THE CREATIVE SKILLS REPORT

It's Nice That × Adobe

INTRO DUC TION

Learning new skills can arm us with new ways to bring our ideas to life, advance our careers and attract new clients. Nobody wants to be a one-trick pony and we can also get a deep sense of fulfilment from learning something new.

But as creatives, it can be tough to know where to start – both on a personal level and when it comes to upskilling our teams as a manager. Are juniors getting enough support and guidance? Which new technologies are worth investing in? And is it better to hone your expertise, or gain a broader range of skills?

Surveying creatives from more than 60 leading studios, from design to film, we set out to uncover answers to these questions and find out which skills creatives consider to be key for success today and in the future.

Over the following pages, we dig into five key themes through statistical results from the survey and a series of interviews with industry leaders. We'll start by exploring which skills are the most foundational for a creative career, and then look at the ones that are in high demand today. Next up, we'll examine how managers should approach learning itself, before revealing which emerging technologies are the most essential in a creative's toolbox. Finally, we'll dive into the specialist versus generalist debate, to try and settle on the best strategy for balancing a creative skillset once and for all.

CONTENTS

2

4

1

3

5

FOUNDATIONAL SKILLS

Our survey zeroed in on the very start of a creative career to find out which hard skills are the ideal foundation for a creative. Graphic design came out on top, followed by image editing and layout design. We also found that the majority of creatives are teaching themselves these skills, and also don't think universities are providing enough software training.

KEY FINDINGS

Nearly half (49%) of juniors say they taught themselves their foundational skills.

Among those that think expectations have changed, **63%** believe it's because there is now more competition for junior roles.

84% of people in our survey selected graphic design as an essential hard skill for a budding creative.

70% chose image editing,

68% layout design and

42% motion design and editing.

Only **15%** selected coding.

47% of creatives say they started learning hard skills during their school days, rather than at university or at their first job.

Just **15%** of people in our survey think universities are providing enough training in hands-on skills and programmes.

50% of seniors think that employers expect more hard skills from juniors now compared to when they started out.

41% of seniors think employers have always expected juniors to start work with hard skills already.

Only **9%** think employers have always expected people to start learning these skills on the job.

Q&A

Lupi Asensio and Martin Lorenz

TwoPoints.Net

Lupi Asensio and Martin Lorenz are the founders of TwoPoints.Net, a Hamburg and Barcelona-based design studio famous for creating flexible visual identities for brands and institutions like Uniqlo and Roca Gallery Barcelona. The couple has also taught at various design schools and are about to relaunch their own, called Design Werkstatt, where they will teach flexible visual systems, editorial design and typography online. Here they discuss the role of higher education, how learning leads to happiness and why young creatives should be focusing on their "unicorn skill".

Q&A
Lupi Asensio
and Martin Lorenz

TwoPoints.Net

Q Why do you think people feel that universities aren't providing enough training in foundational hard skills?

A Martin: We suppose people don't feel ready for the creative industry, or they just feel overwhelmed with the amount of hard skills they think they'll need. Maybe. Maybe not. Anyhow, we don't think universities are the place to learn hard skills anyway.

A Lupi: You can learn hard skills nowadays everywhere and on your own. Even if your university is great in teaching software-based skills, they could teach something that would become obsolete in a couple of years. Universities should focus on what you can only learn in exchange with a group of humans: empathy, listening, communication, experimentation, teamwork, project management, methodologies, research, perception and culture etc.

Q Do you agree that expectations of creatives starting out are higher than they used to be? And if so, why is that?

A Lupi: Nowadays designers are slowly getting out of their specialised hole and offer almost everything you can do in visual communication. Which is good, because the holistic approach is the most effective. But it's also undoable for a single person. You can't be great at everything. And you also will never be seen as the best if you are a generalist. Even if you are the best, that's not how people will perceive you. You wouldn't buy cheese from a tailor.

So, yes, more is expected of people starting, but no, don't fall into this trap. Relax. You do not need to be able to do everything. Specialise in something. Your work is your product and needs a unique selling point.

Q Do you think the industry has got more competitive? What do you think young people can do to stand out?

A Martin: We do not think that there is more competition now. We just think the competition got more visible. How to gain an edge? Do the best you can and focus on your unicorn skill, but above all, be a nice person. We prefer to work with someone nice who is not the absolute best, than with someone amazing who just thinks about themselves.

Q 74% of creatives in our survey say not having enough time is the biggest barrier to learning new skills. How can people address this on both a personal and at a company level?

A Lupi: Many can't address this problem on a personal level. If you've got a family and you've got to provide, money always comes first. Companies and governments need to address this problem. In the end, they will benefit from this investment too. Learning not only helps people to keep up with the latest requirements. We believe it makes people profoundly happy.

Q If you could learn one non-creative skill, what would it be and why?

A Martin: Ignoring. I suck at ignoring. I feel bad when I ignore something or someone, but paying attention to everything and everyone keeps me from focusing on what matters.

Lupi: Portuguese, but the act of learning is creative for me.

"Learning not only helps people to keep up with the latest requirements, we believe it makes people profoundly happy."

Before crafting campaigns in-house for eyewear brand Ace & Tate, art director James Cullen worked at DesignStudio and Nike. We ask him to reflect on his early days in design and the most important skills he's learned since university.

Q&A

James Cullen

Ace & Tate

Q&A
James Cullen

Ace & Tate

Q When did you start learning hard skills in design?

A Photoshop was my entry into the world of graphic design. I started learning it when I was a teenager and I wanted to make graffiti stencils. It was really bad Banksy impersonation type stuff, there was no depth to it, or cultural commentary! I just thought that kind of work looked cool and I wanted to try making it myself.

I did everything in Photoshop at first, even typesetting, which was definitely not the way to do it! But knowing the basics in Photoshop made it so much easier to learn the rest of the Creative Suite.

When I got into college I learned the programmes properly. But I think I learned more from other students rather than from the course itself. We could teach each other little hacks and share ideas.

Q What kinds of skills did you need to develop once you started working?

A The first thing I learned when I started working was presentation skills, as everything starts as a deck. I found that I was designing a little bit, but mostly I was making presentations all the time because you need to make a presentation to sell your idea. Along with skills like photo editing and typesetting, presentation skills should definitely be taught more at university. And this means designing decks and being able to create a narrative for your idea and explain it in a way that everyone can understand.

A You've worked at agencies and in-house. Do these different kinds of studios require different skill sets?

The practical skills of graphic design are the same across the board. It's the way of working that's very different. You're probably exposed to more politics internally and you can struggle to work with agencies because you feel you know more about the brand than them. But on the positive side, working in-house is like having one big project you're working on, and having one client can mean you have more focus. I found the pace of agency life a lot more ruthless.

Q Do you think more is expected of juniors these days?

A When I first entered the workplace, the focus was more on traditional print and branding, but I think now you're expected to have animation and soft coding skills so that you can react to where graphic design is at the moment.

I think often, creative directors or more senior creatives will have great ideas but not necessarily the skill sets or the time to execute them. And so we're looking for younger talent that does have those skills. Certainly from Ace & Tate's point of view, we are a brand that communicates every day on social media and we need to find new and exciting ways to do that. So when we're looking for talent we're looking for people that will bring those ideas to life, rather than just making a printed booklet because we don't really do that anymore.

Q If you could learn one non-creative skill, what would it be and why?

A It would be interpersonal skills, like empathy or leadership. As a designer, you're so focused on creating, creating, creating, but there's also a very human side to how we need to interact with each other.

> "I think I learned more from other students rather than from the course itself."

SKILLS

To help creative decision makers learn which skills to invest in, our survey explored which skills are most in-demand in the creative industry today. To uncover this, we asked our respondents to compare four types of skill sets, including digital (coding, web design, digital typography, UX and UI design), future digital skills (AI/ AR/ VR, robotics, the internet of things), film (motion graphics, animation, video editing) and traditional (photography, image editing, print design, typography). The results paint a clear picture, revealing that top creative studios consider skills in the film and digital realms to be the most sought after, and by a long stretch.

IN
DEMAND

KEY FINDINGS

66% say that digital skills (e.g. coding, web design, digital typography, UX and UI design) are seen as the most in-demand.

Film (e.g. motion graphics, animation, video editing) is the most common skill studios are using freelancers for. This was found to be the case across all types of creative companies.

By far the most in-demand skills

are digital (66%) and film (62%). Demand for future digital (22%) and traditional (22%) skills pale in comparison.

