REPORT

The future of creative experiences.

How creative work changed in 2021—and where it's headed in 2022 and beyond.

Table of contents

> " Creativity is one of the last remaining legal ways of gaining an unfair advantage over the competition.

Ed McCabe
—Iconic copywriter responsible for some of the world's most successful ad campaigns and the youngest inductee into the Creative Hall of Fame

As the digital world evolves at the fastest pace in history, the creative experience has had to evolve along with it. We surveyed 400 US-based creative professionals to gain a better understanding of how the creative experience has changed, the challenges creatives face moving forward, and what's on the horizon for future creative work.

We uncovered a common thread: Creative work, the kind that drives innovation, opportunities, and outcomes, is at every stage tied to behind-the-scenes operations. Creatives may no longer have to fight for a seat at the table. But they do have to fight for the time to do what they do best—create.
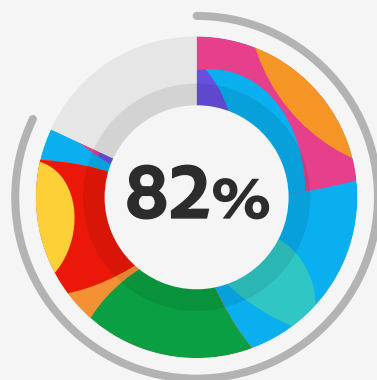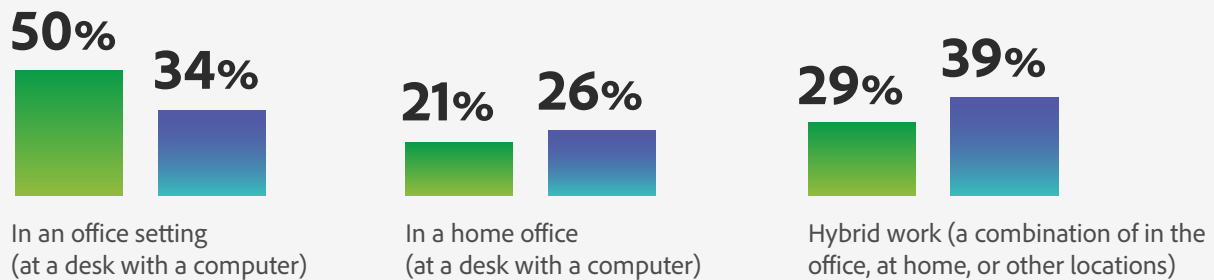
We've used these findings to arm creative leaders with the intel they need to improve the creative experience so that creativity can give them the competitive advantage.

Creativity can happen anywhere.

The current state of work.

Of the creatives surveyed, 82% said that when the world went into lockdown, where and how they worked changed. Pre-COVID-19, half of all creatives commuted to work every day, while the other half either worked remotely or in a hybrid environment—sometimes in the office and sometimes at home or another location of their choosing. Currently, only 34% of creative professionals work in an office, with a hybrid model of work taking the lead.

■ Pre-COVID-19 work environment   ■ Current work environment

50%
34%

In an office setting
(at a desk with a computer)

21% **26%**

In a home office
(at a desk with a computer)

29% **39%**

Hybrid work (a combination of in the office, at home, or other locations)

82%

82% said work settings changed due to COVID-19.

The future is built for flexibility.

Nearly three-quarters of organizations expect their employees to return to the office by late 2021, but not necessarily full time. Expectations are evenly split between full-time in-office work and hybrid work.
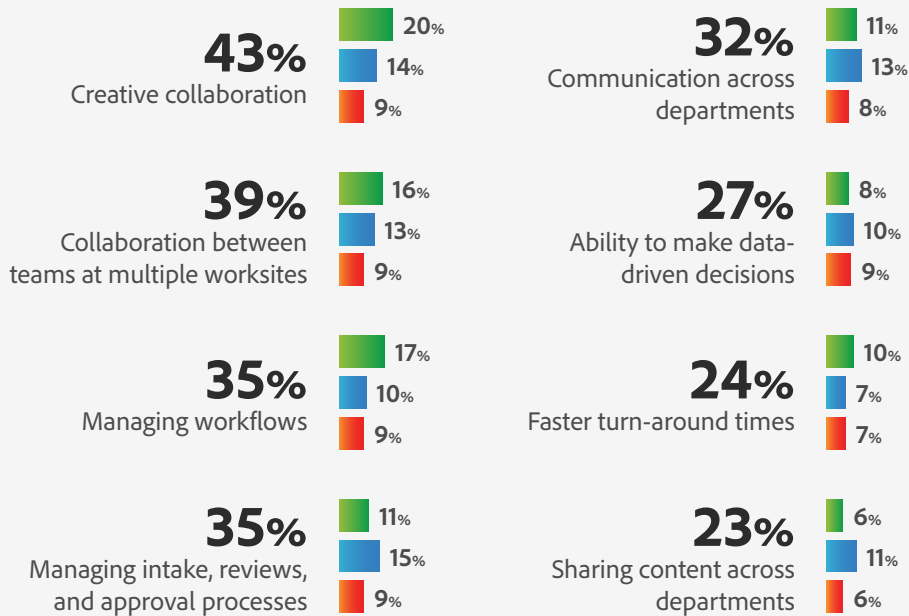
While 82% of respondents say their organizations are set up to effectively work from home long term, they also point out new challenges introduced by hybrid work environments, namely around collaboration and managing workflows when employees work from multiple locations. It's critical to address these challenges now because hybrid isn't merely a temporary reaction to change. The hybrid model of work is here to lead the way.

Hybrid work concerns.

Concern	
Managing hybrid meetings or calls with people in work and home locations	**51%**
Maintaining company or team culture and morale	**40%**
Missing out on "in-person" conversations and collaborations when I am not at work	**38%**
Ensuring the work location is an effective space for creativity and collaboration	**37%**
Not having my colleagues together in one location	**21%**
Not having the same opportunities as people in the office	**20%**
Managing a "split team"	**20%**
No concerns	**6%**

Top-ranked work priorities.

