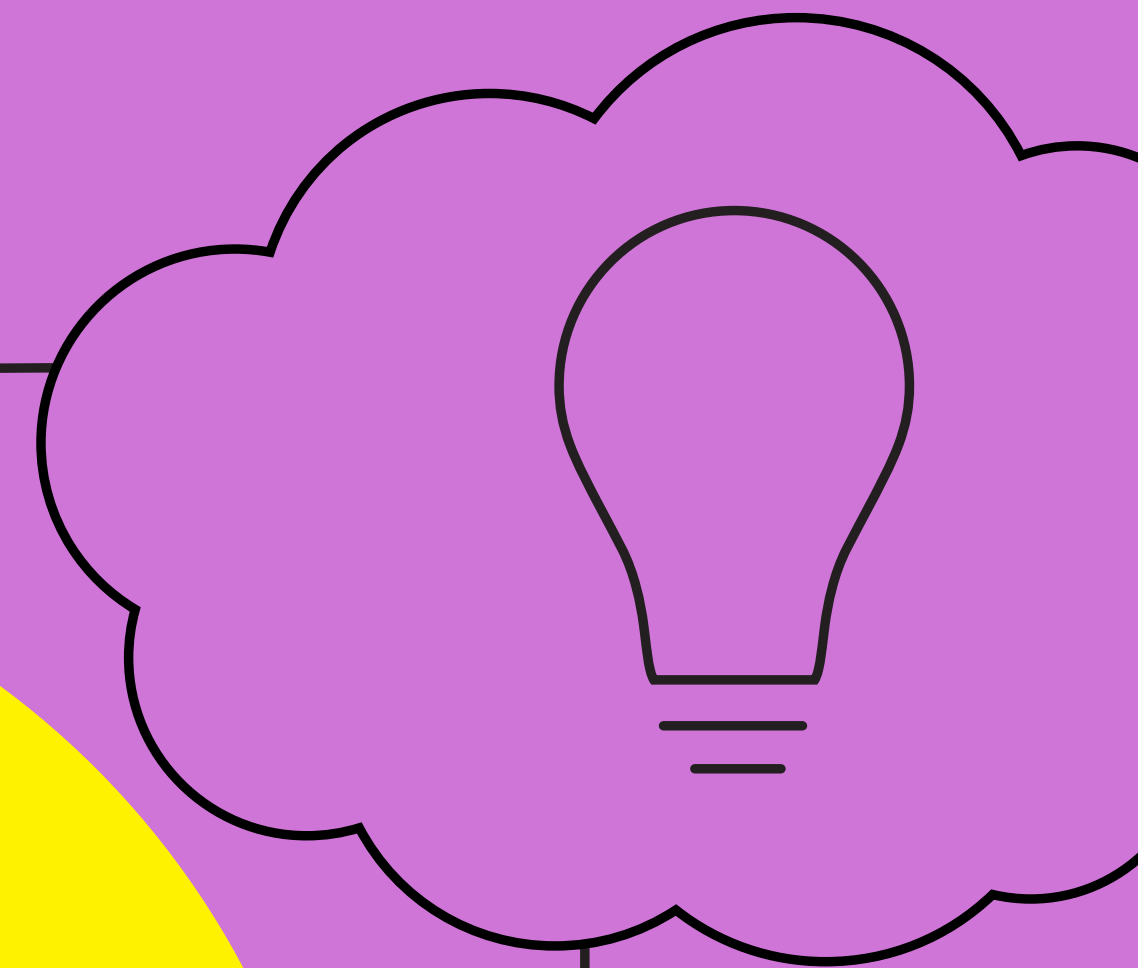




Creativity
finds a way



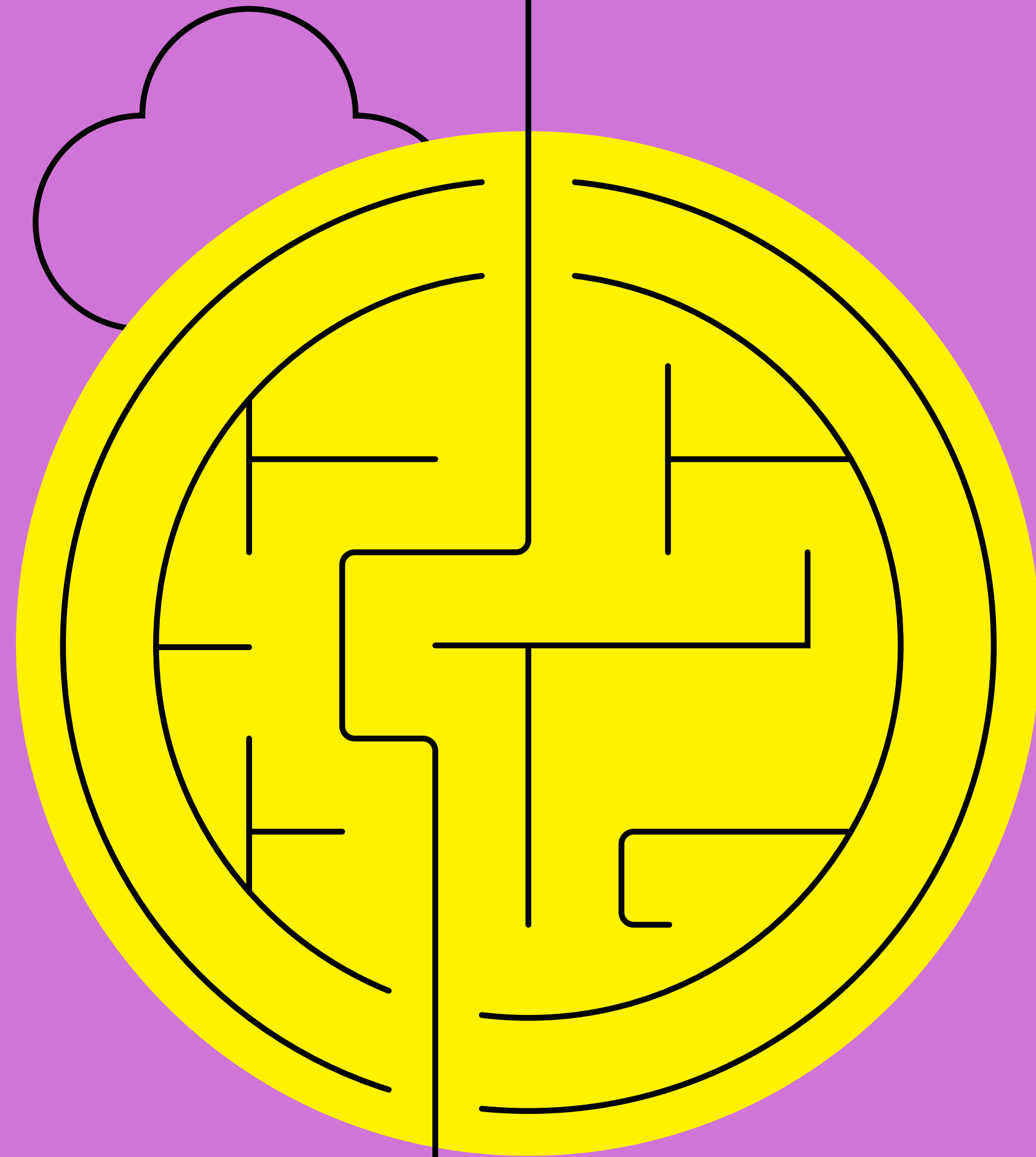


Creativity finds a way

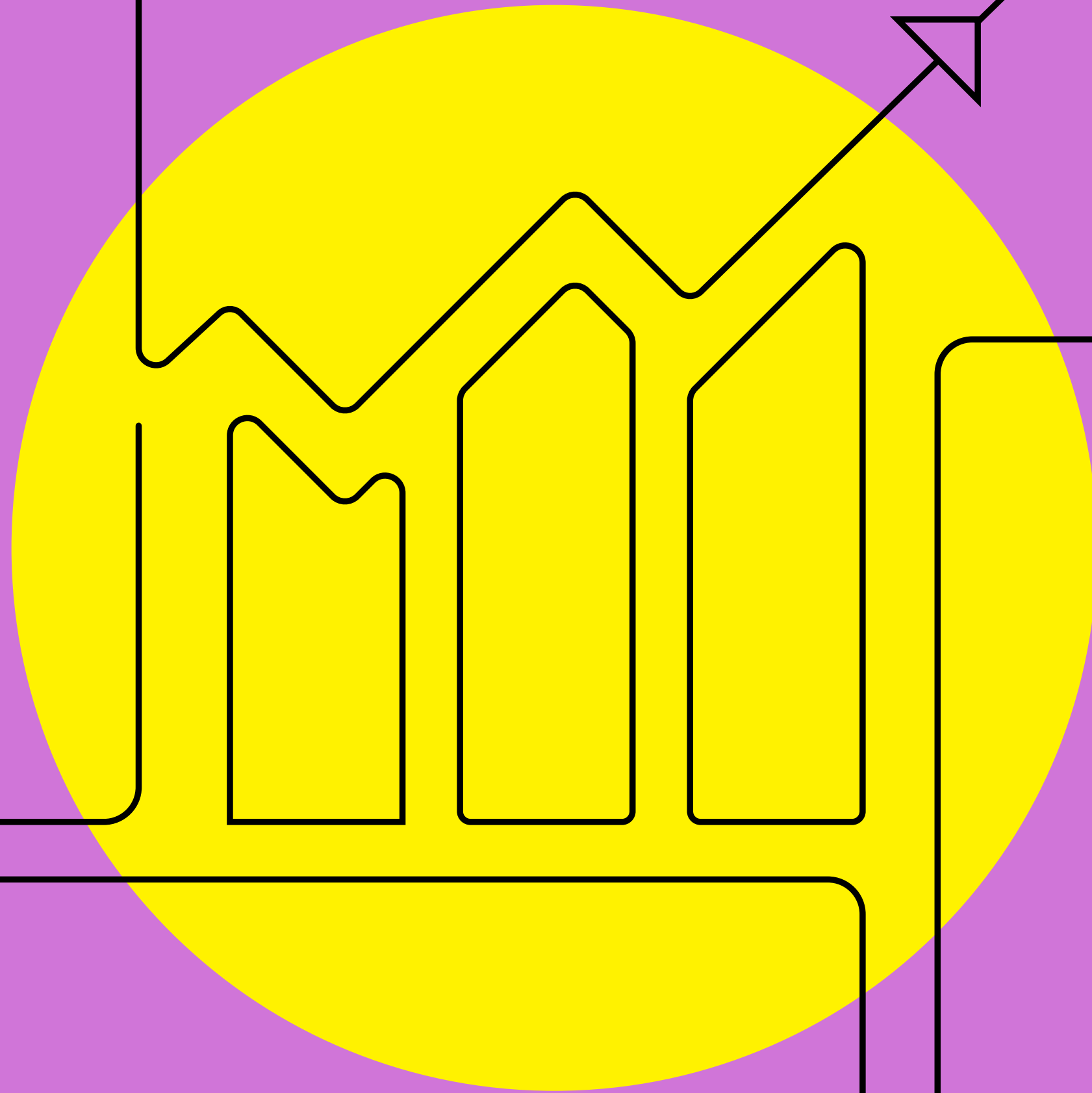
Creativity will always find a way. This has been proven time and time again since the Covid-19 pandemic hit in 2020, and the world changed irreparably. Creativity became the first line of defence for brands and businesses as they sought ways to navigate, and ultimately recover from the unfolding crisis.

Last year The Drum and Adobe teamed up to explore the state of creativity in Asia Pacific. The inaugural report revealed an industry grappling with the “new normal”. In the thick of adapting and pivoting to a constantly changing world, brands were using creativity to solve business problems and innovating to strengthen and maintain connections with consumers.

Half a year later, The Drum and Adobe gathered marketing and creative leaders from Diageo, IBM, Lego and Lowe Lintas to discuss creativity’s role in the industry. This year’s report finds creative leaders have evolved along with the market, embracing the new normal and loosening control of their brands in order to “break the fourth wall”. Creative leads are elevating creativity within businesses and seeking out collaborations to ensure their brands are relevant and meaningful, while using empathy to build authentic relationships with consumers.



Why letting go means brands will grow



We are in the midst of a new era for brands. The continuing fall-out from the pandemic's all-encompassing impact has seen creative leaders embrace bold new strategies, lighten restrictions on their brands and open up authentically to consumers in a bid to create more meaningful connections.

Grace Astari, creative lead for innovation at Diageo, says, "With us all living in a one-dimensional screen reality for the last year, we became closer to our consumers as a result. We all live fragmented lives, and we can all empathise with that. The strategy has been to break that fourth wall between the brand and the consumer and bring more experience into our products, culture and partnerships.

"Collaboration is the word du jour. It is an era for partnership between agencies, communities, cultural players and brands. We were able to share the tools and our stances, so to speak, by letting people work with our icon. A big lesson was letting people reinterpret our brand's role in their lives, not taking control, and allowing people to define that role.

"I think there's a lot more flexibility in the world. My strategy is, collaborate, listen, and be more open and vulnerable in the creative exchange," says Astari.

As brands have sought out relevancy and connection, the focus on delivering perfect, polished work has also shifted.

"Perfection is starting to become unnecessary", says Primus Nair, head of creative at The Lego Agency, APAC. He attributes this trend to the explosion of content on platforms such as TikTok, where very different rules govern content creation.