The majority **(52%)** of people in our survey feel that the most useful skills to add to their studio's offering would be digital.

Half of those at advertising **(55%)** and film **(50%)** studios specifically say that clients are asking for future digital skills.

More than a third say that digital skills **(36%)** and future digital skills **(34%)** are skill sets that their existing clients are asking for, but the company doesn't already have covered.

53% think that future digital skills would be the most beneficial to advancing their careers.

Nearly half **(48%)** think that the most useful tool for creatives to add to their skill sets in the future are soft skills, like expansive thinking and teamwork – significantly more than AI (1%) and even coding (20%).

The majority of creatives

think the soft skill most vital to career progression is collaboration (38%), followed by problem-solving (22%).

Q&A

Marina Willer

Pentagram

Pentagram partner Marina Willer is one of the most celebrated figures in the design world. During her career, the graphic designer has created major identities for brands and organisations like Tate, Southbank Centre, Second Home and Amnesty International. Multi-talented Marina has also designed exhibitions for the Barbican and the Design Museum and her first feature film, *Red Trees*, was released on Netflix in 2018. We ask the creative powerhouse to reflect on which skills she believes are most in-demand today.

Q&A
Marina Willer

Pentagram

Q Are you surprised that people said the most in-demand skills are in digital and film?

A It's a picture of our times. You can't just think of ideas as flat and static, the world isn't like that anymore. They need to be malleable, adjustable, reactive and participative. When we are employing new designers, if they can also create interactive things, or they can animate and code, it helps.

The risk of focusing too much on these skills is that they are worth nothing without good design, good thinking and good writing – the fundamentals. Understanding digital tools and behaviours is also fundamental, yes, but they can become a gimmick if they're not balanced with craft. It's about having a family of skills, there isn't one single skill that becomes more important than the others. If you don't have the imagination and the creativity, then you become a bit of a technician and that isn't what they call a good designer. A good technical specialist is also very valuable in this world, but it's a slightly different thing.

It's about collaboration. You can't expect one person to have every single skill. If you think of any great designer like Sagmeister, for example, he has always been very future-facing but he would work with the right partners. You don't imagine that he sits there and is doing all the coding, but he is able to imagine what you can do with those tools and has the vision. So if you can integrate some of those skills into your set, it helps you think of ideas.

Q Why do you think so many people felt soft skills are important going forward?

A As many of our skills are being reproduced by AI and robots, I think the difference we can make is to do with imagination and being able to create a vision. One of the big problems with education in this country now is that the curriculum has been adjusted to create people that do technical things and can use AI and digital tools. But they can't be visionaries if they can't invent new solutions. We are no longer in the industrial era where you just needed people to follow specific skills. They need to be much broader and much more imaginative, to get us out of this difficult place we're at, with the crisis now and the planet in general.

Q What advice would you give to seniors when it comes to helping their teams learn new skills?

A It's hard because when you try to build training programmes, inevitably deadlines will get in the way. I say to my team that if they have an afternoon when they don't have work, use it to train in the things they want to learn. Animation is one skill that keeps coming up, or coding.

Q If you could learn one non-creative skill, what would it be and why?

A Surfing.

> "It's about having a family of skills, there isn't one single skill that becomes more important than the others."

Polaroid

Q&A
Ignasi Tudela

Before joining Polaroid as global creative director, Ignasi Tudela worked as an art director at Wieden + Kennedy and Barcelona-based design studio Herraiz Soto. We chat to the creative leader about the merits of maintaining a conceptual approach and how he is cultivating a collaborative and experimental culture.

Q&A
Ignasi Tudela

Polaroid

Q What is your view on which hard skills are the most in-demand across the industry as a whole and why?

A Digital is not the new kid on the block anymore but a must-have for any creative endeavour. There's a lot of ambiguity in the digital and film space – and a lot of creatives today do mixed media work – that's why it is always valuable to have a conceptual approach to the work.

But it is true that we live in a world of screens. This opens us up for a lot of creative opportunity and especially for new forms of storytelling, all of it because of this fragmented media distribution. Newer skills are more in demand because the education system does not run at the same speed as culture, so there's a gap between offer and demand. As brands, studios and creators don't have unlimited funds, they have to also balance their investment and decide where they need to focus to make a bigger impact.

Q Are film and digital skills the most in-demand at Polaroid? If so, why is this the case?

A The approach I take with my creative department is to work in smaller, diversified teams. We have great talent across disciplines that are willing to collaborate, be creative and are not afraid to make mistakes. Experimenting and collaborating keeps the creative culture alive. We also love to work with external artists and creatives to take the work to the next level when we need that kind of focus. We understand and appreciate the value of good creativity and excellent craft and we always try to find the best talent to help us achieve the best output.

Q Are you asking your agency partners for digital and future digital skills and if so, why?

A We always try to find partners that can help us make meaningful work for our audiences and that applies to any partners we collaborate with.

Q If you could learn one skill that has nothing to do with your work, what would it be?

A Choreography or theatre direction. I love the emotion that unveils in live performances, there's a visceral feeling that is almost impossible to recreate in any other medium.

"Experimenting and collaborating keeps the creative culture alive."

LEARNING

Comparing senior and junior perspectives, we dug into whether studios are satisfying creatives' thirst for new knowledge when it comes to how they are approaching learning. The results reveal a disconnect: a large proportion of juniors say they don't get any learning resources, but seniors disagree. However, with almost 50% of creatives saying that training is not measured or accounted for, and 72% believing that organisations need to dedicate more time to training, both ends of the spectrum agree that creative teams need to up their learning game.

SKILLS
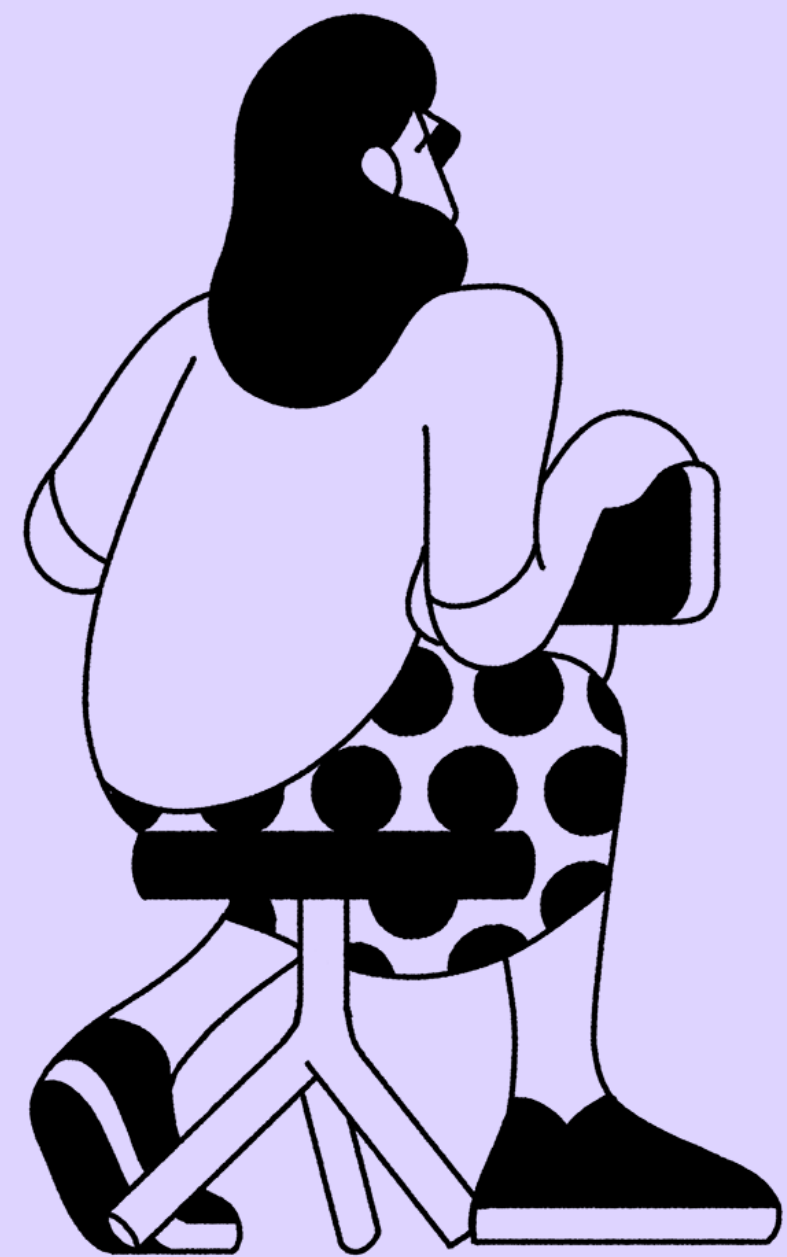
KEY
FINDINGS

The most common way people are learning new skills at work is through internal skills sharing (31%), followed by workshops and courses (25%).