43%
Creative collaboration
20%
14%
9%

32%
Communication across departments
11%
13%
8%

39%
Collaboration between teams at multiple worksites
16%
13%
9%

27%
Ability to make data-driven decisions
8%
10%
9%

35%
Managing workflows
17%
10%
9%

24%
Faster turn-around times
10%
7%
7%

35%
Managing intake, reviews, and approval processes
11%
15%
9%

23%
Sharing content across departments
6%
11%
6%

HOW WORK MANAGEMENT HELPS

Regardless of the "where," everyone is connected to the "why."

Work management applications allow creatives to work where they want—at home or in the office—while staying connected to data, people, processes, and technology across the organization and at every stage of work. With work centralized in a single system, every team member has clear visibility into strategic business goals, has their pulse on progress, and can prioritize requests and adapt work as new demands and opportunities surface.

Work management technology helps creatives stay connected so that they can collaborate from anywhere.
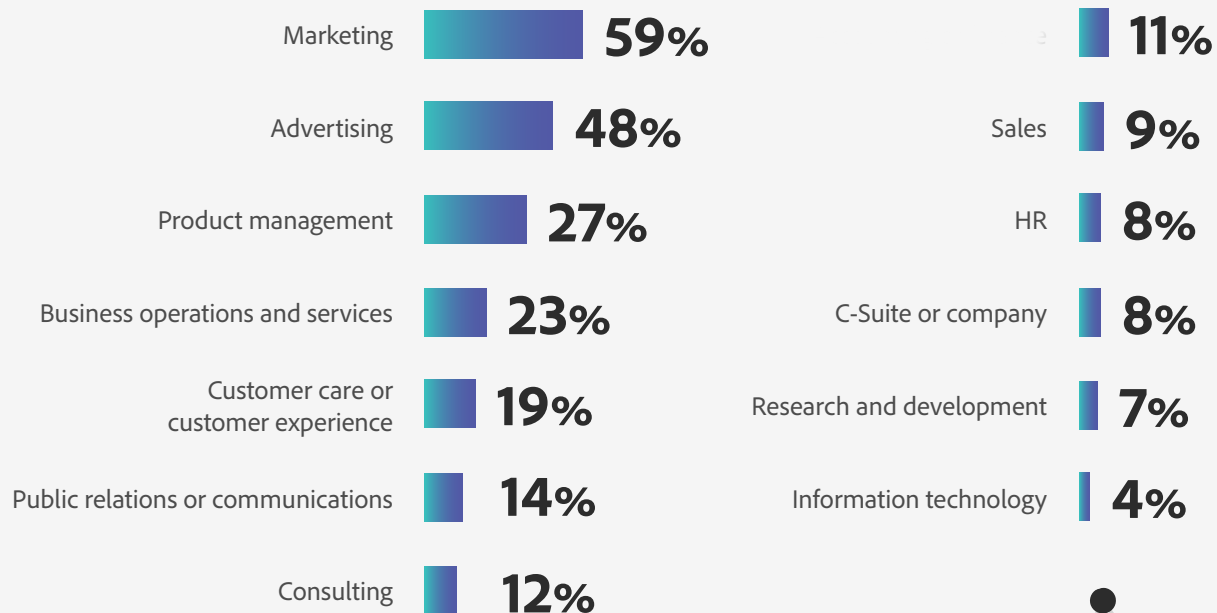
No creative is an island.
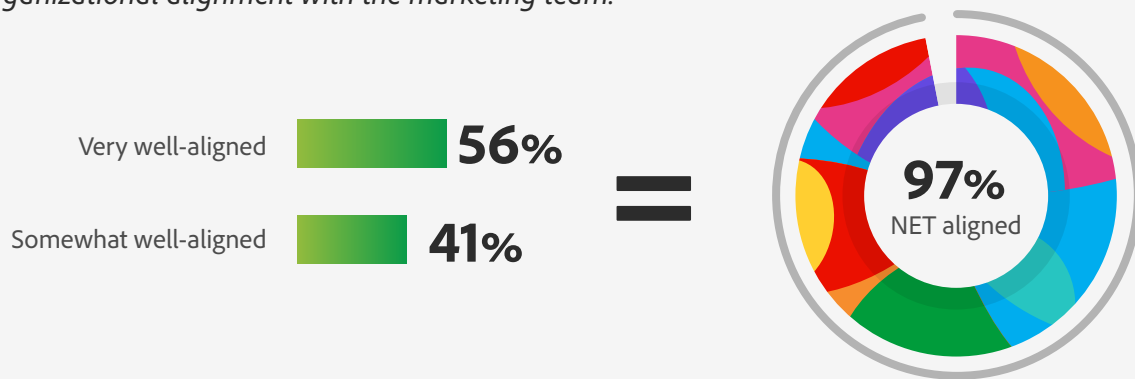
Creativity is part of a whole.

Creatives are interacting with many different teams and departments—most often marketing, advertising, business operations, and product management. But the majority prefer to be involved in campaign development and content creation while staying out of the performance insights and optimization stages of the work cycle.

And while 79% of agency creatives say they're "very well-aligned" with their marketing teams, only 48% of in-house creatives feel the same. This may well be because creatives working within brands have more competing priorities and directives.
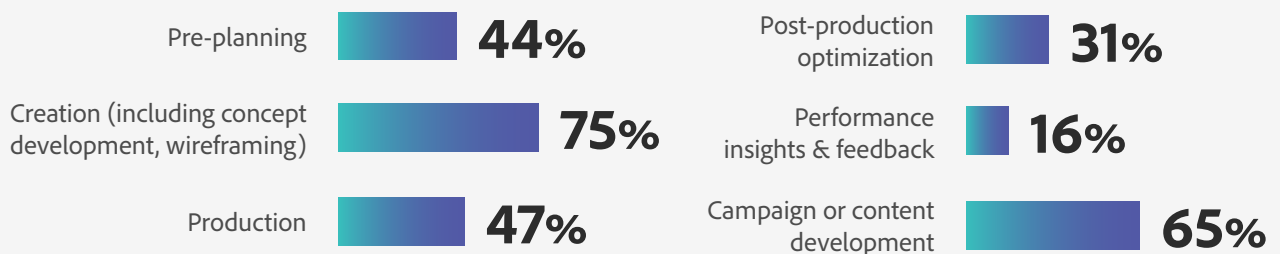
Departments that request time.