"[On TikTok] they're not as hung up as we are traditionally about things like production values and quality. If there's a charming idea and it's communicated well enough, there is the truth. Because content is not something you keep in your pocket for years and years and years. Somebody consumes it, and they move on."

"Our CMO has this really interesting saying, that we spend too much time searching for unicorns when we can be just as happy with a rhinoceros. And it's this idea that you're looking for this mythical creature, but there is this very real thing that you could build, and it could exist in the real world tomorrow, but you're too hung up on iterations and meetings and stuff like that. One of the things we've had to do is lower the bar in terms of what we create. We make sure that there is a good idea and that it makes us laugh, but we don't obsess too much... and it's worked so far."

It's not just in the execution of work that we are seeing brands relinquish control; it's also in the messaging, according to Sagar Kapoor, chief creative officer at Lowe Lintas, which manages Unilever's soap brand Lifebuoy.

As the realities of Covid swept the globe and the necessity of


handwashing was a top priority, Lifebuoy embraced purpose-driven messaging in its ads to encourage people to wash their hands with any soap.

"We put our heads and hearts together to figure out 'what do we put out in a crisis like this'? We totally focused on purpose, in this case for a big campaign that we rolled out in the first half of the pandemic, which was not an advertising campaign, but was a public service announcement campaign. We gave the message 'use any soap, not just Lifebuoy'. It was a new area we went into, and we were honest to the audience," says Kapoor.

Lifebuoy also created a customised dance to promote effective handwashing techniques and pushed it out through TikTok with 300 social media influencers across 30 countries achieving close to 60 million impressions. The campaign, which ensured handwashing remained top of mind, was relevant for consumers and demonstrated compassion and empathy from the brand.

"At the heart of it, there is a mix of passion and compassion. You can't be in communication and preaching anymore; you have to be compassionate towards the situation that we are all going through," says Kapoor.

"Relevance is the key because the way consumers are now receiving communication is a lot different than what it used to be. You can no longer be superficial; you have to be relevant to what we are facing – that's the big equaliser; all of us are in it together. Communication has to be much more relevant than what has been in the past. Communication has to be to the point, it has to matter to that person at that point in his or her life. It can't be surface level, it has to be deep, it has to be insightful," adds Kapoor.