74%
said the biggest barrier to learning new skills is a lack of time. 19% of juniors say their managers never give them time to learn new skills. A third of juniors get to upskill once a month, while a lucky few get to do it every day (7%).

Almost half (49%)
of those in our survey say that learning at work is not measured or accounted for.

20%
When learning is measured, do this through line manager meetings and 19% by putting it to the test on briefs.

One thing juniors and seniors do agree on, is that there should be more time dedicated to learning at work.
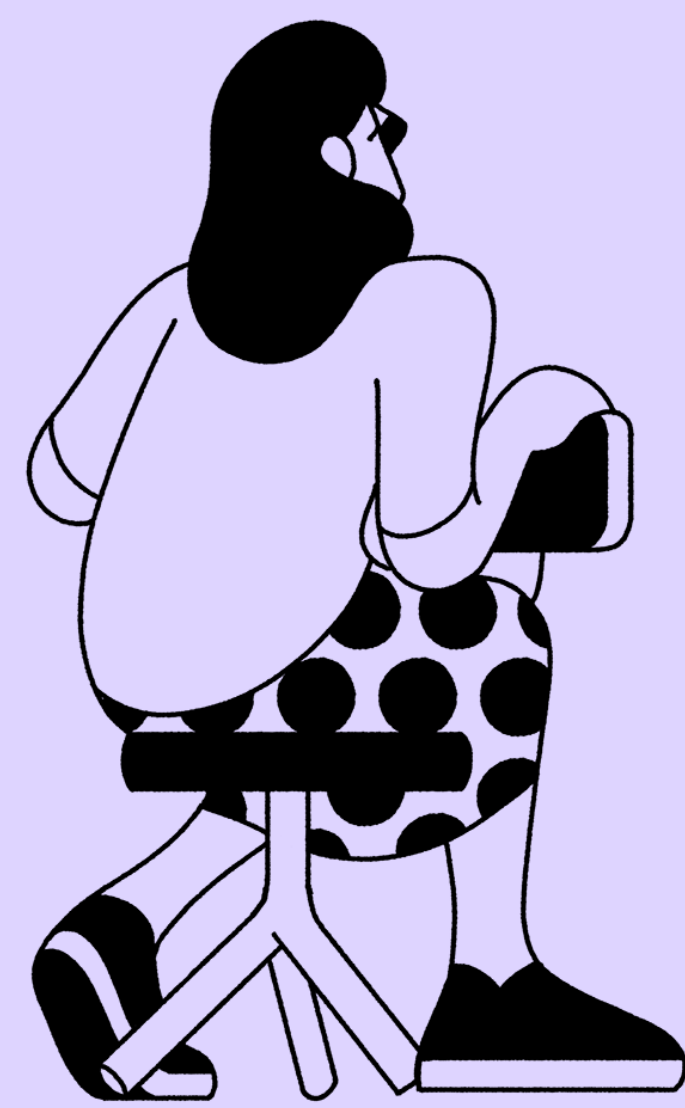
77%
of juniors say they need to be given more time to upskill and 69% of seniors say they should give their teams more time to do this.

Juniors disagree with seniors about whether they are given learning resources at work.
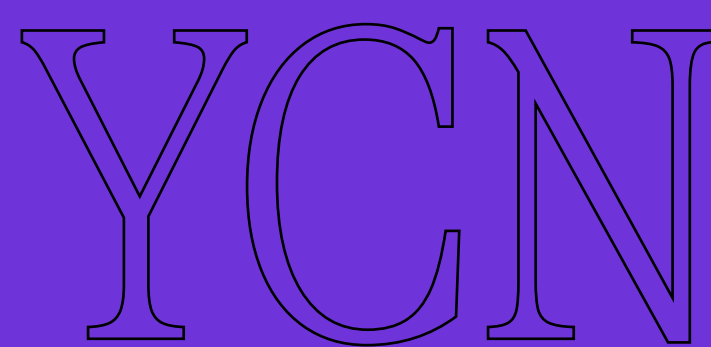
27%
of juniors say they are given no resources for learning new skills. Only 4% of seniors agreed that this is the case.

Q&A
Katy Kent

YCN

Katy Kent is a learning facilitator and team coach at members network YCN, where she helps companies like Innocent and *The Guardian*, to upskill its teams. She also works privately with clients one-to-one as a self-development coach, helping people better align their work, values and strengths. We asked the learning expert to share her two cents on our findings.

Q&A
Katy Kent

YCN

> "For things to change, there has to be buy-in from the top that learning is important, otherwise it will fall to the bottom pile."

Q Do you get a sense in your work that junior creatives are frustrated with the amount of support and resources that they get for their development? If so, where do you think this has come from?

A I think there are generational differences affecting people's expectations. I know that when I started working in the creative industry there was very little offered in terms of learning and development. Senior people like me never expected to receive a huge amount of training. Whereas now, partly because people move jobs more often, millennials go into a job thinking that they need to be upskilling to help them get their next role.

But another factor is that managers often lack training themselves. We are constantly hearing about people struggling with a lack of clarity in their job descriptions, especially when it comes to people's management responsibilities. Often seniors will be thinking, "Training isn't my job, I shouldn't be expected to do this! The juniors should be more proactive". I worked at five big advertising agencies, and only one of them provided training for management. Even then it was poor quality and out of date. Becoming a manager is a huge transition and requires a lot of support.

Q Why do you think seniors aren't giving juniors more time when the appetite for learning is clearly there? What advice would you give seniors to overcome the time issue?

A We're living in what's been dubbed a "VUCA" world, which stands for Volatile, Uncertain, Complex and Ambiguous. Within that, we're being asked to deliver more than ever and over less time. This has resulted in an epidemic of stress, with people feeling like they're always on and that they don't have enough time to do the things they'd like to. So naturally people can feel that the management or training part of the job isn't a priority. For things to change, there has to be buy-in from the top that learning is important, otherwise it will fall to the bottom pile.

Senior managers need to ask juniors what's best for them rather than coming up with a solution that might not really address their needs. Then it's their responsibility to manage upwards by communicating the needs that they're hearing from junior staff to the people at the top.

Q The most common way that people are learning at work is via internal skill sharing. What are the pros and cons of this approach?

A One of the benefits of internal skill-sharing is the social element. Our philosophy at YCN is that people learn better from other people by watching them. Internal skill sharing is also likely to be very relevant. When you learn from someone who is doing exactly the same job as you and for the same organisation it's going to immediately hit the mark.

On the flip side, people are stimulated by external environments and people that they don't know. Internal skill sharing also doesn't account for the fact that people have different learning styles, which include visual, kinesthetic and auditory learning. A step-by-step, verbal or written guide could be brilliant for one person, while someone else might need an experiential learning course that involves no PowerPoints.

Q The majority of people in our survey said that their learning at work is not measured or accounted for. Do you think this is a problem and how would you recommend tracking people's development?

A Get people to present back what they have learned as much as you can. This will give you a much better understanding of what they've absorbed. Then a good rule of thumb is that every third catch up you have with someone should acknowledge and discuss their career development. Rather than just having an annual review, it should be an ongoing conversation.

A psychological theory called the forgetting curve explains that we forget around 40% of what we've learned in just 20 minutes. After a month, we'll only remember around 25%. The most effective way to improve the curve is to revisit the material, ideally three times. If you do that, you can remember up to 60% after a month. You need to build in follow ups and ways of monitoring training to help people retain their new knowledge.

Other ways to boost retention are to get a good night's sleep, choose material based on what kind of learner you are (verbal, visual etc.), or do some pre-reading to familiarise yourself with the topic as we retain more about things we know about.

Q Do you have any final advice for when it comes to helping teams learn new skills?

A It's crucial for seniors to build listening skills. It'll undermine the whole way you communicate if you can't listen properly. Doing this means active listening where you're listening to understand somebody, rather than just to answer them. Then you also need to create a culture of psychological safety, which is when people can be who they want to be and feel comfortable to say when they don't understand something yet.

