SHAPING

*Leading in the
Age of Intelligence*

The AI & Creativity Report 2025

D&A

shutterstock

THE SHIFT

A NEW CREATIVE STANDARD

"One of the huge benefits of AI is that it's levelled the playing field; we're all at ground zero, so we need to work together to figure it out."

Chief Creative Officer, Johannesburg

The creative industry is built on invention. Finding form in the formless. Turning constraints into clarity. And now, as generative AI redraws the boundaries of imagination, it is our job to meet that shift with the same creative force we've always brought to change.

At D&AD, we believe **creativity is not static. It evolves.** And in moments of disruption, it expands.

This report is not just a snapshot of what's happening – it is a reflection of who we are becoming. Through hundreds of in-depth conversations with creative leaders across 55 countries, we've surfaced seven shifts that define the moment: from trust and ownership to craft and collaboration.

Our goal isn't just to name these shifts – it's to help the industry respond. For creative practitioners, leaders and founders, that might mean setting clear attribution policies, auditing your workflow, educating your clients, or investing in ethical tooling.

We break down the changes that matter most: How we get paid. How we protect originality. How we stay trusted in a world of automation. And how we keep creative work creative.

This is not about catching up to machines. It's about doubling down on what they can't do. Judgement. Taste. Risk. Weirdness. The things only you bring to the work. Whatever the first step is, take it now. Because building a creative future we can trust won't happen by default – it will happen by design.

We believe that **creativity will not just survive this shift. It will shape it.**

Let's get to work.

Dara Lynch
CEO, D&AD

CONTENTS

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REIMAGINE RETHINK RECLAIM

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* All chapter header images were created using Shutterstock's AI Image Generator, part of their GenAI Pro suite of tools and services supporting businesses globally. The creative approach leaned into the strange and imaginative — a purposeful bending of reality rather than a pursuit of photorealism. Image prompts are included on pages 52 and 53.

Disruption remains a constant force in the creative industry. We've lived through the sea change of digital media, shifts in audience behaviour, and the dramatic rise of mobile and spatial computing. Each time, we've learned. We've adapted. Each time, we've evolved.

Now, with the rise of AI, we find ourselves in the midst of yet another wave of transformation. The seemingly boundless possibility brings excitement, but it also brings uncertainty - and for many creators, a deep and understandable sense of displacement. That feeling is real, and it deserves acknowledgement and attention. But the road doesn't end there.

Generative AI is a powerful new tool, but like any tool, the impact and value lies entirely in how we use it. At Shutterstock, we've embraced AI to democratise creative ideation, accelerate content creation, and support more sustainable production. In our industry, there's no shortage of ingenuity, curiosity, and a desire to push the boundaries.

I see artists, developers, designers, and producers of all types actively exploring how AI tools can expand their craft - not to replace creativity, but to enable it.

AI allows us to iterate more quickly, meet new demand and scale in exciting ways. But it cannot tell us what will resonate. It cannot understand the nuance of what moves an audience. That artistry still lies with us. The tools may change, but the essence of what we do - telling stories that connect, that matter, that make people feel - remains unchanged.

This report is a rallying cry to reimagine, to rethink, and to reclaim our place in this new chapter. AI has forever altered the creative process. It's up to us to lead with intention.

Because in the end, **the audience isn't focused on how the content is created. They care about the stories we tell.**

GROUND TRUTH
The questions that matter

The Study:
Creative leaders,
global voices

This report was built differently - because it had to be.

To understand how Artificial Intelligence is truly reshaping creativity, we didn't just analyse markets or run a basic survey. We spoke directly with the people at the centre of it. And we used AI to do it – not to replace the conversation, but to scale it.

In partnership with creative leaders and local D&AD networks, we gathered thoughts, anxieties, opportunities, strategies and provocations from hundreds of practitioners across 55 countries. From CEOs to CSOs, Creative Directors to Founders. From Jakarta to Johannesburg, Mumbai to Madrid. We wanted the full picture.

55
countries

291
voices

121
hours

This kind of dialogue simply wasn't possible a few years ago. In partnership with Brainstrust, and powered by Juno – an AI platform for human-level research – we captured 121 hours of in-depth conversation. This allowed us to listen, interpret and synthesise insights at a pace that meets the urgency of the moment.

The result is a living picture of how creativity is reacting, reshaping and preparing for what comes next.

AI in numbers:
The great reckoning

When generative AI first hit the headlines two years ago, it felt like hype. Today, it's reality – built into the everyday tools creatives use to research, think, design and deliver. What matters now isn't novelty but impact: how far it goes, how fast, and whether we shape it with intention and integrity.

We anchor the discussion in the data:
the pace of adoption and the economic impact.