Department	%		Department	%
Marketing	59%			11%
Advertising	48%		Sales	9%
Product management	27%		HR	8%
Business operations and services	23%		C-Suite or company	8%
Customer care or customer experience	19%		Research and development	7%
Public relations or communications	14%		Information technology	4%
Consulting	12%			

Organizational alignment with the marketing team.

Very well-aligned	**56%**
Somewhat well-aligned	**41%**

=

97%
NET aligned

Desired involvement at content stages.

Pre-planning	**44%**
Creation (including concept development, wireframing)	**75%**
Production	**47%**

Post-production optimization	**31%**
Performance insights & feedback	**16%**
Campaign or content development	**65%**

Creativity can be measured.

As much as creatives would like more involvement in the development and production stages of work, only a small minority (16%) wish to see how their work performed.

There's a great opportunity for creatives to garner insights from feedback and performance metrics to help inform future work and create better customer experiences. When creatives are connected to outcomes, they can see and feel the impact of their creativity. They can create more meaningful experiences for their audience and expand their influence even further.

Turning creativity into a hard skill.

Adopting a work management system facilitates cross-functional work and keeps projects moving in the right direction. Creatives can partner with marketing teams, sales teams, stakeholders, and executive leaders without friction and better align strategies, resources, and work. Data can be synced in one place and updated in real time so that everyone has complete insight into the status of work as it occurs across different tools and teams. And when there's connection and visibility at every stage—from project inception to delivery to evaluation—creative work is tied to measurable outcomes. Everyone, including executive leadership, can see just how valuable creatives really are.

By keeping work requests, feedback, status updates, and outcomes in one place, a work management application ensures creatives never get sidelined.
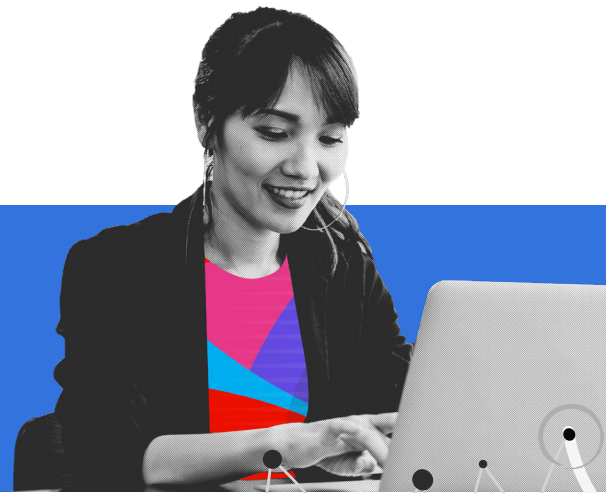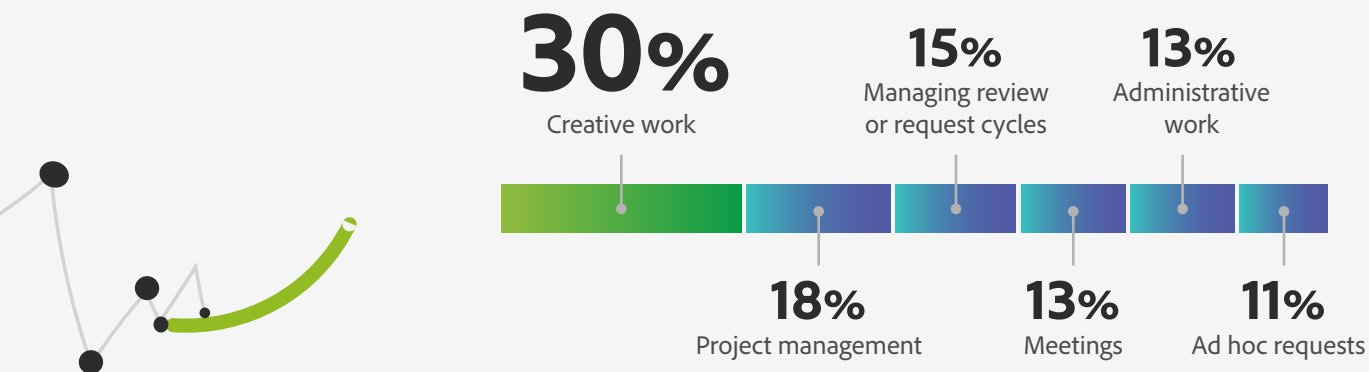
When work flows, creativity flows.

Creativity is on borrowed time.

Creatives aren't just in it for the money. They love to create. Imagine their frustration when 70% of their day is spent on non-creative tasks: project management, meetings, admin work, and so on.
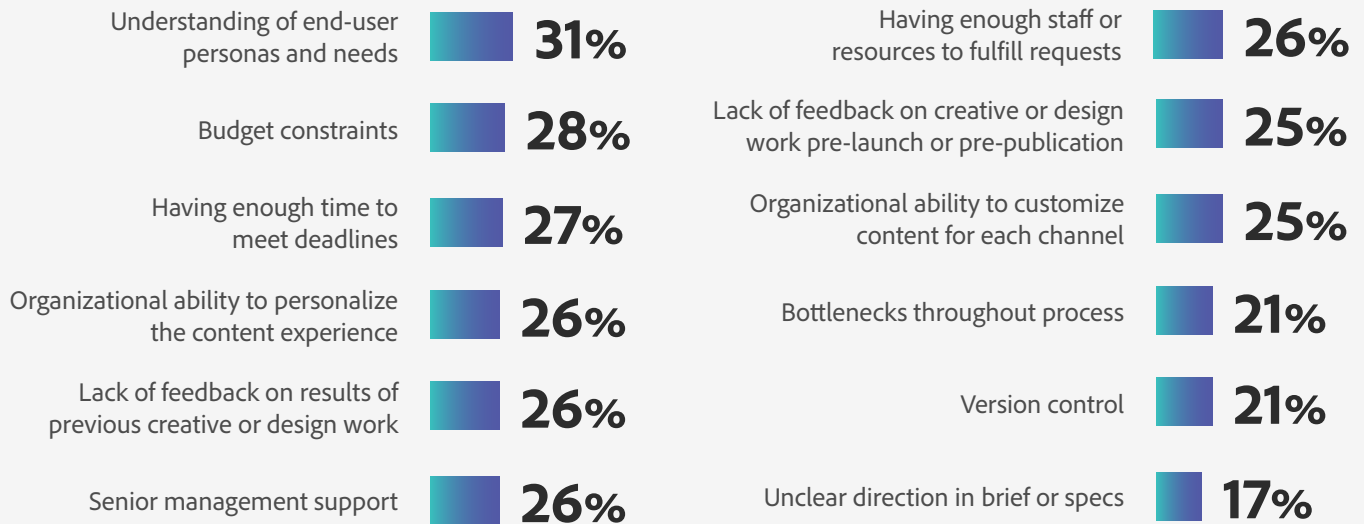
There's a simple fix—automating the more operational elements of the job can free up time to create.