**Q** If you could learn one skill that has nothing to do with your work, what would it be?

A Jazz piano.
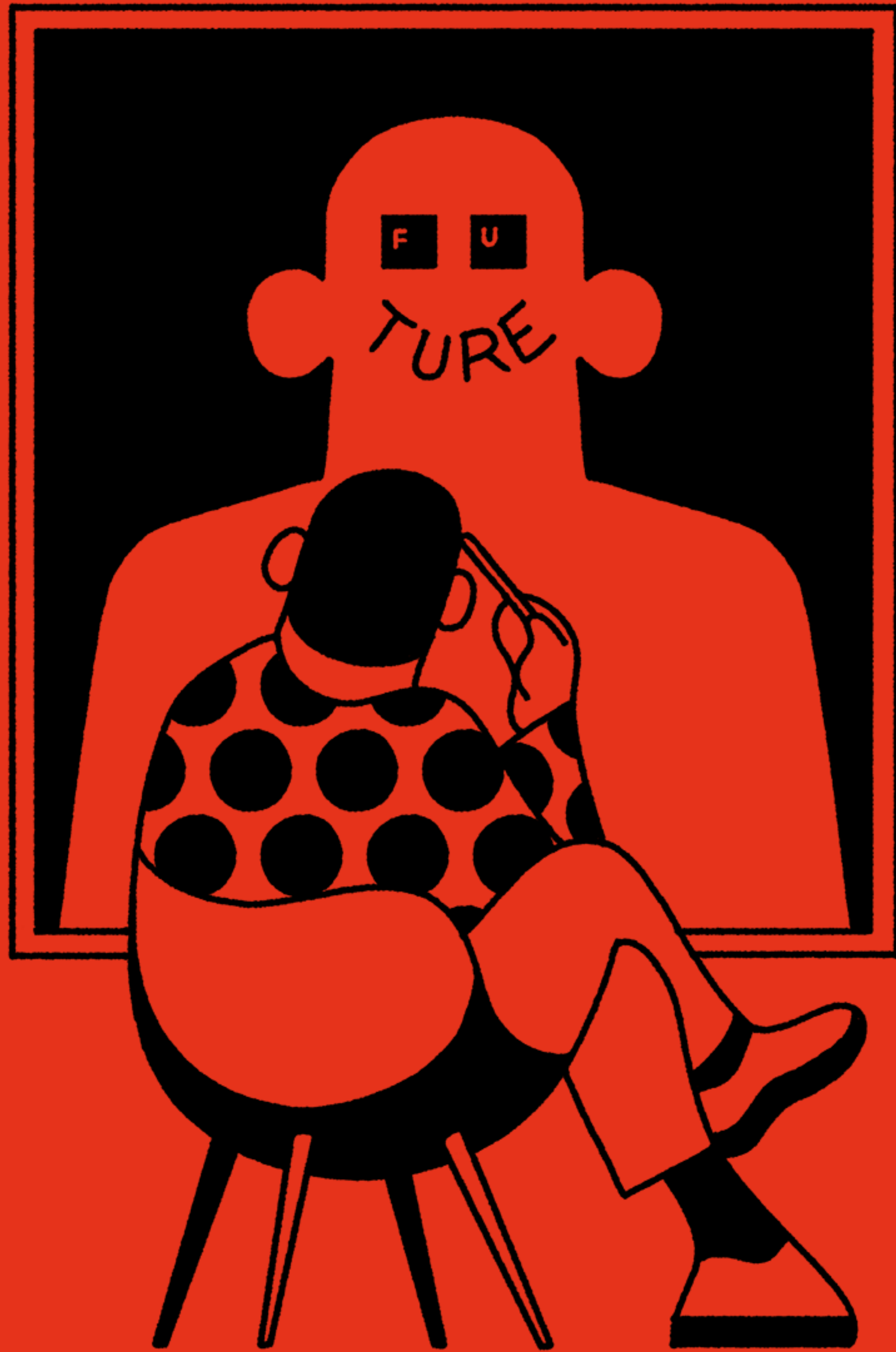
FUTURE SKILLS

As well as looking into the skills creatives are using currently, we also wanted to look beyond the hype and find out what the top creative studios really think about skills in emerging technologies, including VR and AR, AI and robotics, plus 3D modelling and printing. People rated VR and AR as the most important technologies for the future of their work overall, and yet only 31% currently feel equipped to work with them. Nearly half don't feel ready to work with any of the emerging technologies listed, despite the fact 54% believe that future digital skills would help them attract new clients.
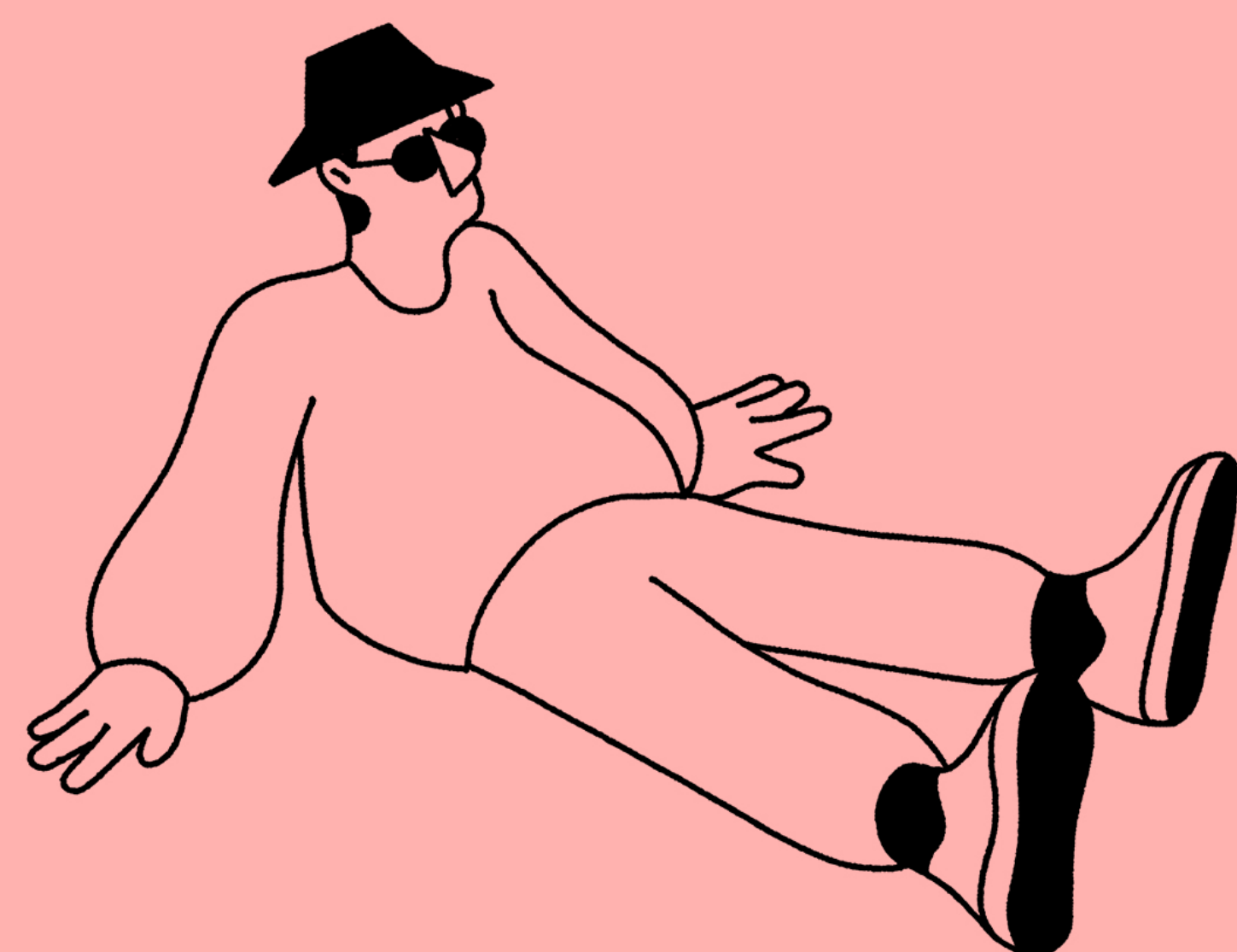
KEY FINDINGS

Nearly half (47%) of respondents in our survey don't feel equipped to work with any of the emerging technologies.

Production companies rated **emerging tech** as more important overall than other types of studios in the survey.

People at production and film companies think **3D modelling** and printing will be the most important for their work in the future.

