Date: 14.10.25
Title: MISSION HUBS working practices survey. A findings overview.
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INTRODUCTION

The creative industry is at an inflection point. This arguably started with the pandemic that forced changes to agency working practices. Many businesses had to re-evaluate how creativity is fostered, and relationship are remotely developed. At the same time, the rise of powerful A.I tools, coupled with the mantra of 'faster, better, cheaper', has led creative business leaders to re-imagine what an agency is, and how it needs to be tomorrow.

Against this backdrop, we conducted an online questionnaire with our colleagues at Sapio Research of MISSION Hubs Partners, SAMA and PRWA members to get a 'barometer reading' of their individual working practices and approaches to managing their businesses through a period of change.

Whilst not an extensive survey the results did highlight the following areas of interest.

REGIONAL DIFFERENCES IN WORKING PRACTICES

It has been suggested that different cultures demonstrate different preferences to flexible working. Based on our survey results there's some evidence to support this with 57% of US based agencies requiring employees to be in the office three days a week. In Europe and the UK, 80% of respondents said they mandates 2 or more days in the office per week. Whilst in APAC, the percentage is much lower at 29% of responding agencies operating a three day in policy.

The relationship between and agency's location and it's working model is complex and multifaceted. Whilst national and business cultures, are undoubtably influencing factors, transportation, environment, connectivity, client expectations, and the competitive environment also come into play.

AGENCY WORKING MODELS KEY DRIVERS

Post pandemic, many agency leaders believed 'the genie was out of the bottle', regarding the work/life balance expectations of their employees and prospective talent.

For creative leaders this presented an opportunity to remodel their businesses and take advantage of new attitudes towards flexible working and to embrace technologies.

When questioned, 79% of APAC based respondents cited productivity improvements as the key driver for their current business models. This contrasts dramatically with the Americas and Europe, where only 43% and 20% respectively, identified productivity as a primary consideration.

In Europe 60% of respondents identified retaining agency culture as their primary consideration. This is significantly higher than in the Americas at 29%, and indeed, APAC at 50% of respondents.

Our survey also identified that in APAC 57% of respondents felt that their agency working model was important for talent retention and acquisition. This is in stark contrast to Europe, where only 20% of respondents considered it a priority, indicating potential regional differences in labour market conditions and talent availability.

Finally, the Americas show a unique trend, with 43% of respondents indicating that they did not feel the need to change or adapt their working model post-pandemic.

COMMUNICATING AGENCY CULTURE, VALUES AND GOALS

At this point, it's important to recognise that our respondents all hold senior positions in their respective organisations. As such, their perception of organisational communication may differ from those in less senior positions, or without longevity in the business.

Of those asked, most agencies stated that they are taking proactive steps to ensure their business culture and values are well communicated to employees.

Leading by example emerged as the most prevalent strategy, with 85% of respondents indicating its use to convey organisational goals and values. This approach was particularly pronounced in APAC where 86% of agencies claimed it played a crucial role in reinforcing cultural objectives. For Europe, the percentage was slightly less at 70%. Overall, 58% respondents stated that regular reinforcements of values, culture and goals was essential.

When asked 74% of the agency leaders believed that most employees had a robust understanding of their agency's culture, goals and values – although this was not always reflected in their day-to-day work.

COMMUNICATING CHANGE

As mentioned, the creative industry has been and continues to undergo significant change. Change can be positive but, it's always disruptive. So how a business communicates change is important.

Our survey discovered that the transition to new working models has been met with varying degrees of acceptance across the regions. A significant portion of organisations, 37%, chose to implement their current working model in consultation with employees, indicating a collaborative approach to change. This method was particularly prevalent in the APAC region, where 50% of organisations engaged their employees in the decision-making process.

In contrast, 33% of organisations opted for a top-down approach, implementing changes by mandate. This approach was most common in Europe, where 40% of organisations chose this method.

Interestingly, the data also reveals that a small percentage of organisations, 22%, are still in the process of refining their working models, indicating that the journey towards an optimal working environment is ongoing. This work-in-progress approach was noted by 40% of European organisations, suggesting a more iterative and flexible strategy in this region.

WORKFLOWS AND AGENCY SYSTEMS

The agencies surveyed use a diverse set of applications to manage workflow to boost productivity. Slack emerged as the most popular being used by 30% of respondents (with Asana coming a close second at 29%). Slack's adoption is particularly high in the Americas with 43% of agencies in region using it compared to 21% in APAC and 20% in Europe.

Interestingly, 48% of respondents highlighted a significant reliance on other unspecified/niche solutions. Again, a trend led by the Americas, at 57% of respondents, with APAC being much lower at just 7%.

Perhaps this suggests a desire for a more bespoke approach to workflow management in the Americas, or it's simply the result of choices made based on time, ease of implementation, and niche solution development costs in smaller markets.

Finally, and perhaps not surprisingly, smaller agencies of 1-25 employees, generally opt for a Slack implementation, whilst larger businesses of 26-100 (the independent agency sweet spot), have a more varied range of solutions that they work with.

AGENCY WORKING MODELS OF THE FUTURE

Our survey suggested a strong consensus across all regions regarding the future of agency working models. An overwhelming 89% of respondents believed that agencies would adopt or continue with a hybrid working approach.

SUMMARY

Whilst limited in scale our survey did highlight several noteworthy areas, those being:

- Most agencies across our network, operate a flexible hybrid model with two-to-three days mandated in the office. This is unlikely to change.
- In APAC, this approach is driven by perceived productivity gains, whereas in Europe and the US, the decision is influenced by protecting agency culture.
- Leadership by example is seen as especially valuable in the APAC region and less so elsewhere.
- The majority of agency leaders felt that their businesses communicated change well, with Europe talking a more 'top-down' approach to organisational decision-making.
- All our respondents use some form of workflow management application with Slack and Asana being prevalent in the US. Business size also likely creates a necessity for off-the shelf solutions in smaller markets/business.

As the creative industry landscape continues to change, agencies will be forced to adapt… and quickly. Change is manageable and business models can be adapted if there are firm business foundations in place to start with. Systems and approaches play a role but, it's secondary to shared vision, clear leadership and direction.

Acknowledgements

Thank you to those agencies who participated in this survey. MISSION Hubs would like to offer special thanks to Sapio Research for their support and access to their Date2Story A.I.

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