to make structural changes or hire more staff, you can take steps to position your team as a strategic partner. Ashleigh Axios, digital creative director of the White House and chapter president of AIGA DC, says she teams up with departments within the executive office as well as federal agencies outside the organization. She’s taken the initiative to improve collaboration in the workplace by scheduling ongoing, in-person meetings to build rapport and educate participants on how her three-person creative team works. “We’ve hosted brown-bag lunches to demonstrate how we’re able to turn a client’s initial thought into a series of compelling products for public consumption. For example, by explaining how we transformed a 50-page report on the importance of a piece of foreign policy into a multichannel communication and engagement campaign, we’ve incentivized collaborations with otherwise tricky clients.”

→ QUICK TIPS ←



Structure your team to operate more like an agency with subspecialties, such as concepting and design. **Hiring the right people** and forming groups around their strengths will help support the business’s goals and priorities.



Since paying for a service makes people value it more, **consider implementing a chargeback system** in which you charge clients for the costs associated with a project. If that’s not possible, share information on how much a project would typically cost if such a system were in place.



Give colleagues the tools to do simple tasks — like updating presentation slides — themselves. This might include approved photos, copy and layout templates. Doing so can save you time from attending to routine duties so you have more time for strategy.



“Poor communication is crippling productivity.”

Communication is a commonly cited workplace struggle, and it can be especially challenging for departments accustomed to operating in silos.

SOLUTION: Following basic communication tenets — like being an active listener and clarifying what you hear, keeping negative emotions and biases at bay, and offering ideas rather than imposing them — will help set the stage for smoother relationships with your peers. It’s also important for teams to establish preferred communication methods, whether it’s in-person meetings, phone or video calls, instant messages, use of project-management software, or a combination of any of these.

Carlos Estrada, an information design consultant for Herman Miller and an active member of the AIGA Diversity and Inclusion Taskforce, underscores this point. “At Herman Miller, we’re all coming from completely different backgrounds, perspectives and career levels,” he says. “Everyone interacts or engages in a different way, so we’re stretching ourselves to see differently and work together toward a common goal. When meeting with colleagues in different departments, I’m learning to put myself in other people’s shoes, find a common language and ask the right questions to ensure we’re all on the same page.”

→ QUICK TIPS ←



Get to know your colleagues’ communication preferences:

Is email, in-person or video communication ideal? Also, determine how much detail individuals expect when it comes to project updates.



Always ask if it’s a good time to chat

before approaching colleagues with questions or requests. This will help improve the odds that they’ll welcome you with open ears.



Designate a creative workspace in the office

for cross-functional teams to come together to tackle longer-term projects. This can help facilitate real-time collaboration and decision making.



“No one can make a decision.”

It's nearly impossible to move a project forward when you don't have the power to make business decisions and have others honor your point of view. A common complaint among the in-house creatives we surveyed was not having a seat at the executive table.

SOLUTION: Ideally, a senior-level manager can lead the charge for each team and have the final say. If that's not the case, the ranking team members or project manager should establish who has the authority to make decisions at the start of an initiative. Sometimes that will be a person directly involved in the undertaking; other times it will be a third party (or parties) that the teams report to as approvals are needed. Make sure everyone understands who has the final word. That way, projects are more likely to run smoothly.

“Having one person who will continually trim out elements as needed, keeping the project to its core principles, is invaluable and ensures that everyone stays on task and on time,” says Sean Smith, lead designer at MileIQ.

→ QUICK TIPS ←



Identify who on your team will be responsible for making decisions at the start of an initiative, and make sure everyone on the team knows who this person is. Also, to minimize loss of productivity, ensure that project milestones and deadlines are clear.



After meetings, **put together key points or decisions in writing** and share them with all relevant teams. This can help prevent miscommunication and ensure projects keep moving.



Speak in terms of business and objectives when conversing with executives. Present ideas and plans that show return on investment and how they align with larger company goals.



“Approval processes drag on for days — or weeks.”

Getting everyone focused and engaged at the right times during a project versus reacting when it's essentially too late can be an uphill battle. It's especially frustrating when this scenario leads to delayed feedback or approvals.

SOLUTION: To overcome this hurdle, make sure your colleagues know what you need from them and when you need it. Follow up a day or two in advance of deadlines to remind them that you require their input. If certain individuals chronically fail to get back to you in a timely manner, let your manager or team leader know you'll have to push back deadlines if you can't get what you need from other departments to move forward with a project.

“I created a quality assurance sign-off sheet to keep projects moving since there are so many stakeholders in the company who need to review and approve projects,” says Andy Brenits, director of design and marketing at BASIS.ed. “The sheet includes dates (when a project is opened, reviewed and receives comments) and version/revision numbers. This allows us to go back to clients and demonstrate if missed deadlines were caused by any delays in their review or extra revisions.”

→ QUICK TIPS ←



Provide in writing the specific dates and times of when you and your team will supply everything you're responsible for after every meeting — and request the same information from other departments.



Notify your manager if something or someone is preventing you from moving forward with a project. He or she may be able to make a case for **hiring additional help** in order to keep projects on track.



Create a sign-off sheet to route with projects that require input and approvals. Show anyone who will be using the tool how to read and update it.



“No one has time to meet.”