Just 7% currently feel equipped to work with AI and robotics.

Overall, creatives rank **VR and AR** as more important to their future work than AI and robotics or 3D modelling and printing.
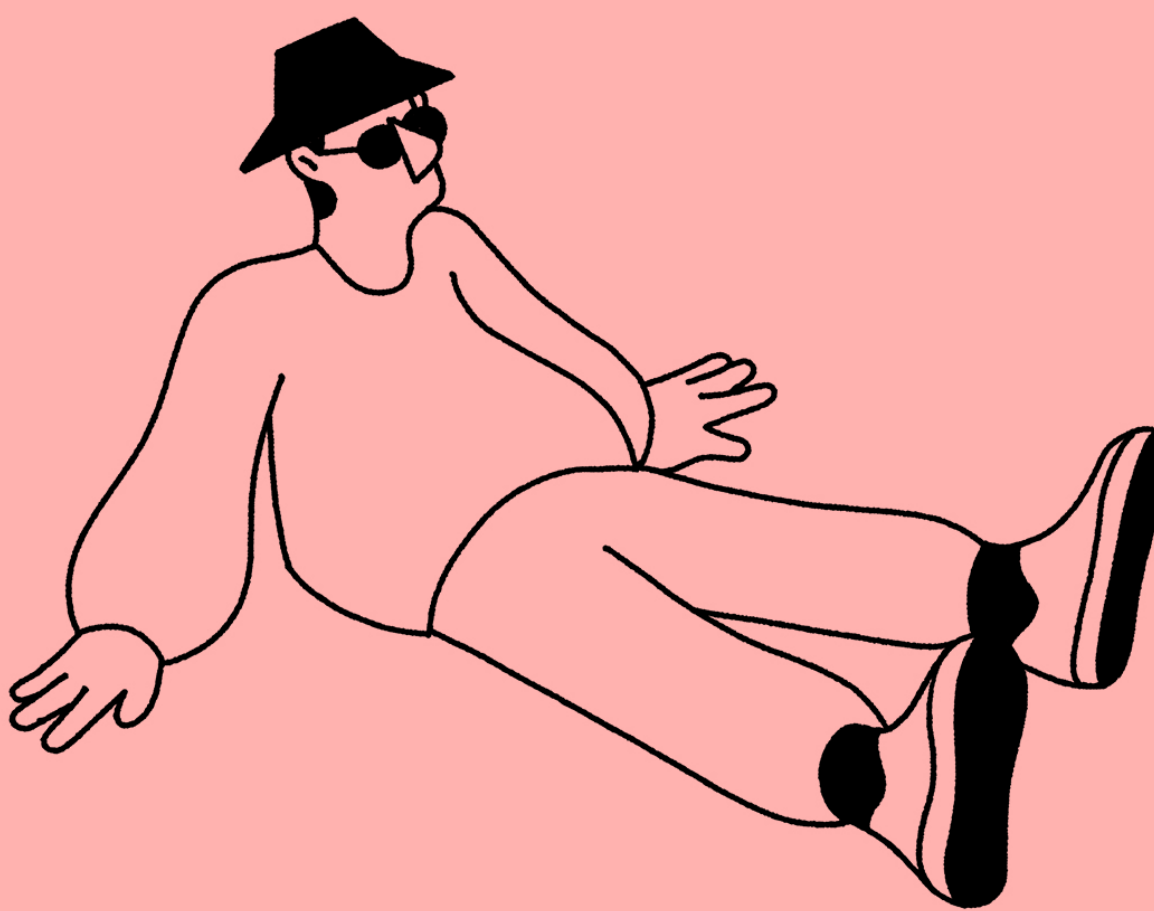
54% believe that future digital skills (e.g. AI/ AR/ VR, robotics, the internet of things) would be the most helpful for attracting new clients. Only 1% of respondents believe AI will be the most useful tool for creatives to add to their skillset in the future.

Advertising and design studios believe that VR and AR will be the **most important** for their work in the future.

Chrystal King is a product designer working at Depop to shape the lives of sellers. Now designing features to aid a user's journey and help them run their shops, previously Chrystal has designed multi-platform experiences at Boiler Room, Life Works and other early stage start-ups. Early on, the designer actually studied architecture, and in her spare time continues to explore "the parallels between user experience design, mixed reality and spatial design." We sat down with Chrystal to discuss what future digital skills she's interested in learning, and how future facing digital work can be better facilitated in the creative industry.

Q&A   Chrystal King

Depop

Q&A
Chrystal King

Depop

Q As someone who works in a digital context, are there emerging technologies you're personally interested in learning?

A So far, the evolution of technology has shown me that people aren't actually addicted to their devices, and they move on to better ones pretty easily – we know this through looking at the adoption of VUI's (voice user interfaces). People are addicted to the information and experiences that those devices provide. So, as you can expect, once that information can somehow integrate into their reality, the need for computers, smartphones, and 2D interfaces in general will almost disappear.

This has led me to believe that the future of design is screenless, and that today's UX and UI designers will eventually transition to roles where they're designing spaces through the application of augmented, virtual and mixed reality.

Because of this, I'm currently exploring how we might experience everyday life without screens, through the use of augmented and mixed reality overlays. I'm particularly interested in solutions that make everyday life easier. I'm also thinking about the ethics that'll inevitably arise when these experiences become more mainstream.

Q Nearly half (49%) of respondents in our survey, don't feel equipped to work with any emerging technologies. Does it surprise you that across the industry it's something that isn't being focused on?

A I'm not entirely surprised by this because, for those coming into the industry, traditional education isn't as progressive as the tech or the creative industry. A lot of the time the courses you'd expect to be able to take either don't yet exist or aren't accessible – and it shows, especially when you look at the landscape of the tech community. I've worked alongside many amazing designers, technologists and engineers, the majority of whom have either been self-taught like myself, or have gone through non-traditional education like boot camps.

For those of us already working in the creative and tech industry, we're having to actively stay on top of this. We also have to continue to self-educate throughout our careers, which can be challenging if workplaces don't support this, or intentionally allow time for their creative teams to self-learn. That being said, the space itself is very exciting, especially since a lot of the design patterns are being quite newly defined. There's so much room to experiment and innovate.

Q 53% of our respondents believe that future digital skills will be the most helpful to attract new clients. Should studios be concerned that there is a possible demand for these skills, but the majority of designers don't feel equipped?

A I think that studios should be concerned, but it should drive them towards approaching this as a massive opportunity. It's a chance to create spaces for designers and creative teams to be able to explore these digital skills. It should work authentically as part of their day, especially since these skills require continual investment. We don't just learn a skill and the work is done, we have to consistently keep brushing up our knowledge so being able to have space, time and resources carved out would benefit designers.

That being said, the onus can't totally be on studios. I think it's just as important that people are being equipped with these skills coming into the creative industry as much as possible.

Q Respondents across the industry ranked VR and AR as being the most important to their future work. Do you agree that this may be a vital skill to learn as a designer, or would you have chosen other options?

A I'm definitely team generalist over specialist, and would encourage designers to learn and understand the basis of many skills, as opposed to specialising in just one. Only then will we begin to use them as tools and that will change our relationship to be less biased towards one in particular and become more agnostic and focused on the bigger picture.

Q&A
Chrystal King

Depop

This would mean moving from specialising in 3D printing, and only thinking of it in that application, to thinking of the problem that needs to be solved and deciding which tool would be most effective at solving that problem – whether that be 3D printing, AI, or something completely different. It would mean being less reliant on tools, and more focused on ideas, solutions and exploration. There are also overlaps in these skills too. For example, VR and AR are important, but you could argue that without UX, we can't create meaningful AR/VR experiences that people find easy to use or understand.

In the context of design today, I often get asked by junior product designers what software they should use to prototype a design. I always ask "what are you trying to achieve? Are you trying to show a micro-interaction or do you want to test an entire flow?" The answer to that question will determine the software you should use. I think it's a similar principle here. Whatever it is that we're trying to communicate will determine the tool we should use to execute it. Execution is where mastery comes in, not the other way round.

Q If you could learn one non-creative skill, what would it be and why?

A It's so hard to pick one! I'd probably say sales because it's built on the premise of connecting and communicating with people. Sales involves creating a narrative to help turn complex things into something digestible for someone. It's articulating to someone the benefits of a product and why it's perfect for their needs. When used in the right way, I think it can be really powerful in design.

"This has led me to believe that the future of design is screenless, and that today's UX and UI designers will eventually transition to roles where they're designing spaces through the application of augmented, virtual and mixed reality."