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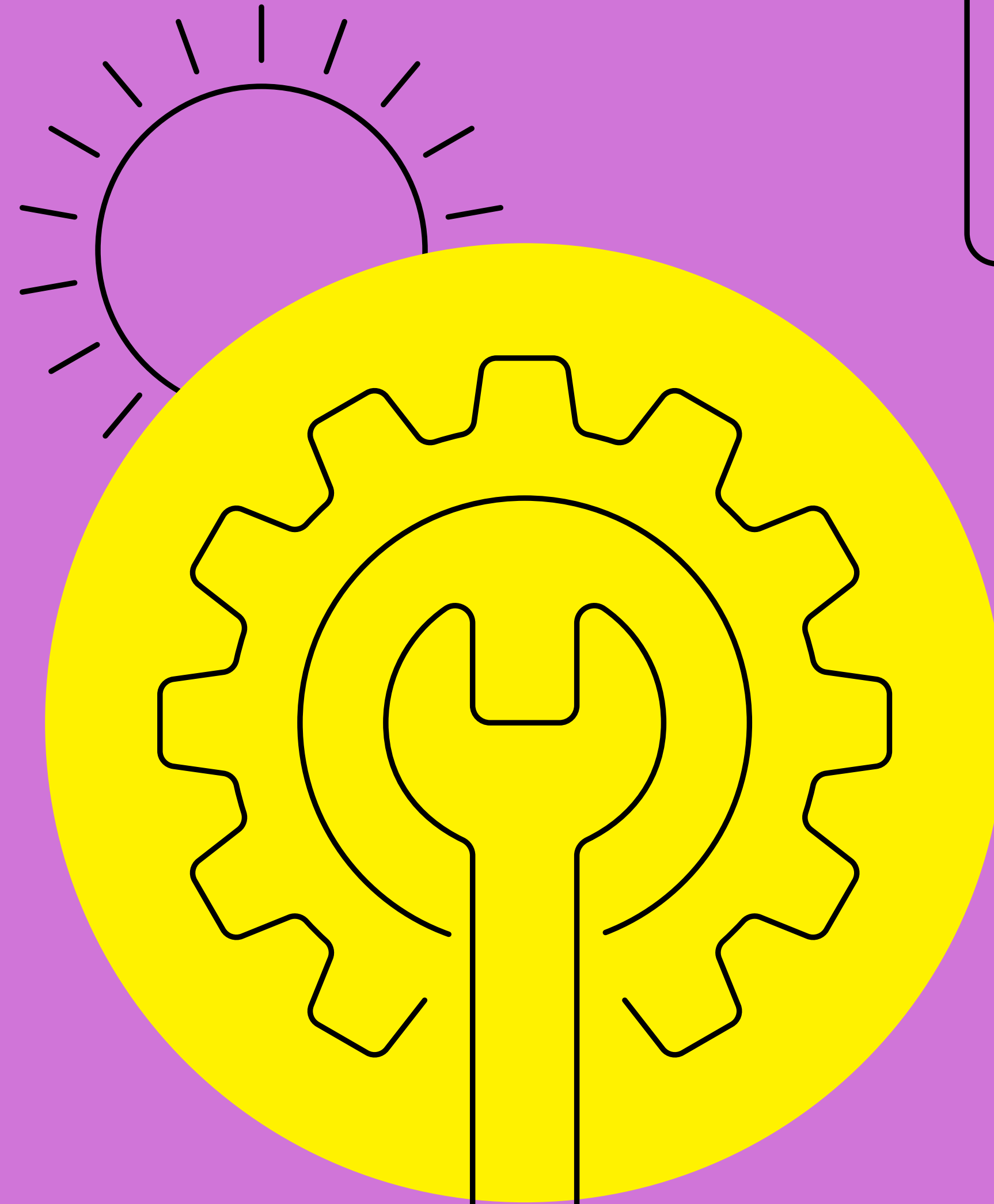
**Sagar Kapoor, chief creative officer,
Lowe Lintas**

The brand toolbox for the 'new normal'

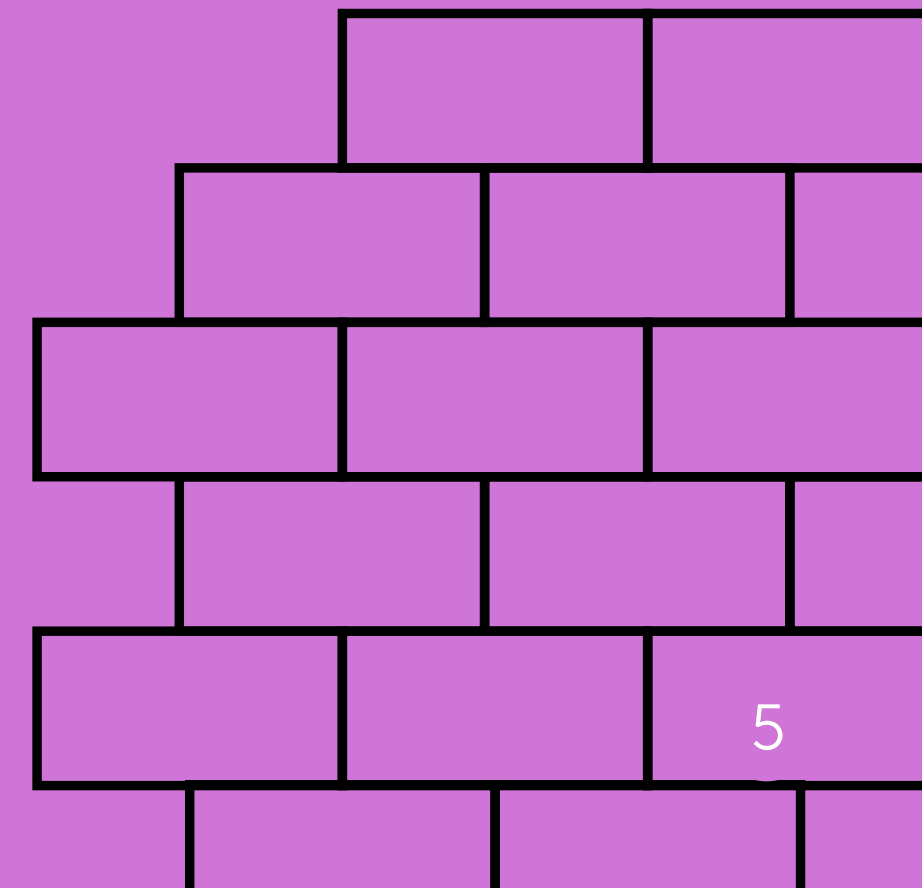
While brands were knocking down walls to connect with consumers, the “new normal” reality meant we were divided and confined within walls. With physical meetings and brainstorming sessions off the table, creative teams had to find new ways to navigate their processes and learn how to collaborate virtually.