Estimated economic impact

$15.7

trillion by 2030 (McKinsey & Co)

*$1.*35

trillion in 2025

$1

trillion in 2024

This isn't just growth –
it's global acceleration.

For creative industries, it signals scale, investment and influence. We're not just watching change happen, we're in a position to lead it – shaping how this value is realised, shared and expressed.

400m

Weekly active users ChatGPT
Feb 2025 (Reuters, TechCrunch)

22m

Weekly active users DeepSeek
March 2025 (Backlinko)

11m

Weekly active users Midjourney
Dec 2024 (Phototutorial)

Adoption & adaptation

AI tools aren't just streamlining workflows. They're reshaping how creative work gets made.

ChatGPT, Midjourney and DeepSeek have moved from niche tools to global platforms, changing how ideas are sparked, visualised and shared.

Creative ecosystems are shifting too. Getty, Adobe and Shutterstock have all launched generative tools, each promoting different strengths. Getty emphasises legal safeguards. Adobe prioritises integration within its suite. Shutterstock brings high-quality, tailored tooling together with expert services - aiming to deliver end-to-end solutions and ensure the commercial viability of the content.

Demandsage reports that over 75% of digital marketers now use it. Once a novelty, it's now embedded in daily work and accelerating fast.

The creative resistance

Where there is acceleration, there is resistance. In February 2025, over **1,000 artists** – including Kate Bush and Damon Albarn – released an album of silence titled *Is This What We Want?*, a protest against AI training on copyrighted material without consent.

> *"Cultural theft wrapped in novelty."*
>
> **Hayao Miyazaki**
> **Co-founder, Studio Ghibli**

Elsewhere in the UK, more than **2,000 creatives** formally opposed proposed copyright reforms that would give tech firms greater freedom to scrape content. Authors Mark Haddon and Michael Rosen joined the protest, describing the changes as "wholesale robbery" of the creative sector.

After GPT-4o's image feature launched, users flooded social media with visuals mimicking the iconic Studio Ghibli aesthetic. The viral trend, dubbed the "Ghibli Effect," drew fierce criticism from across the globe.

Creatives are pushing back, demanding consent and a fair future for originality.

BRIT Awards
Lola Young

AI art meets AI protest
xhairymutantx by Holly
Herndon and Mat Dryhurst

Below: art-frame.org/

The resistance reached the art market too. Over **6,000 artists signed an open letter** urging Christie's to cancel its *'Augmented Intelligence'* auction of AI-generated work. They argued the pieces relied on copyrighted material used without consent or compensation. Despite the backlash, the auction went ahead, with one work selling for more than $277,000. For many, it became a flashpoint in the growing debate around AI's appropriation of creative labour.

Creativity has always pushed back before it pushes forward. From Metallica versus Napster to the early days of digital disruption, resistance has helped shape the creative economy. Today's pushback against AI is no different. It's not about rejecting progress; it's about demanding **progress with principles**.

This friction isn't failure. It's a feature. The more we question how AI is built, trained and applied, the more likely we are to develop tools that reflect creative values, not just computational capability.

Resistance isn't the end of the story. It's the start of something better.

The panic button is flashing

Bias. Transparency. Misinformation. These aren't abstract concerns, they are urgent creative realities. And now, so is climate impact.

A single ChatGPT prompt can use up to **10 times more energy** than a Google search (Bloomberg, 2023). One estimate equates its monthly emissions to 260 transatlantic flights (KnownHost, 2024). And it's not just ChatGPT: other image and video generators also carry steep energy costs with every prompt.

From model training to real-time image generation, the environmental load stretches across the stack, GPU-heavy data centres, water-cooled servers, and power-hungry inference cycles. While AI can streamline workflows, the net infrastructure cost is rising.

This has triggered a shift in mindset: from what AI can create, to how sustainably it can scale. Leading voices, from the World Economic Forum to the AI Action Summit are calling for **cleaner energy, smarter models, and mandatory reporting.**

Deepfake of the late Pope Francis.
Credit: Reddit/Midjourney, Pablo Xavier

> *"It's becoming very difficult to discern truth."*
>
> **Creative Director, Edinburgh**

The World Economic Forum's 2025 Global Risks Report also flags systemic AI bias as a growing threat. Outside major markets, creative leaders are warning of cultural erasure and normalised misinformation through synthetic content.

Governments are scrambling to catch up. The EU has mandated digital watermarking. The US is debating disclosure laws. China's new rules, live from September 2025, require all AI-generated content to be explicitly and implicitly labelled. And platforms are beginning to step in, YouTube now backs the proposed 'No Fakes Act' (Nurture Originals, Foster Art, and Keep Entertainment Safe), which would make it illegal to generate AI replicas of someone's voice or likeness without consent.

But enforcement is patchy. For now, the burden of trust rests with the creative industry.

This is our opportunity to lead on transparency, champion shared standards, and push for both ethical and ecological accountability.