IKEA

Q&A
Hans Wirblad Kastman

Within the inter IKEA Group, Hans Wirblad Kastman is responsible for Robotics Process Automation in its supply chain development. Within this unique role, Hans is responsible for extending and improving these functions, including new digital skills. His mission within this is to lead the implementation and evolution of intelligent automation within the group, in order to free co-workers from non-creative work.

Q&A
Hans Wirblad Kastman

IKEA

Q When it comes to skills in new and emerging technologies, creatives rank VR and AR as being more important to their future work than AI and robotics, or 3D modelling. What is IKEA doing to gain skills in these technologies and why?

A At IKEA we have a vision to create a better everyday for many people. And, to be able to reach even more people, we need to remove the physical barriers as much as possible. With this in mind, these technologies will play an important role. To be able to visualise our products in your home before ordering them through augmented reality is one of many areas we are working on. It is about creating an even better shopping experience for all. In evolving our business through these technologies, we of course gain and develop these skills within IKEA.

Q Only 1% of respondents believe AI will be the most useful tool for creatives to add to their skillset. What do you think the role of AI will be within creativity?

A AI, as an umbrella, is not about taking over or replacing human creativity or cognitive decision making, it is about amplifying it. If we are able to see it for what it truly is, and to be able to visualise how to implement it in everyday life, I believe it would most likely

increase the answer rate on that kind of question. Without that understanding, it will continue being low rated as an important tool.

One example of where we in IKEA are implementing the digital skill sets is within our supply chain. The main objective of the initiatives is linked to accessibility. With a more complex reality, where we are moving from a store approach to a market approach, we need smarter and new ways of working. The digital skill sets are not aiming towards reducing headcounts, but rather creating better working conditions, and shifting the focus to creative, rather than non-creative tasks.

Q When you're looking for agency partners at IKEA, how important is it for agencies to demonstrate having skills in these technologies?

A We need the best partners and tools throughout our entire value chain to be able to continue working towards our vision. To always challenge the way we are working, to create better preconditions, and to think in smarter and new ways. Our partners play an important role here, as they help us broaden our view.

One important aspect regarding partners and future digital skills is that almost everyone can demonstrate and talk about this area. A good partner

sticks out in the sense that they are able to put the skills in the IKEA concept. They are able to understand and align on our vision to know which steps we need to take. Furthermore, a good partner understands the IT complexity and the architecture behind it. So yes, it is important that agencies and future partners are able to demonstrate having skills and experience, but most important is that they can understand it from the business and problem-solving perspective. It is when we can combine all this together a truly good partnership is created. At IKEA we often talk about togetherness, that we all work together towards a goal. And this is indeed applicable in this context too.

"AI, as an umbrella, is not about taking over or replacing human creativity or cognitive decision making, it is about amplifying it."

The generalist vs. specialist debate has been raging for many years in the creative industries. Even the cliches are in conflict, with celebrations of "swiss army knife creatives" at odds with the lack of enthusiasm for a "jack of all trades, master of none." A third option entered the discourse around the 1980s, showing that specialists or generalists weren't the only options. Coined by McKinsey & Company, "T-shaped" skill sets combine a breadth of knowledge and experience with a depth of expertise in one area.

We decided to put the debate to the experts, and their responses are striking. The overwhelming majority (75%) of creatives in our survey say that developing a T-shaped set of skills is the best way to future-proof your career. But with people arguing passionately on all sides, we doubt the dispute is over yet.

BALANCING SKILLS

KEY FINDINGS

96% of creatives would like to upskill while at work.

75% of creatives believe that to future-proof their career it's better to develop a T-shaped skill set than to either generalise or specialise.

Those who opted for a T-shaped skill set, said:

"It's important to be agile and be able to adapt your core skills to a variety of environments."

"A T-shaped skill set allows you to stand out in one area and enhances your collaboration with others."

Those who chose generalising, said:

"There are so many specialists out there who you can hire for specific jobs, but not many see the bigger picture."

Those who chose specialising, said:

"Where do you prefer to buy meat? The butcher or the supermarket?"

"Being a generalist [makes it hard] to develop a unique, personal style. Sure they will be 50% good at whatever they do, but that's bland and boring."

Less than 1 in 10 think that specialising is the best way to future-proof their career.

Moving image, film and production companies were the least likely to choose specialising.

Q&A
Ana & Hermeti Balarin

Mother

Since joining Mother London as interns in 2007, Ana and Hermeti Balarin climbed the agency's creative ranks to become joint ECDs and later partners in 2017. During this time they've created famous ads for many of the agency's clients, including KFC, Coca-Cola, Stella Artois, IKEA and Greenpeace. The pair are also the current presidents of the Creative Circle, have exhibited at London's Design Museum and have won a Documentary Short Tribeca Film award. We speak to the couple about their perspective on specialising in the creative industries.

Q&A
Ana & Hermeti Balarin

Mother

Q Do you back the idea of having a T-shaped skill set?

A Hermeti: I think that it is almost essential that you have a broad set of skills alongside your main feature. The creative industries have been changing so much that it feels almost like a luxury that you could just do your thing and rely on other people to do elements for you. Creatives at Mother are asked to perform a much broader range of skills in their day-to-day. They are in constant contact with clients, so they're doing a lot of the selling and defending ideas. We want them heavily involved in the briefing and so they are very strategic in that way. But obviously, the reason why they're here is to do their main skill, like copywriting, art directing or design.

A Ana: If I had answered that question I would probably have ticked the generalist box. The creative industries have changed so rapidly in the past 20 years. If you were a creative 30 or 40 years ago, you could spend the whole of your career doing one thing and specialising in one craft and that would be all you needed. And then suddenly you had to expand, adapt and learn, and that never stopped after the digital revolution. I don't think people have that much time or the luxury to specialise these days.

Q Do you think there is a risk that by not specialising, creatives may fail to build confidence?

A Ana: I think that's fair. If you're a specialist in something your self-confidence does grow. It really depends on your career path. I'd say to work at a creative agency you definitely have to be more of a generalist. Of course, we do work with loads of specialists, but we tend to seek them out for certain projects. But I don't know if in our industry, or even our agency, there would be space for a super specialist unless they had other skills to bring to the table.

A Hermeti: I can see that having a specialism lets you go deep into something, become very courageous and back yourself, but I don't think the opportunity to do this is being offered. At a creative advertising agency, generalism has been the order of the day for the past ten years. But I do agree with the research still because it's not about having a broad set of skills and being good-ish in all of them. You have to be outstanding at one of your skills.

Q Moving image/ film and production companies were the least likely to choose specialising. Why do you think this is the case?

A Ana: Wow that is surprising, because we normally go to them for specialities!

A Hermeti: I wonder if it's a business need, in the past, you have directors in your roster and you have one for each kind of film you could make, like special effects or comedy. I am surprised. But again, the top tier of directors are all really diverse, you'll see them doing animation, live action, long and short form. So I think the same answer still applies. It's the market dictating what's available. I'm almost changing my mind, you need to become a specialist in everything!

A Ana: Now that we're talking about it, I can see that there might be some reluctance to become pigeonholed into a certain style.

Q Do you think creatives are generally afraid of being pigeonholed?

A Hermeti: I think a lot of creatives would be very happy, perhaps ourselves included, if they could go so deep into one particular style that they like the most. But the need or the ask of the marketplace is for people that can do multiple things. At least creatives in our area of business are very commercially attuned. They are smart about how they are marketed. It's not necessarily that the individual wants to broaden, it's them knowing what to do to be successful these days.

Q If you could learn one non-creative skill, what would it be and why?

A Ana: I never have the answer to these types of questions but this time I do: I would love to have formal training in gardening.

A Hermeti: Mine is born out of lockdown, I would love to be able to teach a four year old – I'm failing miserably.

> "I don't think people have that much time or the luxury to specialise these days."

Michelle Phillips is the co-founder and creative director of Studio Yukiko, a design and art direction studio based in Berlin. Alongside her partner Johannes Conrad, "the other me" as she puts it, the pair have carved out a loyal following from commercial and cultural institutions, from Nike to designing the always travelling magazine, *Flaneur*. Although the studio has expanded since the two of them started out in 2012, Michelle's a designer at heart and continues to stay close to and passionate about every project from a creative perspective. We discuss what this means when it comes to hiring and working with other designers.

Q&A

Michelle Phillips

Studio Yukiko

Q&A
Michelle Phillips

Studio Yukiko

Q Where do you feel you sit in the generalist to specialist spectrum of skills?