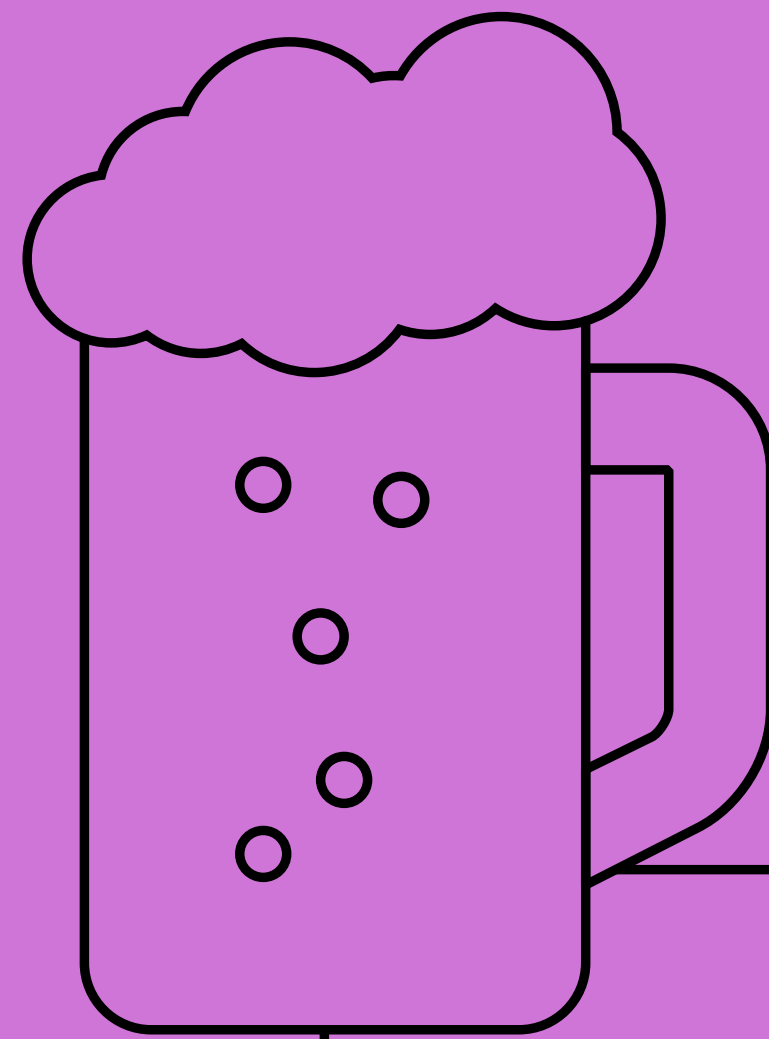
While tools such as Mural or Miro helped facilitate virtual brainstorming sessions, companies needed to create dedicated spaces to share knowledge and foster collaboration, says Isabella Bain, sales and creative associate director, IBM.

“As designers traditionally, we would have these spaces for water cooler chats and live sessions, which would organically evolve within our studios and our workspaces. Now that we are in this fourth dimension removed from each other, the question is how do you create these spaces where we can have that co-collaboration time, and share our ideas, evolve what our thinking is, and share our materials and our learnings.”



Original vector by [davooda](#)





“There has been an absolute explosion of image requirements”

Michael Stoddart, director of strategic business development Asia Pacific, Adobe

IBM created virtual hubs for its creative teams to help facilitate those conversations in a more natural environment and promote and share its innovative knowledge throughout the business.

“We opened up our whole enterprise design thinking education so that we could upskill as many people as we could on the fundamentals of design and design practices so that they become advocates.”

Nair agrees. “One of the biggest ways we’ve had to adapt is how we work as a team. When we first went into the work from home period, and you are looking at screens, brainstorming is an incredibly different process when you don’t have a big whiteboard to just chuck ideas on. We’ve had to adapt the way we work, how we keep in touch with everybody, how we keep the energy around, push ideas and deliver work.”

According to Michael Stoddart, director of strategic business development Asia Pacific, Adobe, the impact of remote working has changed how creatives work and has supercharged technology adoption within businesses.

When lockdowns and social distancing requirements made physical photoshoots impossible, brands turned to other

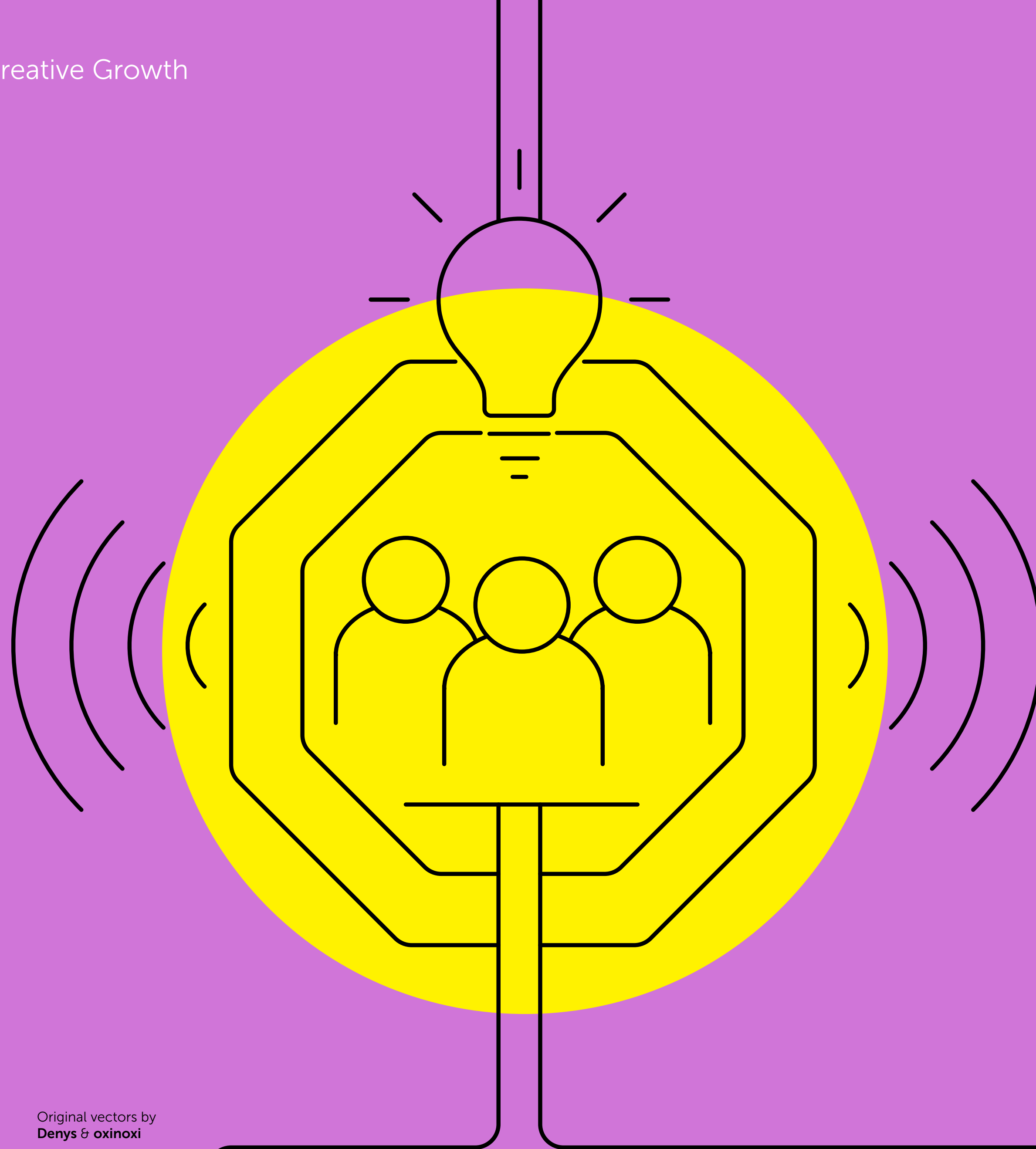
formats and technologies for content creation such as synthetic photography, automation and even AI.

Stoddart says “there’s been an absolute explosion of image requirements” across both still and video imagery, as brands clamour for content to engage with consumers.

He says brands have embraced synthetic photography – creating product images end to end digitally using 3D processes – to create content without studio photoshoots. At the same time, the appetite for long-form video has also grown, with Adobe Digital Index research revealing 60% of consumers are now more likely to watch an entire video once they start viewing.

“It’s all about images, whether they’re moving, or whether they’re synthetic, that high volume, high content to get that empathetic response. [There’s been] an explosion in that space – and it’s a creative explosion as well.