How creatives spend their time.

30% Creative work

15% Managing review or request cycles

13% Administrative work

18% Project management

13% Meetings

11% Ad hoc requests

Creativity is also curtailed when creatives aren't in touch with the why and how of an assigned task— when they don't have an understanding of customer personas and needs. Budget, resource, and time constraints can also impede the creative process, as can the lack of feedback on previous projects. Understanding the context helps creatives do their best work.

Challenges in creating effective design.

Understanding of end-user personas and needs	**31%**
Budget constraints	**28%**
Having enough time to meet deadlines	**27%**
Organizational ability to personalize the content experience	**26%**
Lack of feedback on results of previous creative or design work	**26%**
Senior management support	**26%**

Having enough staff or resources to fulfill requests	**26%**
Lack of feedback on creative or design work pre-launch or pre-publication	**25%**
Organizational ability to customize content for each channel	**25%**
Bottlenecks throughout process	**21%**
Version control	**21%**
Unclear direction in brief or specs	**17%**

Creativity isn't an endless well.

Creatives agree that working from home and having efficient and effective business processes in place helps them manage their time better and work faster. Eliminating daily commutes and office distractions opens up more time to focus and find balance. But working from home for such a prolonged time may be starting to cause a drain on creativity, with 34% of creatives feeling "less creative."

We'd also like to call attention to the pressure creatives are feeling to create more in the same amount of time, with a net 68% agreeing it's getting harder to produce content on a global scale. The majority of creatives feel that teams are disconnected from overall company strategy, which can waste time, work, and resources.
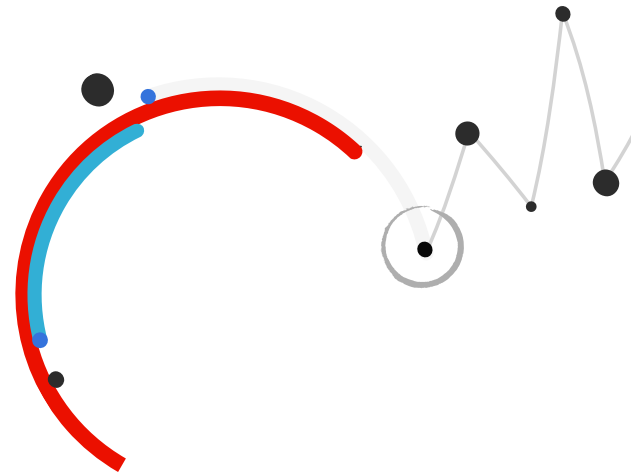
Workday conditions and challenges.

■ Strongly agree ■ Somewhat agree ■ Somewhat disagree ■ Strongly disagree

Process management helps me turn creative work around faster.
- 46%
- 40%
- 14%
- 0%

Teams in our organization do not have the same understanding of company strategy.
- 28%
- 38%
- 31%
- 3%

Working at home makes it easier to manage my time.
- 42%
- 39%
- 16%
- 3%

We don't have enough resources to handle our workload.
- 29%
- 28%
- 37%
- 5%

Working at home has made me less creative.
- 31%
- 34%
- 32%
- 3%

I don't have enough time in my day to be creative.
- 29%
- 28%
- 39%
- 3%

It's getting harder to produce creative on a global scale.
- 30%
- 38%
- 30%
- 1%

Executing great creative work is becoming increasingly difficult. Declining creativity may be one reason why many companies are pushing for a return to the office or adopting a hybrid model.

Protecting time for creativity.

Increased work requests, disconnected systems, shifting stakeholder expectations, excessive emails and meetings, and repetitive manual tasks keep creatives from the work they were hired—and love—to do.

Establishing one place for all requests, standardizing creative briefs, building project templates, and automating the prioritization and assignment of work and workflow tasks can help give creatives back their time and creativity. With a solid foundation in place and no blind spots, your team can create more strategically, eliminating restarts or extra revisions. Creativity has more time to find its footing, which naturally speeds the creative process.

Work management applications let creative teams spend more time being creative and less time lumbering through slow and inefficient processes, bottlenecks, and creative rework.
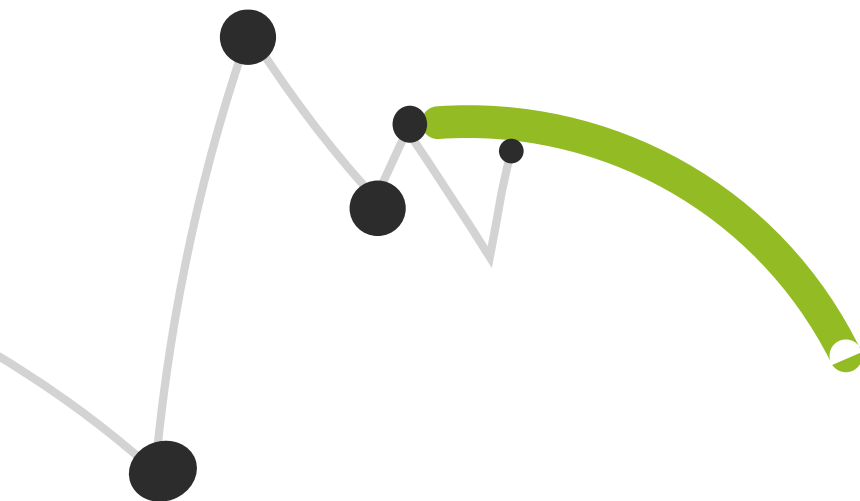
Creativity has the perfect partner in tech.