A I would say, in terms of specific skill sets, I'm more of a specialist. In that, I'm really stuck to InDesign, Illustrator and Photoshop, and I switch between them a lot, but that's my limit. In terms of my job role, I'm more of a generalist, in that I'm forced to be. At the beginning of the studio, I did everything myself. Now we have a bigger team, of seven, so I have to delegate a lot more work, and think about the bigger picture. Now I take much more of an art directional role, a lot more sketching things up and then passing it around – back seat driving, basically.

Q 75% of creatives believe that to future-proof their career it's better to develop a T-shaped skill set, rather than generalise or specialise. What would you suggest is best?

A It depends what they want to do though, doesn't it? If they want to be an illustrator, then they should go be an illustrator. Weirdly enough though, when we get portfolios from designers, if they start with illustrations I usually think that they're a wrong fit. In that case, I think that we're traditionally a graphic design studio; we dabble in other things, but that's our priority.

Because of this, I'd say I definitely agree with a T-shaped skill set and that's what we look for. For instance, at the moment we've been looking for a brand designer specifically, but we're still hoping that that person can also jump around on more flexible projects – not be expected to lead, but to assist. I guess that's what the T-shaped model is really, being really good at something but you can help out with something else!

From a personal point of view, it's also great when talking to other creatives to have some understanding of their field. If you're briefing or collaborating with someone you can't be completely ignorant of what's involved with their work.

Q What else is it you're looking for when going through portfolios? Is there a balance?

A Skill set of course, but I think for us it's more that we're looking for a flexibility of style – someone who has a solid design practice, but they have a bit of style themselves, or they bring something we don't have. Someone who is too crazy all the time is also not right, because we still have a number of pretty straightforward jobs.

We look for a balanced skill set, and a balanced style. If a creative has this, it means that if they have an idea that they can't quite execute themselves, one of us in the studio will be able to, or we'll outsource that to a specialist. It's more about being able to have that creative vision and being able to explain that to other people. The other thing we really like is people who are very interested in the kind of work they're doing, people who can straddle a bit of the commercial and a bit of the cultural. Someone who has an interest in what's going on out there!

Overall, to articulate what you want is the most important thing, we'll figure out the rest as we go along. For instance, we just hired a producer who is 18, turning 19. They're maybe not the most experienced, but they were the most open and willing to learn and get onboard.

Q With the mix of skills across your team members, would you say this balance allows internal skill sharing?

A For sure, definitely. We each do have our own ways of working but I think we've grown into each other. I think especially with the younger ones and the interns, but we pick up a lot from each other. Even myself, a designer who works with

us Ira taught me ReadyMag recently. That's not something I would have just sat down and thought to do on my own. Plus, just doing classes and then stopping means you will forget what you've learned.

Learning by doing is the most useful, and it's what actually happens on a project. You work on a project and you have to do something using a certain skill – you're either going to learn it yourself or from those around you, or by really trying to get the project done. It allows for urgency in learning.

Q If you could learn one non-creative skill, what would it be and why?

A You know, about a month before coronavirus Johannes and I were having dinner and got into the discussion of exit strategies. We were stressed, because there was so much going on, and thought god, what if we're this stressed in 20 years time? We decided to come up with an exit strategy, which was to start a Ramen restaurant. So, gastronomy! I don't know if it would be any less stressful... It's more about not doing something in front of a computer screen all day.

> "We look for a balanced skill set, and a balanced style."

CONCLUSION
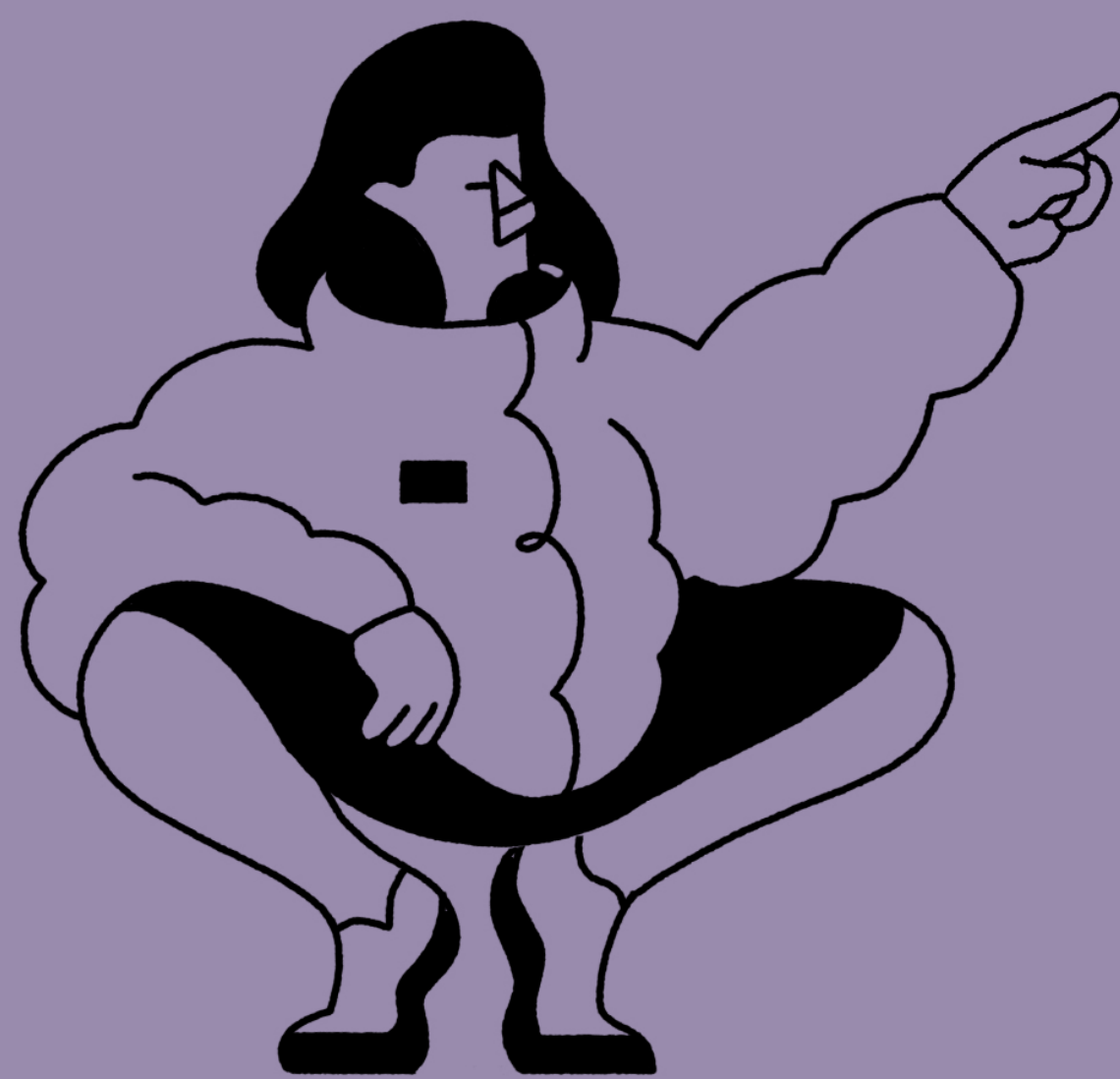
Looking at the most in-demand creative skills today, there are two clear winners: film (e.g. motion graphics, animation, video editing) and digital (e.g. coding, web design, digital, typography, UX and UI design). The ways people are increasingly consuming media are driving this demand – today ideas need to be online and moving, our respondents told us. Yet, the biggest skills gaps are in technology, with more than a third saying that clients are asking for more skills in digital and future digital (e.g. AI/ AR/ VR, robotics, the internet of things).

Creatives also see a clear link between upskilling and personal success. To advance their careers, 48% think that future digital skills are the way to go. They are also widely in agreement when it comes to the specialising versus generalising debate. A huge majority (75%) believe it's best to couple deep expertise in one skill with a broad knowledge base in several others.

But despite the desire to diversify, creatives are coming up against barriers to their development. Teams are suffering from a lack of structure and resources when it comes to training, with almost half of the creatives confessing that learning is not measured at work. With the time constraints in our VUCA world a major issue, and managers unclear about what their responsibilities are, companies need buy-in from the top to make upskilling a priority.