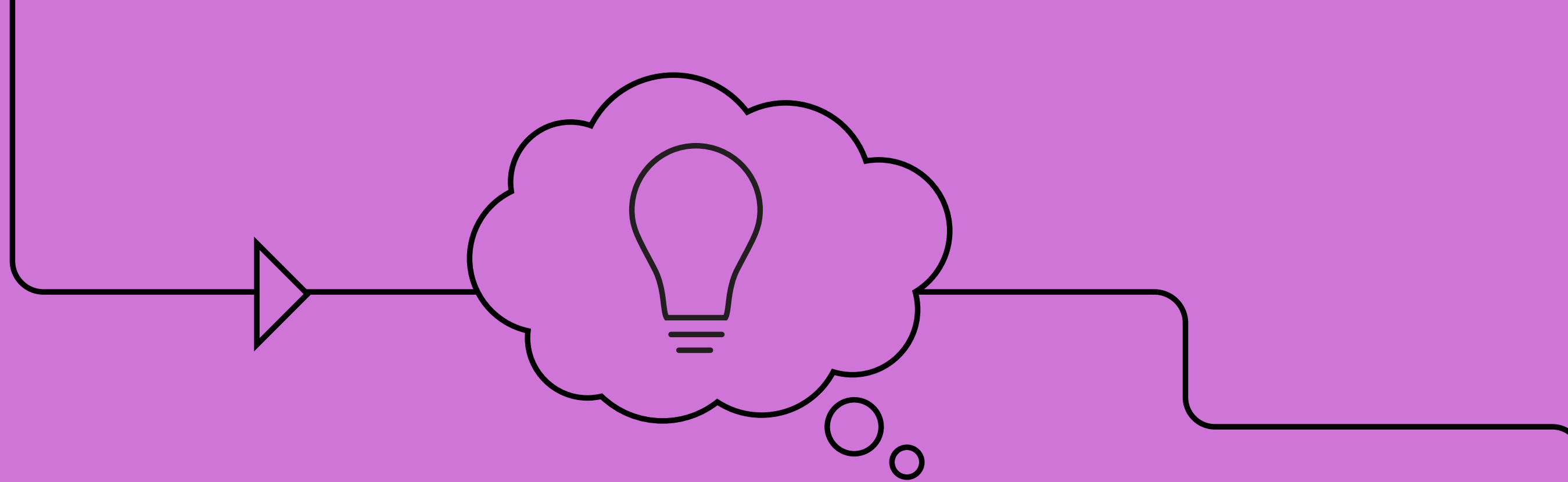
Stoddart says as a result of remote collaboration, brands are also looking to technology, such as AI and automation, to create efficiencies in their work processes and free their creative teams from rote production, to instead focus on the big consumer-facing ideas.



Stop, collaborate and listen: the future of creative teamwork

When it comes to collaboration in Covid times, Bain says skills such as empathy and facilitation have never been so important. Bain worked on a collaboration project in early 2020, which brought together staff from ICUs around the world to share information about what was then an emerging virus. The project created a Covid-19 response app to share data and knowledge rather than being buried in papers or siloed in traditional forms of reporting.

“Who would have thought a designer sitting in a kitchen in Sydney, Australia, would be sitting on a call listening to the vulnerabilities of healthcare workers. It was how I could use empathy, collaboration and facilitation (that we all have) to help come to this idea for a tool.



“Otherwise, this information was going to get buried in papers or scribbled on whiteboards. If it wasn’t for the pandemic, there was never going to be a collaboration like that,” says Bain.

“It is really about the amplification of multi-disciplinary teams and how we all bring our unique skills together. Traditionally, we might have barriers to entry to be able to work together. But it’s almost through this vulnerability we’ve all opened up to share again,” adds Bain.

As brands seek to remain relevant, they’re embracing collaborations to align more closely with significant events and cultural moments. Diageo has connected with new communities and people as part of a significant collaboration strategy to help build its brands and “create talkability”.

“We recently started creating small agile groups for purposeful brand building missions that could respond faster and more relevantly to what’s happening in culture. [The strategy was to create] collaborations with communities and people that represent our brand ethos. It’s all about showcasing our shared values,” says Astari.

One example saw the Scottish single malt whiskey brand Talisker join with environmental group Parlay in a partnership to protect the oceans.

“Talisker’s tagline is ‘made by the sea’. It is so rich and meaningful for the brand, and it now has an important echo in

a cultural and human imperative for protecting the oceans. And out of that comes a series of collaborations in experience and design, as well as innovation.”

“My view on creativity is it’s about being a little more open-minded and adapting to digital systems that can echo our natural desires as creative people to want to write and rip things apart and share. But also doing the same with like-minded people, and that could be outside of the company as well,” says Astari.

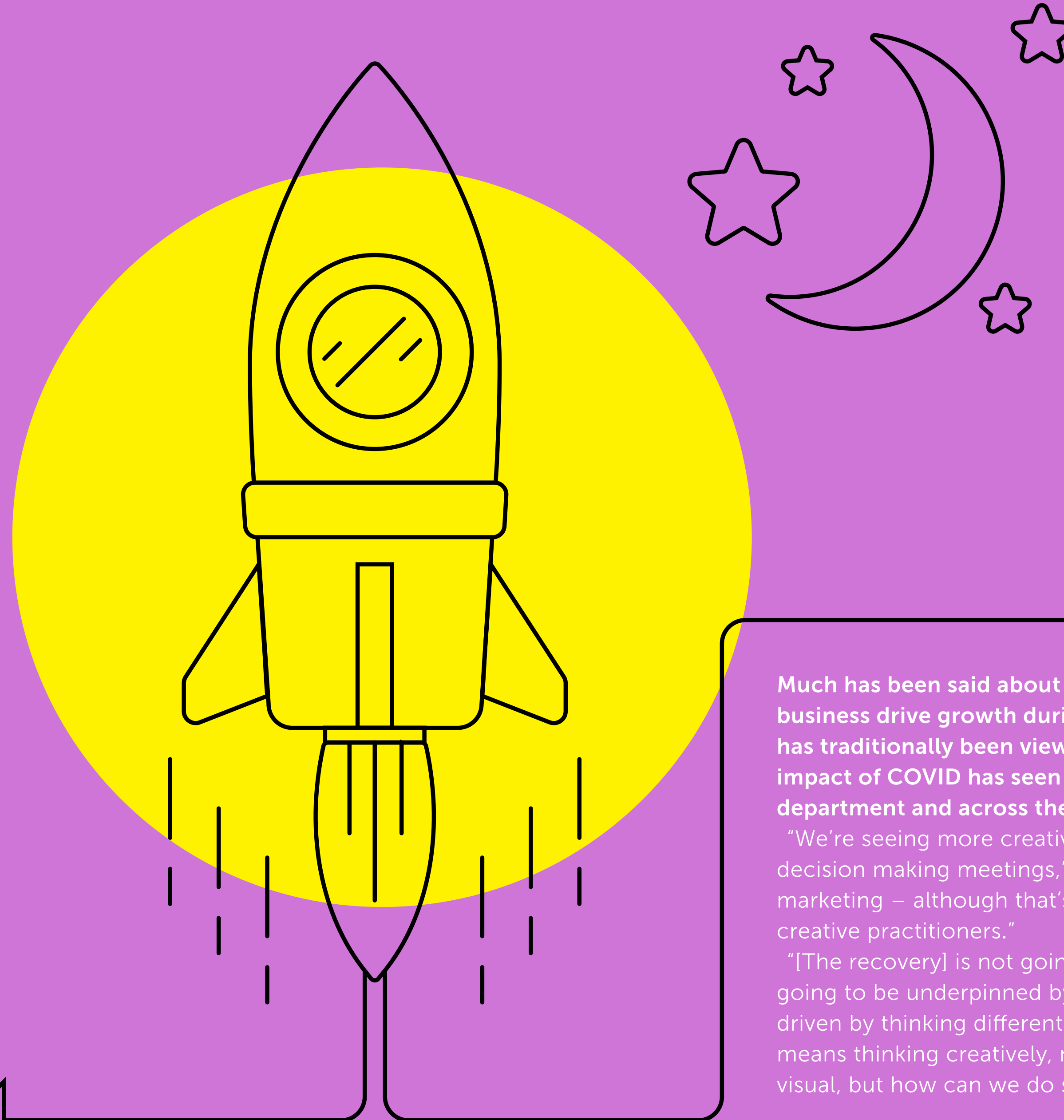
Aligning like-minded people is key to collaboration, particularly as the roles within companies become more blurred. According to Nair, a surprising outcome of “creativity in the new normal” has been the blurring lines around people’s roles and responsibilities, most significantly in terms of where creative ideas come from.