Technology is still getting to know creativity.

In this digital-first world, technology makes creativity possible. Nearly all creatives have access to the tools they need, with most creatives using three or four tools in a workday.

Interestingly, half of respondents say they only have access to the tools they need when in the office. It looks like technology has some catching up to do for remote and hybrid workers.

Fully integrated tools.

11%
No

89%
Yes
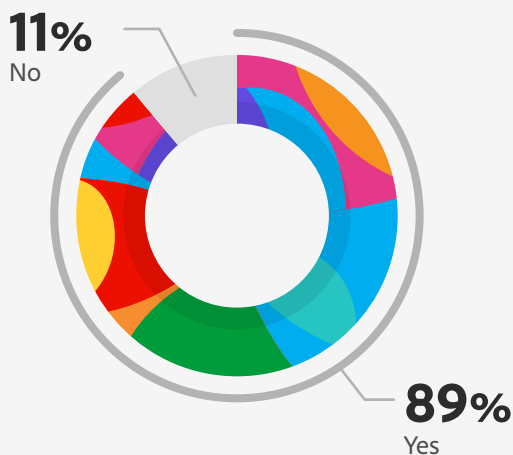
Number of software tools used daily.

1-2 **13%**

3-4 **47%**

5-10 **36%**

10+ **3%**
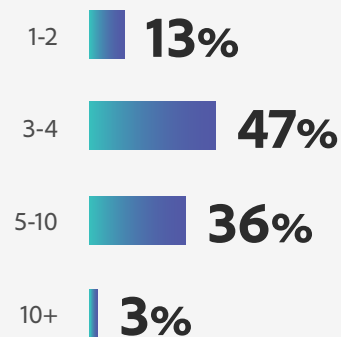
Reliance on technology is growing.

Creative professionals are relying more and more on technology to accelerate the pace of work, improve collaboration between team members, and manage workflow. Brands have a higher learning curve, as agency creatives are more advanced in their use of technology than their in-house counterparts.

Tech meets creatives on their turf.

Even when creativity is speedy, a lengthy approval process can make work late. Automating feedback and approval workflows minimizes the wait time that can hold up projects and maximizes the vital forward momentum the creative process thrives on.

The right work management technology provides seamless integration with the applications creatives are already using. Creatives can generate proofs, make side-by-side comparisons, track versions, pivot with changing workflows, and easily review, approve, and publish assets without having to jump from their favorite creative tool to a different application or communication channel.

No more toggling between tools. A work management application speeds up the creation and delivery of work by meeting creatives where they create.
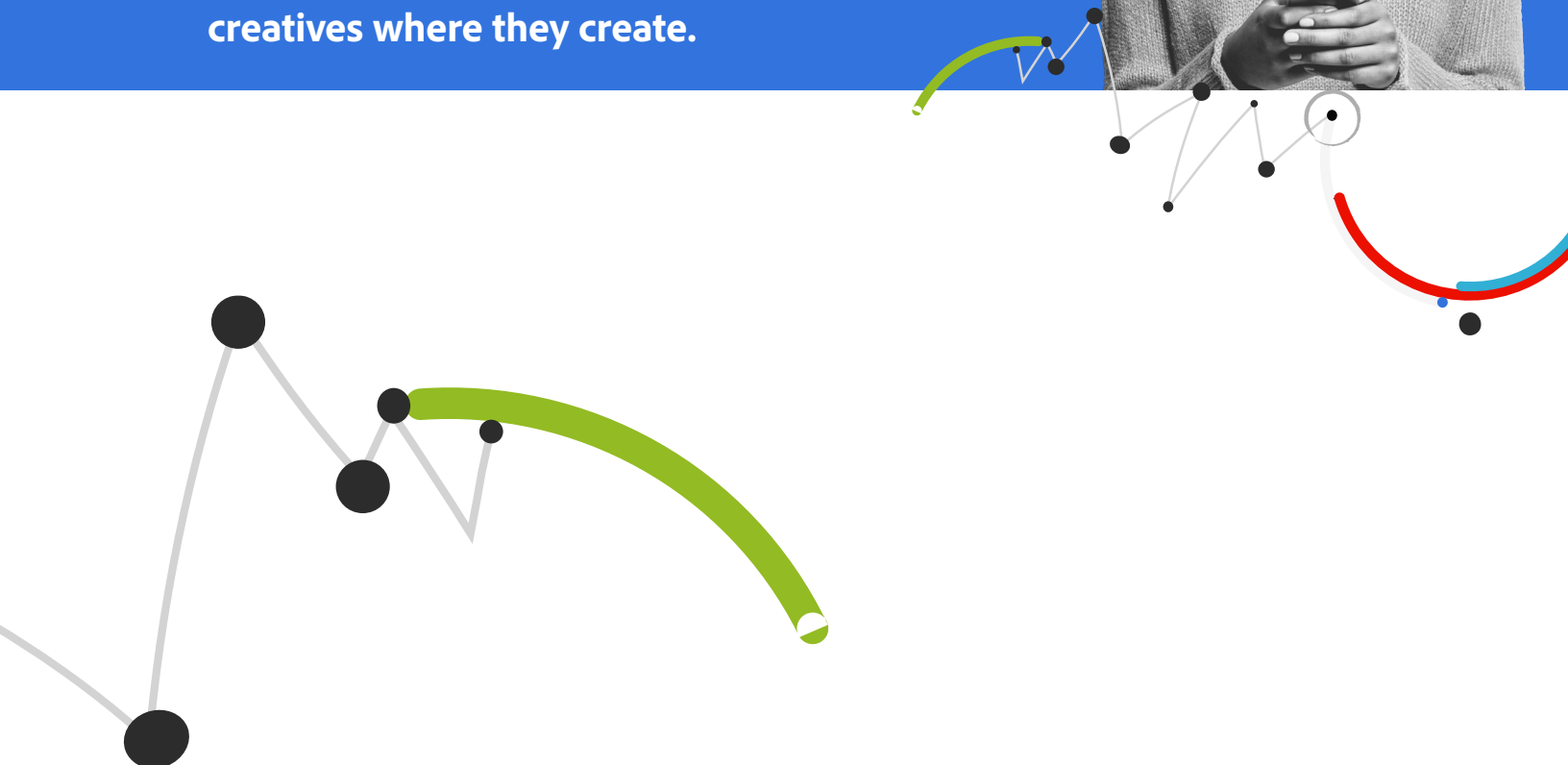
Creatives care about the customer experience.