Leaders need to truly listen to their reports and find out what training they want and need. The first step is to open up conversations about creative self-development. By proving that people's appetites for learning are at odds with the amount of training up for grabs, we hope the findings in this report will help to spark them.

WE ASKED THE CREATIVES IN OUR SURVEY TO FORGET FOR A MOMENT WHAT THEY THINK THEY SHOULD BE LEARNING, AND TELL US WHAT SKILL THEY'D LOVE TO GAIN.
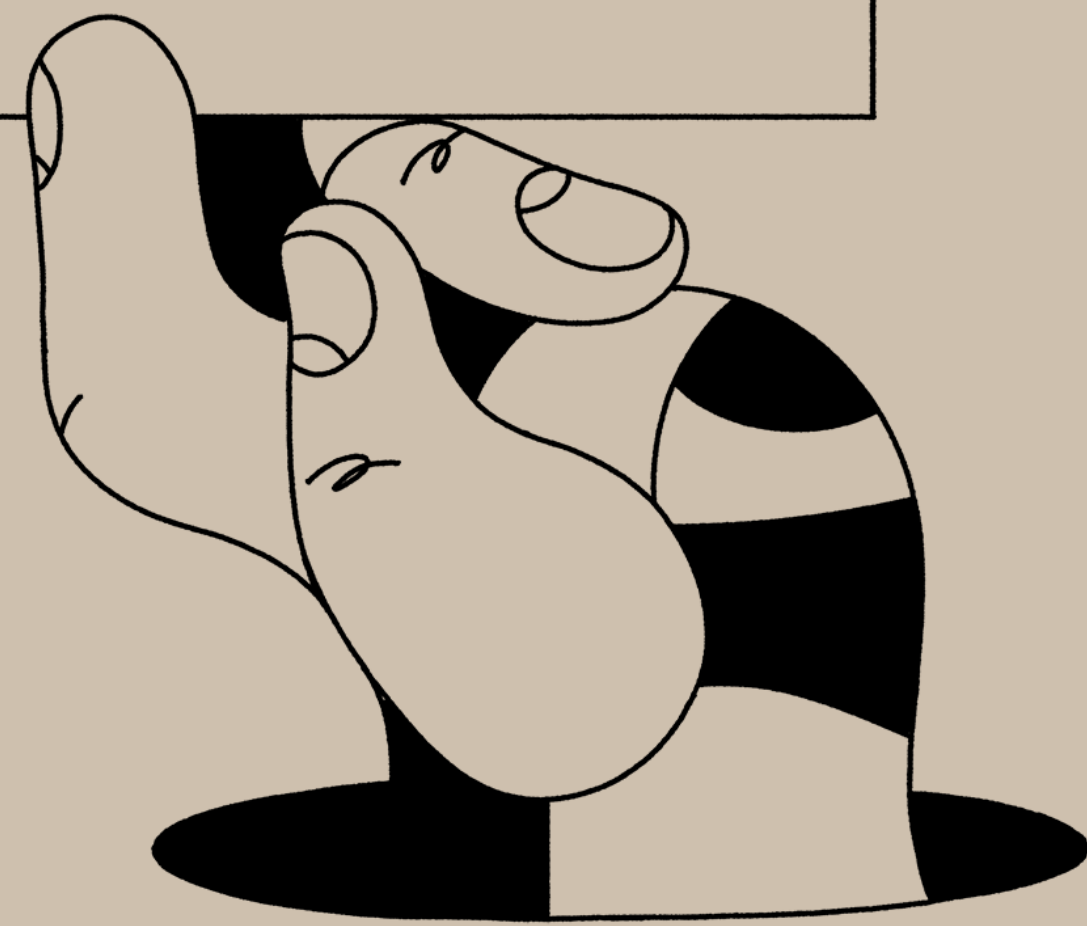
One person wants to learn mind reading, another knife sharpening. Should we be scared?

Maybe it's down to lockdown life, but many creatives are dreaming of domestic skills like electrics, plumbing, gardening and carpeting.

Several creatives want to get behind the wheel, with tractors and trucks the most popular rides.

Spanish is the most popular language to learn and piano the most fashionable instrument.

Money talks: 3% of creatives would choose to boost their financial knowhow.

2% of creatives say they'd carve out time for woodwork.

More people want to learn cooking (5%) than coding (2%).

Creatives are craving the waves, with many opting for water sports like surfing and sailing.

Thanks to everyone who took part in the survey

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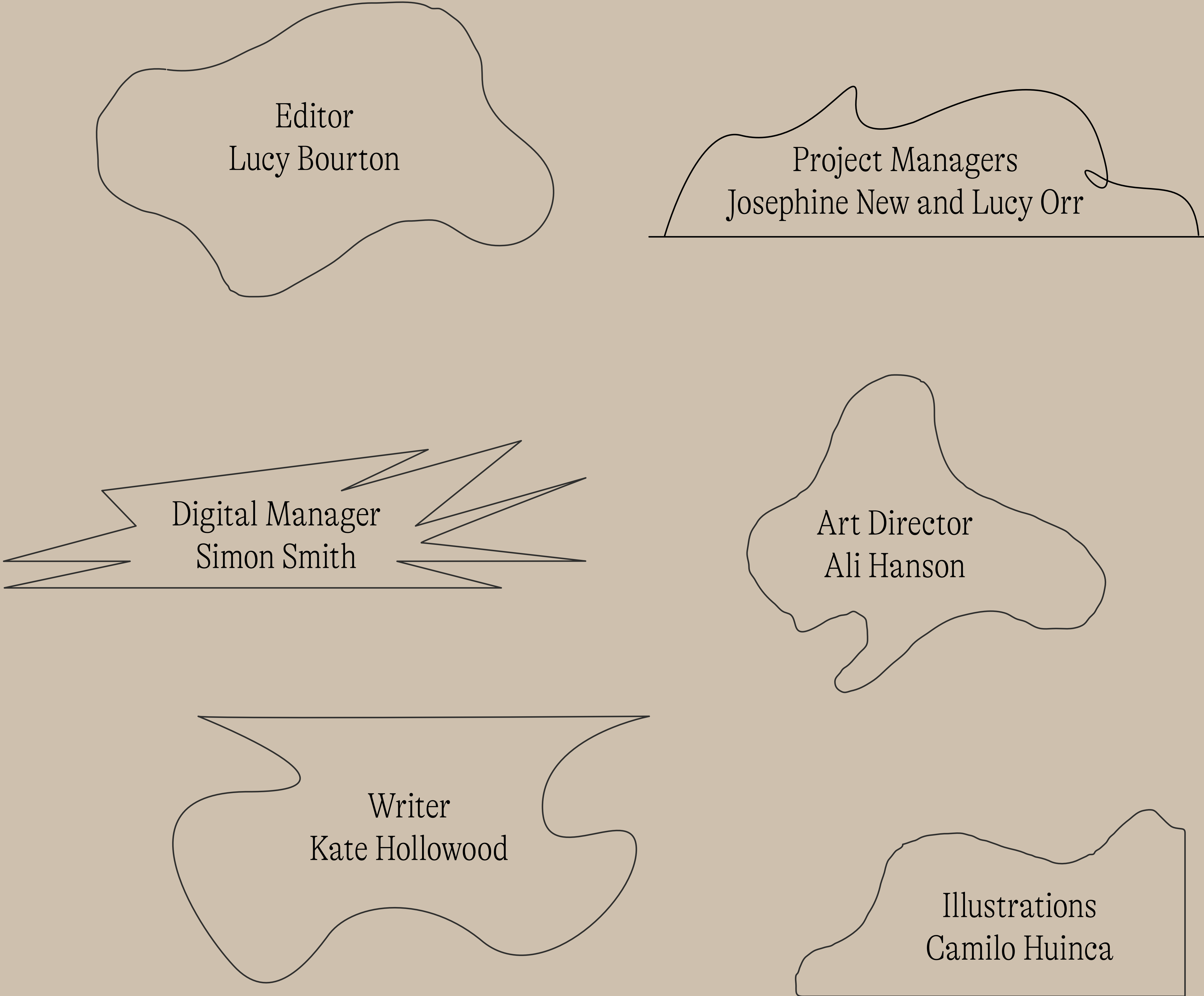VICE
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Thank you to our interviewees for their insight and opinion: Lupi Asensio, Martin Lorenz, James Cullen, Katy Kent, Marina Willer, Ignasi Tudela, Michelle Phillips, Ana Balarin and Hermeti Balarin, Chrystal King and Hans Wirblad Kastman.

Editor
Lucy Bourton

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