“Roles have become a little bit blurred,” says Nair. “It used to be the creatives were sitting in a room thinking about the creative idea, but the necessity of the situation means that right now, we’re trying to gather larger people in digital spaces. We’ve had a ton of really cool ideas from project managers, strategists, all sorts of different spaces, from people who are close to the brand and who are thinking differently. I think one of the things that we’re going to try to be a little bit more mindful of is to not to draw those clear lines for ourselves and let everybody contribute where possible.”

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Grace Astari, creative lead for innovation, Diageo

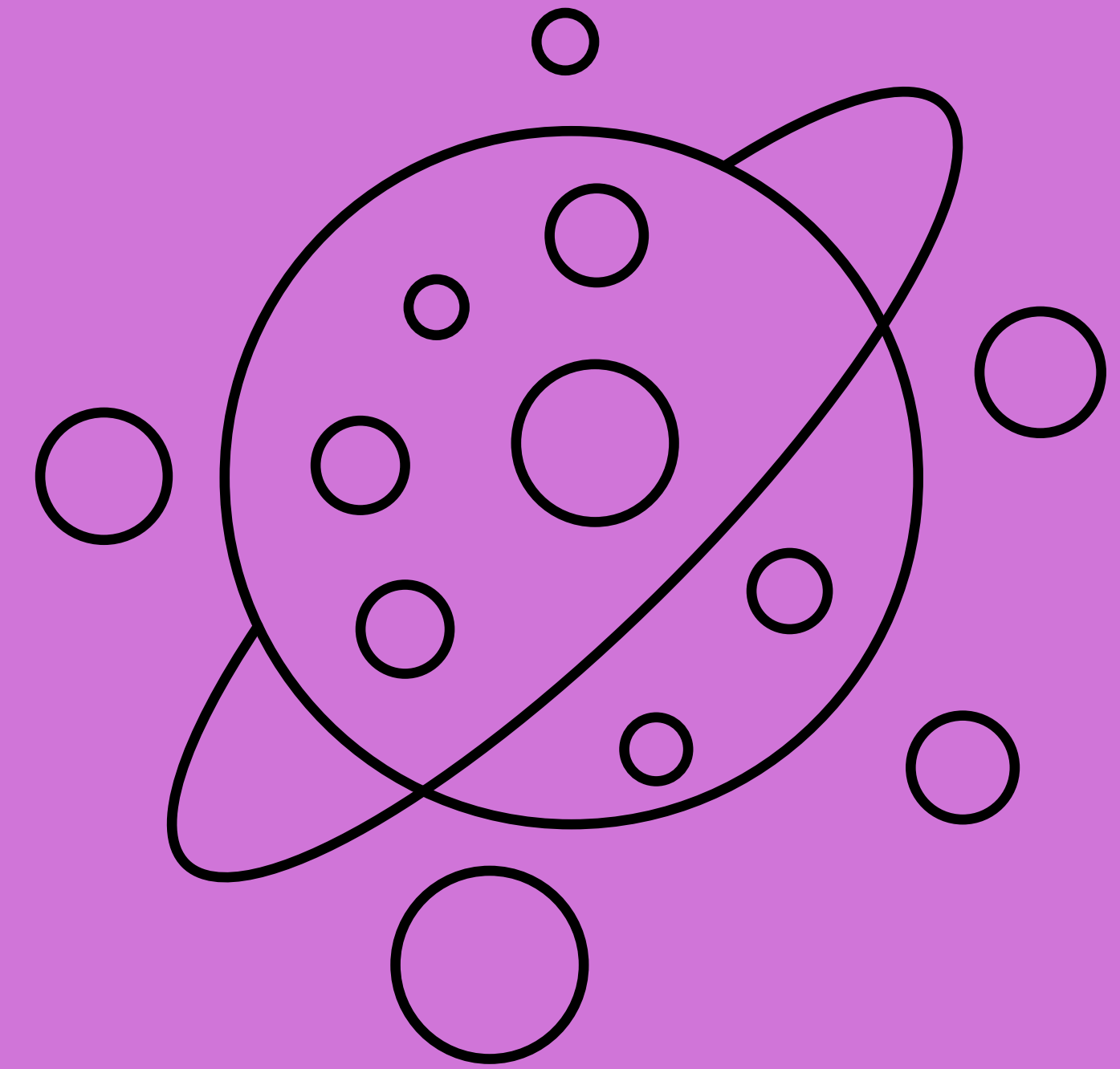
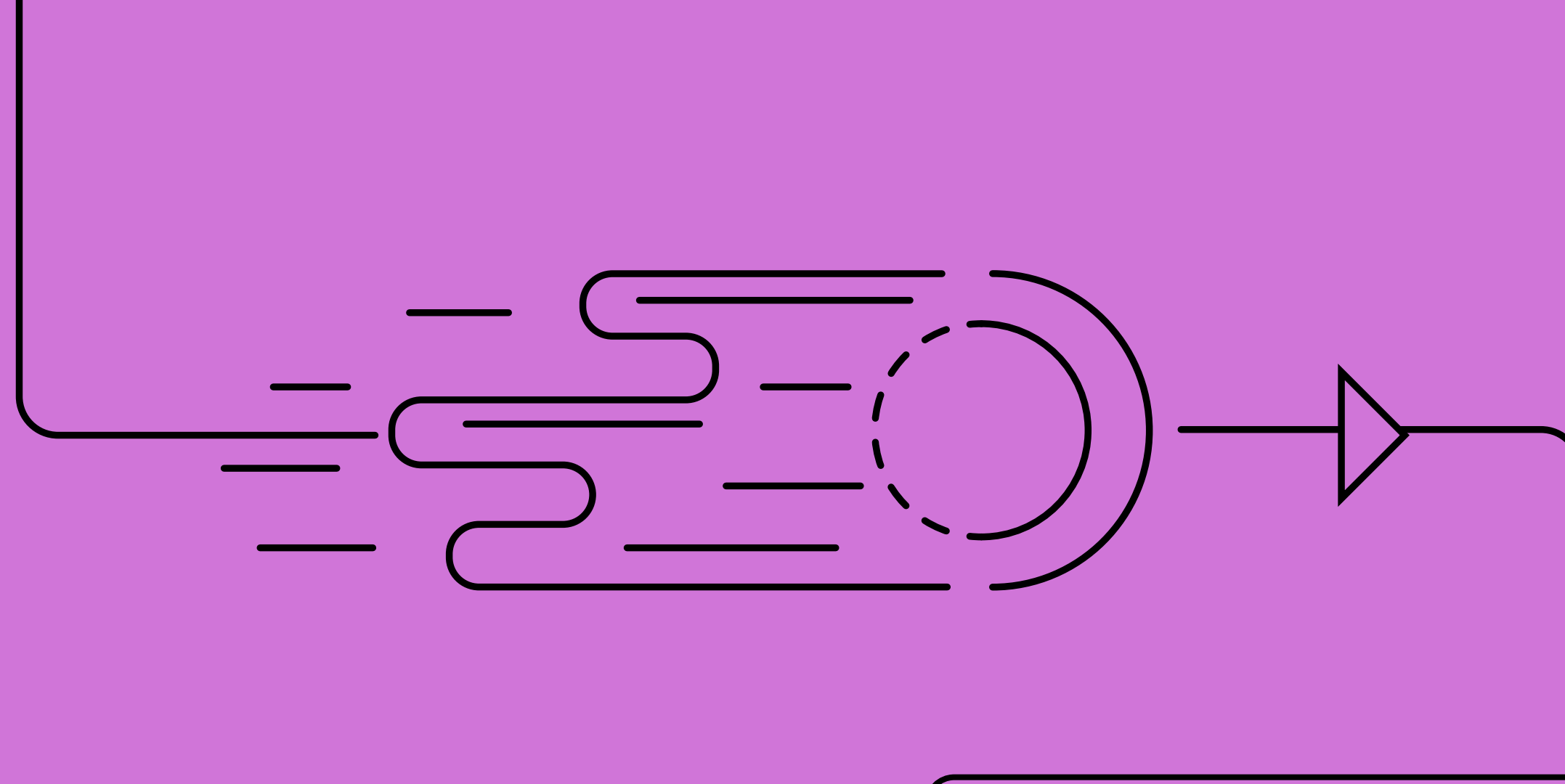
Elevating creativity to the boardroom



Much has been said about creativity's role in helping business drive growth during the pandemic. While creativity has traditionally been viewed as marketing's purview, the impact of COVID has seen it elevated beyond the marketing department and across the entire business.