Great experiences aren't always remembered.

Creatives know how important it is to give the customer a great experience. And most say their companies are meeting customer experience expectations. But only 21% believe these efforts are definitely helping them stand out.

Ability to provide great customer experience.

■ Very advanced   ■ Somewhat advanced   ■ Not very advanced

48%	43%	7%
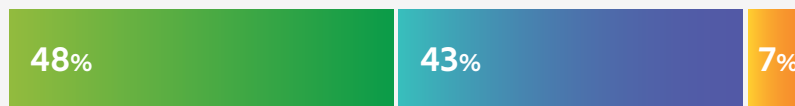
Digital marketing and branding to differientiate against competitors.

■ Has definitely differentiated us   ■ Has somewhat differentiated us   ■ Has not differentiated us at all

21%	56%	23%

It's time to exceed expectations.

The bar on customer experience is rising. As the workforce goes hybrid, creative collaboration and execution become more important than ever. Teams must be able to deliver great creative content at scale while staying on brand and connected across teams and departments.

Never miss a brand moment.

A work management application keeps everyone in the loop and on the same page, so that inconsistencies don't arise and the creative process never stalls. All eyes are on updates, work never strays from strategy, reviews and approvals are in lockstep, and brand standards are maintained across teams and departments.

With built-in automation and connectivity capabilities, a work management application helps your brand stay on point and on pace, creating better experiences for customers and creative teams.

Data insights drive creativity.

It's a budding relationship.

Agencies have a slightly different relationship to data than brands do. Most agencies say they are "completely data driven," even though they generally hand off creative work to the client, who then markets it and gathers relevant insights. Only 32% of brands claim the same, although most brands say they are "very data driven."

Whether in-house or working at an agency, creatives don't have as strong of a relationship with data as they could. Just under half of creatives feel "completely connected" to the outcomes of their creative work, with most feedback coming in the form of direct customer responses, conversion metrics, and marketing leads.
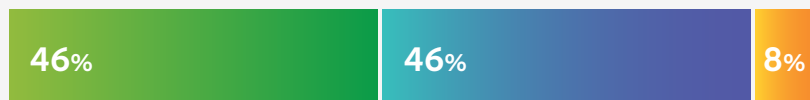
Organizational data drive.

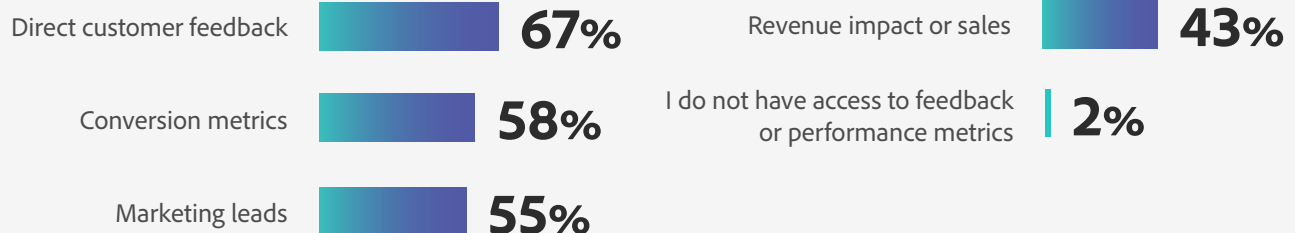■ Completely data driven   ■ Very data driven   ■ Somewhat data driven

39%	50%	10%

Connection to outcomes from creative work.

■ Completely connected   ■ Very connected   ■ Somewhat connected

46%	46%	8%

Access to feedback mechanisms.

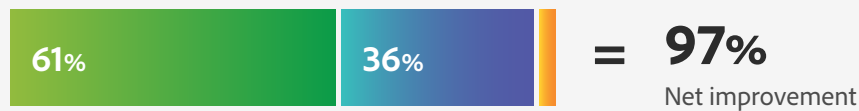|	
Direct customer feedback **67%**	Revenue impact or sales **43%**
Conversion metrics **58%**	I do not have access to feedback or performance metrics **2%**
Marketing leads **55%**	

The future belongs to data-driven creativity.

Recall that only 16% of creatives feel the need to see performance outcomes. However, when they *do* have access to data, it enhances their work. Seventy-nine percent of creative professionals who feel "completely connected" to data outcomes say this access significantly improves their work.

Access to data shortens the time between creative brief and implementation, expedites reviews and approvals, aids personalization efforts, improves future work, and helps creatives stay nimble as priorities shift. It also validates the critical role creatives play in the customer experience and business objectives, ensuring creatives know their work matters.
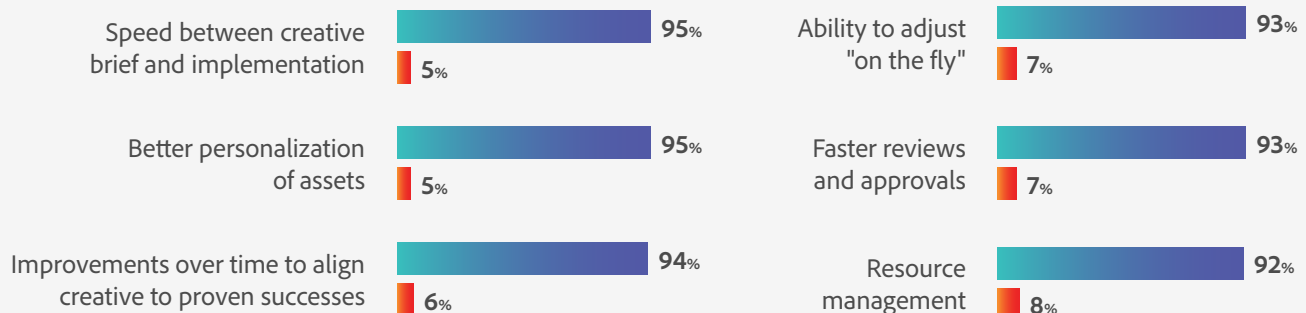
Impact of data access on aspects of creative work.