SOLUTION: From the get-go, diplomatically point out that gathering for a short meeting at the outset of projects and during critical phases will save valuable time by helping head off miscommunications that can lead to lost time, resources and money. Then, if appropriate, schedule those meetings yourself and set up reminders for the entire team. Also consider organizing regular check-in calls to answer questions that pop up along the way. These can be quick, but they help ensure that projects stay on track. If there are no agenda items, the meeting can be canceled.

“There are many demands placed on my in-house team to deliver high-quality creative in an agile environment,” says Ed Roberts, creative lead at ElectriCities. “It’s vital that I create a project timeline displaying deliverables and the person assigned to each task. With a documented plan, everyone instinctively holds each other accountable, cutting down on the number of large group meetings. Door-jam meetings or huddles with one or two project contributors at key points in the project’s life cycle eliminate the daunting task of syncing the entire team’s individual calendars.”

Andy Brenits took a similar approach in his former role as creative director at Arizona Public Service. “I tried to keep the number of attendees in a meeting to as few people as possible, even going as far as delegating creative authority to someone on my team for a particular project. This kept scheduling simple since only two or three people needed to be involved in any given meeting. Only initial kickoff/brainstorming sessions included multiple people. I also created a kickoff meeting checklist to ensure it was a valuable use of time and resources.”

→ QUICK TIPS ←



Make it a priority to **convene at the outset of projects** and during critical phases. Doing so will help prevent miscommunications that can lead to lost time, resources and money.



Limit meeting attendees to participants who have something valuable to offer in relation to the items on the agenda. Share meeting notes with stakeholders who are not in attendance.



Start and end on time, and schedule unfinished business for a separate meeting.



“We don’t have a shared workflow.”

SOLUTION: If a lack of workflow is inhibiting collaboration in the workplace, consider using a project-management tool like [Basecamp](#) or [Google Docs](#) to schedule meeting reminders and keep everyone accountable for their action items. This takes the pressure off and prevents one department from having all the power to manage a given project.

“I think the biggest impact of any project-management tool comes from improved team communication,” says Sean Smith, lead designer at MileIQ. “Accountability to complete tasks and make it to meetings is what all great teams need. If you can keep everyone focused, organized and communicating what they need to do, you will get your projects done on time.”

→ QUICK TIPS ←



Utilize a project-management tool to schedule reminders and keep everyone accountable for their action items. Carefully consider your team’s needs, abilities and preferences — and remember to train everyone once a tool is chosen.



Build goodwill by being respectful of projects and deadlines that are of high concern to colleagues in other departments, even if they’re not your top priority. If your ability to complete tasks is negatively impacted, let your boss and colleagues know.



Periodically **evaluate the tools and processes in place** by asking for input from the team. When possible, act on the feedback provided, and then assess how the changes are positively or negatively impacting employee and business performance.



A Final Thought

As lines between departments continue to blur, creating an atmosphere where constant collaboration is encouraged will become a bigger priority for businesses. Show that you have what it takes to be a multi-team player by addressing common collaboration challenges head-on and sharing best practices with your peers.

“Embracing a collaborative culture is essential for driving good creative thinking and cross-functional excellence,” says Glenn John Arnowitz, director of creative services at Pfizer Consumer Healthcare. “Take a proactive stance. Be the one to bring colleagues together to share ideas and information. Facilitate brainstorming, innovation and team-building sessions to build community among colleagues. Orchestrate those workplace intersections, recognizing that everyone brings something unique to the table. This entrepreneurial approach will also help to build trust with your team members as well as colleagues from other departments.”

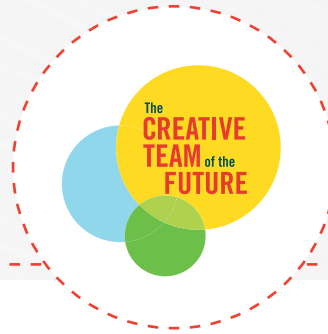
To see the latest research from The Creative Team of the Future, visit the [TCG Blog](#).



Expert Contributors

Thanks to the following individuals who contributed to this project:

- Glenn John Arnowitz, Director of Creative Services, Pfizer Consumer Healthcare
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- Diane Domeyer, Executive Director, The Creative Group
- Carlos Estrada, Information Design Consultant, Herman Miller, and Member, AIGA Diversity and Inclusion Taskforce
- Michael Lejeune, Creative Director, Metro Los Angeles
- Sean Smith, Lead Designer, MileIQ
- Ed Roberts, Creative Lead, ElectriCities



About The Creative Team of the Future

Developed together by TCG and AIGA, with a media partnership provided by Graphic Design USA, The Creative Team of the Future is a research project that explores trends affecting the role of the design team and the creative professional. Our project shares insights from leaders in the creative industry on a range of topics, including challenges creative teams face and how to overcome them. Look for the latest research at creativegroup.com/ctf.

About The Creative Group

The Creative Group (TCG) is a leader among creative and marketing staffing agencies. We specialize in connecting interactive, design, marketing, advertising and public relations talent with the best companies. As a division of **Robert Half**, TCG offers flexible solutions to meet companies' project, contract-to-hire and full-time employment needs. For more information or help addressing your staffing needs, please call 877.418.7892 or visit creativegroup.com.

About AIGA

AIGA, the professional association for design, advances design as a professional craft, strategic advantage and vital cultural force. As the largest community of design advocates, we bring together practitioners, enthusiasts and patrons to amplify the voice of design and create the vision for a collective future. We define global standards and ethical practices, guide design education, inspire designers and the public, enhance professional development, and make powerful tools and resources accessible to all. Learn more at aiga.org.

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