"We're seeing more creative leaders, sitting in the C-level decision making meetings," says Stoddart. "And not just from marketing – although that's important – but also studio and creative practitioners."

"[The recovery] is not going to be driven by technology – it's going to be underpinned by technology – but it is going to be driven by thinking differently. And by thinking differently, that means thinking creatively, not just imagery, not necessarily visual, but how can we do something differently."



“That’s where designers bring our power, as we are empathetic, and we are open to sharing and collaborating”

Isabella Bain, sales and creative associate director, IBM

Stoddart says leadership teams are identifying the need to include creative leaders in broader business decision making, using their new ways of thinking to help transform companies for the post-pandemic future.

A key element of embedding creativity across all aspects of businesses is creating connections and joining the dots to create growth opportunities. This is where creatives can thrive and become more valuable assets within companies, says Bain.

“We’re the facilitators of the conversation and collaboration. For us, it’s not how do we give our own opinions on a particular topic, but rather, how do we help craft those conversations and that discussion that should be happening around the pain points to find a solution,” says Bain.

“I think that’s where designers bring our power, as we are empathetic, and we are open to sharing and collaborating. So how do we then amplify that message across our teams? [To ensure we] become the advocates for everyone else to be open to sharing, which can sometimes come with a level of vulnerability as well.”

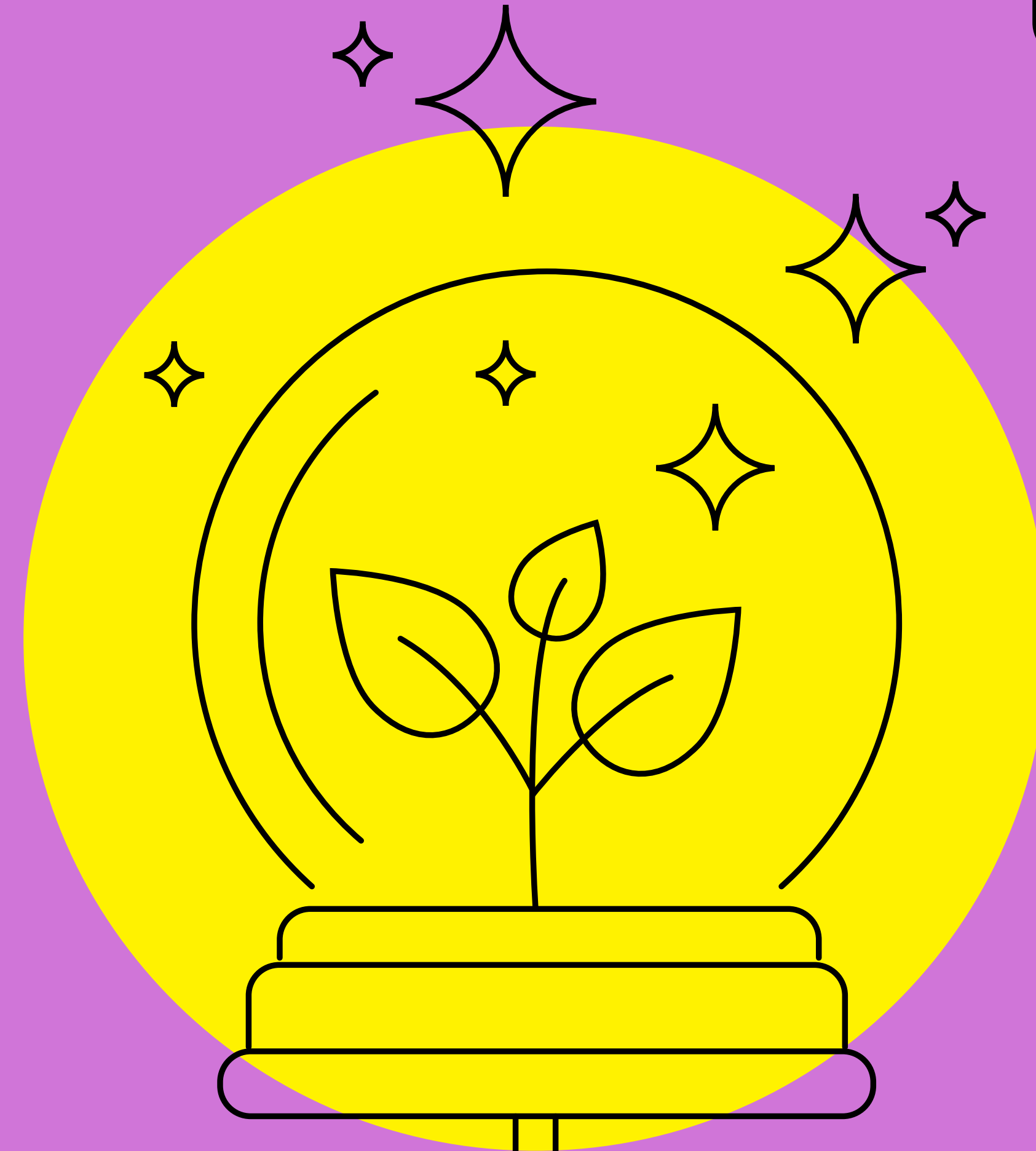
Bain says the challenge is to help companies “break that fourth dimension and be vulnerable”, “so we can all evolve”

The future is growth in APAC

As we begin to see the green roots of recovery across some parts of APAC, there is a significant opportunity to elevate the regions insights, behaviours and processes to help power recoveries in other markets.