■ Significant improvement   ■ Modest improvement   ■ No improvement

61%	36%		=	**97%**

Net improvement

Impact of data access on overall creative work.

■ Net agree   ■ Net disagree

Speed between creative brief and implementation	95%	Ability to adjust "on the fly"	93%
	5%		7%
Better personalization of assets	95%	Faster reviews and approvals	93%
	5%		7%
Improvements over time to align creative to proven successes	94%	Resource management	92%
	6%		8%

19

See creativity through to the end.

Designers, writers, and producers often don't get the chance to see the impact their work has on customers, company goals, or revenue. Work management technology gives creatives access to process data, like time spent on projects, to improve workflow. It can also connect with other systems to pull in performance insights that help inform their work going forward.

In addition to real-time updates and speedier approvals, a work management application links creatives to data that can improve their performance and help deliver even better customer experiences.
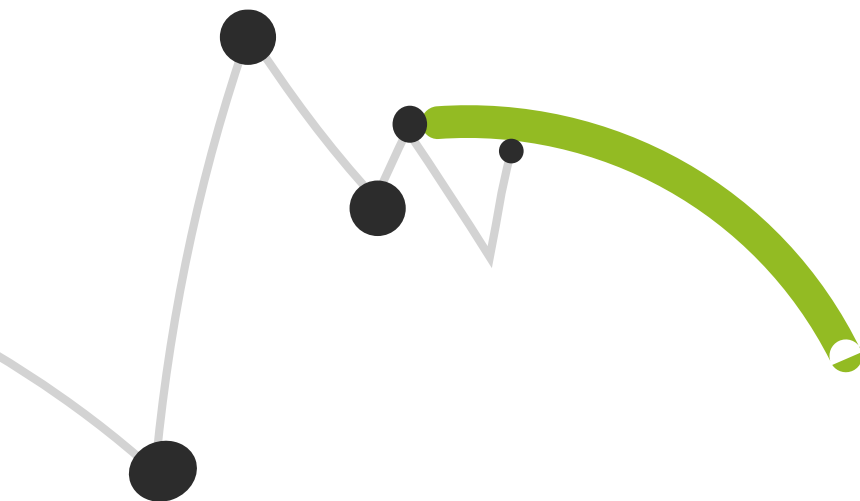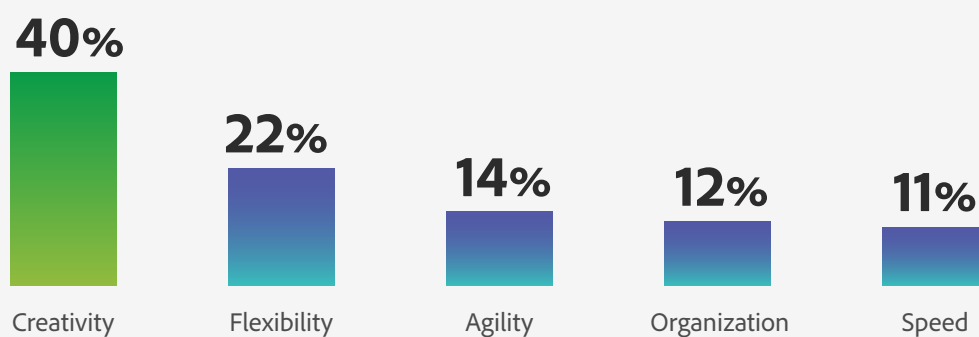
The forecast of creativity.
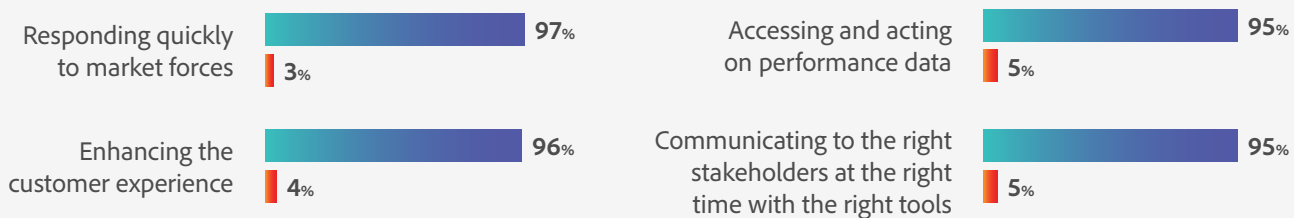
Creative skills of the future.

The most important skill for a creative to possess now and in the future is, unsurprisingly, "creativity." But "flexibility" and "agility" aren't far behind. These skills align with what creatives see as the focus of the future—enhancing the customer experience and responding quickly to market forces. The pandemic pushed these two outcomes into the spotlight, and they show no signs of being upstaged in the future.

Most important for creative professionals in the future.

40% Creativity

22% Flexibility

14% Agility

12% Organization

11% Speed

Importance of future outcomes.

■ Net agree   ■ Net disagree

Responding quickly to market forces — 97% / 3%

Enhancing the customer experience — 96% / 4%

Accessing and acting on performance data — 95% / 5%

Communicating to the right stakeholders at the right time with the right tools — 95% / 5%

Gain a creative edge.

Creativity is delicate. It takes the right conditions to bloom to its fullest expression. Give your teams a creative work experience that nurtures flexibility, agility, and autonomy so that they can do their best creating.

Empower them with technologies that automate the mundane and burdensome, that allow them to stay in the tools of their choice, and that make collaboration easy and keep them connected to strategy, process, and status at every stage. Because a great creative experience makes for a great customer experience, and that's the creative edge of the future.

Adobe Workfront

Adobe Workfront is enterprise work management software that connects work to strategy and drives better collaboration to deliver measurable business outcomes. It integrates people, data, processes, and technology across an organization, so you can manage the entire lifecycle of projects from start to finish. By optimizing and centralizing digital projects, cross-functional teams can connect, collaborate, and execute from anywhere to help them do their best work.

See how Adobe Workfront can help your creative teams deliver their best work from wherever they work—on time, every time.
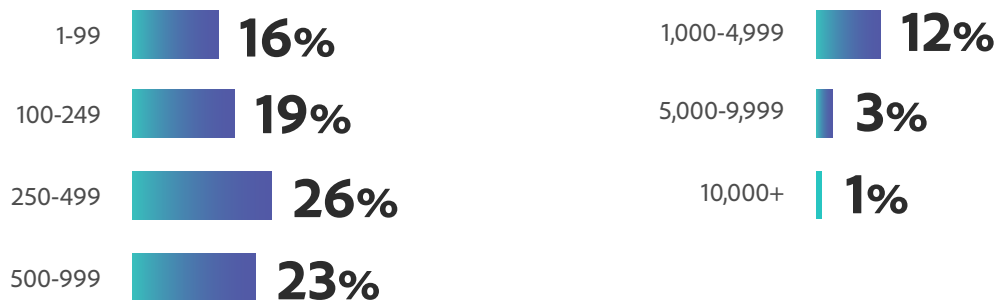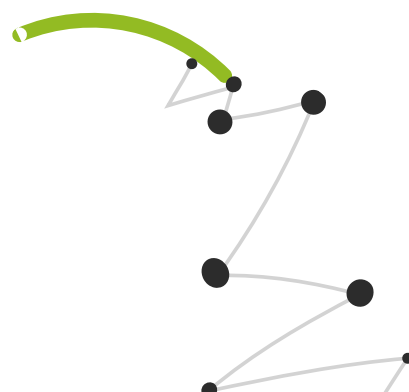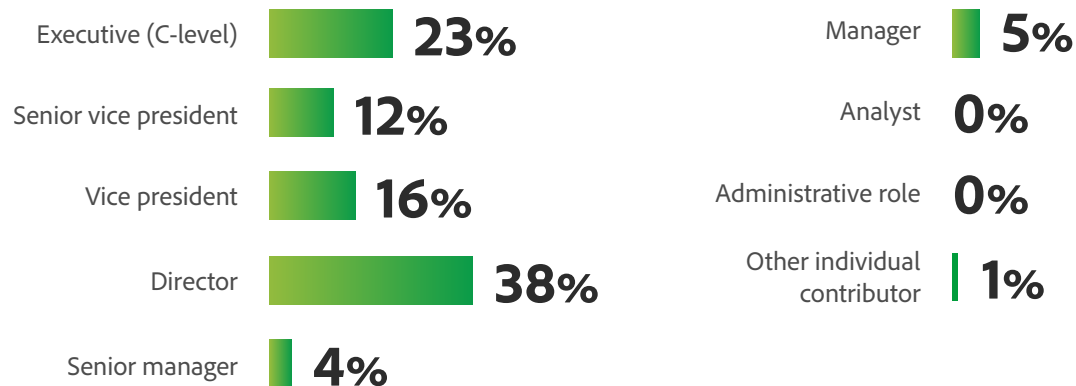
Learn more

Methodology.

This report synthesizes data from an online survey conducted by Advanis and Adobe between August 27 and September 7, 2021. It includes responses from 400 US-based creative professionals (300 brand, 100 agency). Most participants worked full time in a professional creative or design role involving content creation activities, such as photography, design, print layout, video, animation, copywriting, editorial, or content strategy.
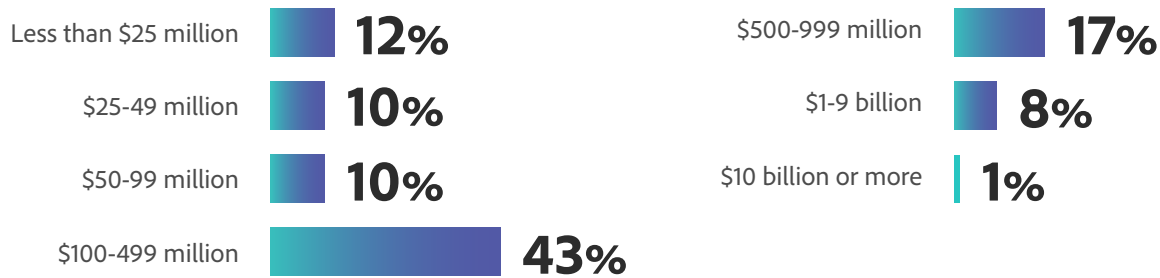
Organization employee size.

1-99	**16%**		1,000-4,999	**12%**
100-249	**19%**		5,000-9,999	**3%**
250-499	**26%**		10,000+	**1%**
500-999	**23%**			

Job level.

Executive (C-level)	**23%**		Manager	**5%**
Senior vice president	**12%**		Analyst	**0%**
Vice president	**16%**		Administrative role	**0%**
Director	**38%**		Other individual contributor	**1%**
Senior manager	**4%**			

Annual revenue (per year).

Less than $25 million	12%
$25-49 million	10%
$50-99 million	10%
$100-499 million	43%
$500-999 million	17%
$1-9 billion	8%
$10 billion or more	1%

Primary industry.

Media and entertainment	24%
Advertising or consulting agency	20%
Manufacturing	11%
Professional services	9%
Retail and consumer-packaged goods	8%
Technology (B2B and B2C)	7%
Healthcare and life sciences	5%
Financial services and insurance	4%
Education	3%
Automotive	3%
Travel and hospitality	2%
Government and military	1%
Other	3%

Customer base.

- 31% Individuals
- 23% Businesses
- 46% Both

Company reach.

Local market only	16%
Regional market	35%
National market	37%
International	11%