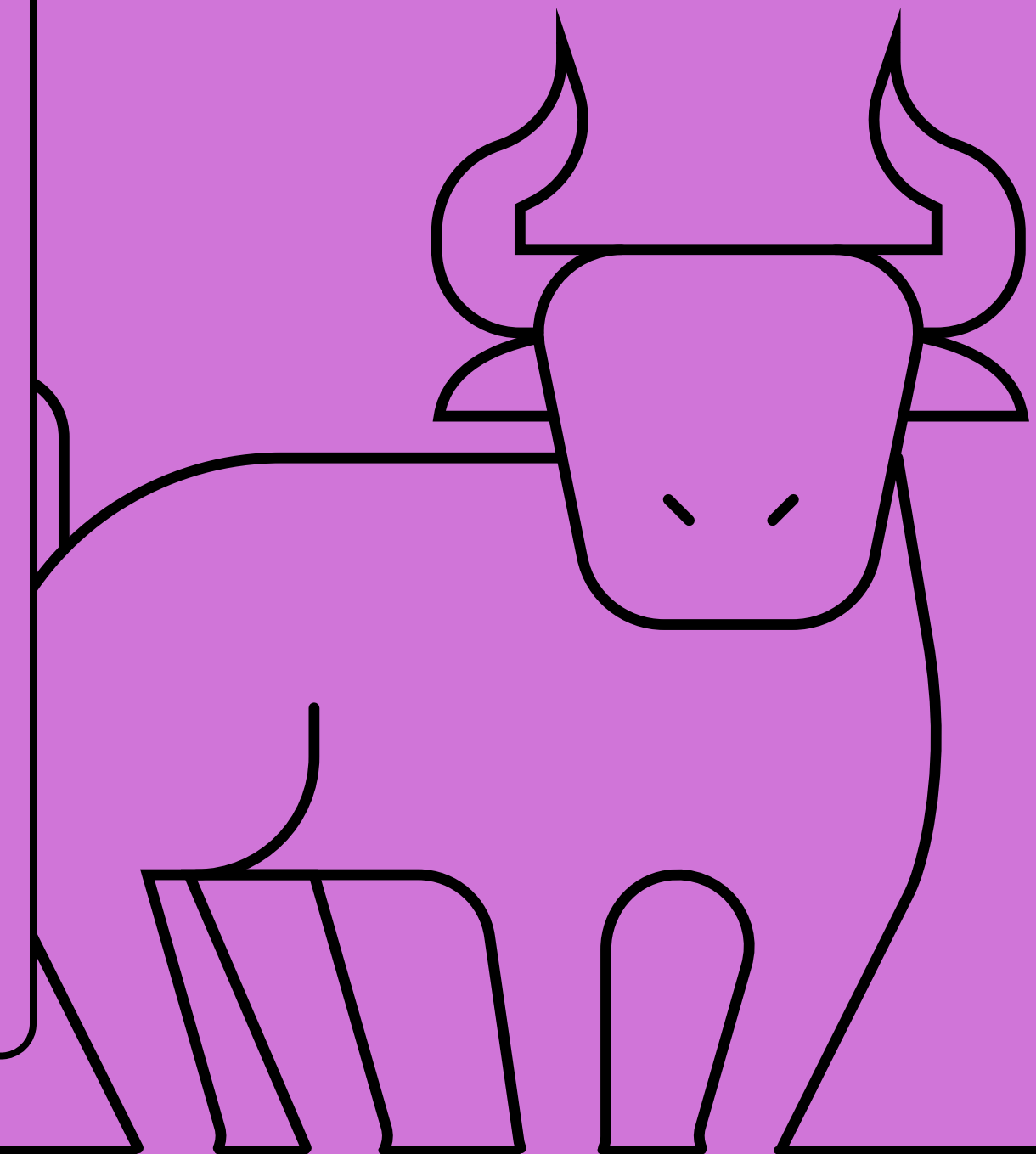
"APAC at large has been probably the strongest in terms of its response to the pandemic, whether that's China, Taiwan, Vietnam, Singapore, within our countries and regions there's been quite a return to socialising and connection in most respects," says Astari.

"It's interesting for me, being seated out of APAC, and looking at the insights for consumer behaviour and taking that to a global platform. For example, we see a lot of paradigm-shifting technologies coming out of APAC, specifically China, whether that's social commerce, or live streaming, TikTok, for example, or automated experiences in retail or applications. And now we see that beginning to grow in other parts of the world. This rich, digital world that blurs on and offline is coming out of APAC."



2020 was tough, but if we're really honest, we did a lot of things well. We started thinking a lot more about employee culture and employee wellbeing, we started to be more dynamic in the way we produced work, we started to speak to consumers in a very different way."

Primus Nair, head of creative at The Lego Agency, APAC

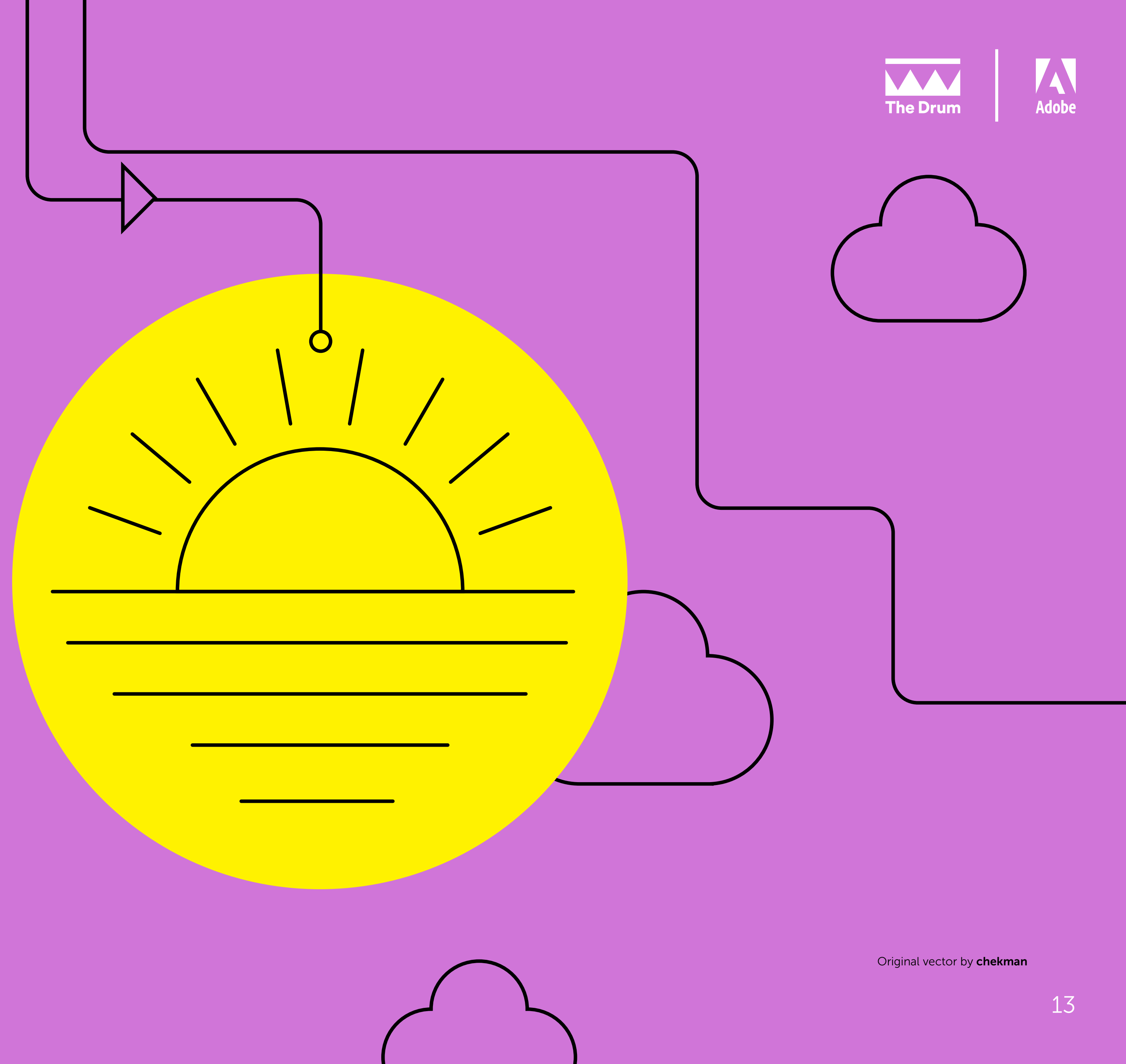


There is also an opportunity for the marketing industry – and indeed the broader world - to embrace the positive, more empathetic, changes that the pandemic has delivered instead of returning to the way things were, says Nair.

"I think we should avoid the inclination to hit the reset button," says Nair. "We're seeing the edges of normal come back, and I think the immediate response is, let's get back to the office, let's go back to our processes and let's get back to normal. I think that's something that we should actively fight. 2020 was tough, but if we're really honest, we did a lot of things well. We started thinking a lot more about employee culture and employee wellbeing, we started to be more dynamic in the way we produced work, we started to speak to consumers in a very different way."

"It feels like there is an urge to get back to the office to sort of like hit the reset button and go back to 2019 - and I think that would be a huge mistake.

Nair says "We have a weird and wonderful opportunity to redefine what the new normal is, and I would like to encourage it."



Conclusion

Our world is in the midst of remarkable changes – but change delivers opportunity. It is critical to provide a comfortable environment where everyone feels confident to innovate, collaborate and reinvent. Business growth in 2021 and beyond will require forward-thinking organizations which embrace creativity, push boundaries and open new pathways to success.

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