Creative leadership in the age of AI

AI adoption is no longer surprising. Tools are accessible, multimodal, and speak our language. Prompting has replaced programming. And with enterprise investment and platform integration, acceleration feels inevitable.

But speed isn't neutral. It's easy to use the tools, harder to interrogate them. Behind the outputs lie deeper questions: what's being trained, on whose work, and with what permission?

The creative industry isn't wrestling with whether to use   AI – it's wrestling with the consequences.

From billion-dollar valuations to protest albums of silence, synthetic content is now a cultural flashpoint. It challenges our definitions of authorship, originality, and creative value.

Creative leaders have a window to shape new standards, lead with integrity & ensure AI strengthens, not flattens, what makes creativity matter.

THE SHIFTS THAT MATTER NOW

To move beyond the noise, we turned to the people shaping the work – 291 creative leaders across 55 countries.

What surfaced were seven shifts already redefining the industry: what it means to stay original; how we partner, price, produce, and protect creative work; and how we stay human, and stay ahead.

These are the shifts that matter now. Read on for how.

01

TRUST IN THE MACHINE

Who owns the creative spark?

When AI enters the creative process, so do new questions about ownership, authorship, and authenticity. For many, the idea of a 'creative spark' has always implied a uniquely human origin. But what happens when machines generate work that wins awards, garners attention, or drives engagement?

Attribution is murky. Legal frameworks are still catching up. And many creatives feel their work, their style, voice, or likeness is **being used to train tools without consent.**

"If a campaign goes viral and was 80% AI, who gets the credit?"

Creative Director, UK

AI isn't just being used to generate final outputs, it's entering the creative process much earlier. From sparking initial ideas to building moodboards and prototypes, many creatives see it as a catalyst for fresh thinking. It's helping teams work faster, pitch bolder, and **explore more diverse directions, faster.**

Very

'How concerned are you about the ethical implications of AI?'

91% of participants had ethical concerns. Loud and clear - ethics matter

Extremely

A little

Moderately

Not at all

AI may be faster and cheaper but without clarity on what makes the work original, we risk losing the trust that underpins creative value. A creeping sameness is already emerging in the aesthetic of AI outputs, a **surface-level shimmer masking a lack of originality**. Slightly tweaked, slightly remixed, but rarely truly new.

"AI is that fire, that flame on the end of the stick. We have no idea what the compounded effect of that is going to cause and how it's going to change society in any industry."

PJ Pereira
Co-founder, Pereira & O'Dell

Zelenskyy, Trump, Vance (2025) Sesame St, Muppets, ChatGPT theme.

The Severance Innies (2025) Apple & Severance, Studio Ghibli-ChatGPT theme.

Théâtre D'opéra Spatial (2022)
by Jason Michael Allen

Created with Midjourney, this AI-generated piece won first place at the Colorado State Fair, sparking controversy and a copyright denial due to its lack of "human authorship."

The Electrician (2023)
by Boris Eldagsen

This won the Sony World Photography Award with its AI-generated image, then declined the prize, arguing AI art shouldn't compete with human photography, raising ethical questions about transparency.

This tension is more than philosophical. It's commercial. Clients are beginning to ask what's 'original,' and whether they're paying for human craft, machine output, or some mix they don't yet understand.

The lack of standards and disclosure guidelines creates confusion.
Who owns the prompt? Who signs off on the result? What happens if an AI-generated element infringes on copyright?

"We need a new creative contract - one that makes space for machines, but puts humans in charge."

ECD, South Africa

The next frontier is ethical, not technical

As AI becomes embedded in creative workflows, the real questions aren't about capability, they're about accountability.

Who owns the work? Who gets the credit? And **how do we preserve the value of originality** when tools are trained on existing styles, voices and ideas?

Clients are adopting AI at speed. That makes it urgent for agencies to lead not just in usage, but in setting new standards. When attribution is unclear and disclosure is inconsistent, trust erodes. And without trust, creative value becomes harder to define, protect, or charge for.

This isn't just a legal gap, it's a leadership gap. The industry has a window to shape a new creative contract: one that blends AI with human intention, protects intellectual property, and **puts people at the centre of the process**.

Where we go from here

- Champion a new creative contract that integrates AI but puts people first.
- Advocate for shared standards around use, attribution and disclosure.
- Define creative judgment as a premium layer not just a by-product.
- Help clients interrogate how AI was used, and why it matters.
- Protect the work. Only use rights-cleared tools when creating for commercial use.

THE ECONOMICS OF IMAGINATION

Does faster mean better?

02

AI & CREATIVITY REPORT 2025

For decades, time was the currency of creativity. Billable hours. Retainers. Production markups. A model that made sense when creative work was crafted linearly, from brief to concept, to execution, to delivery.
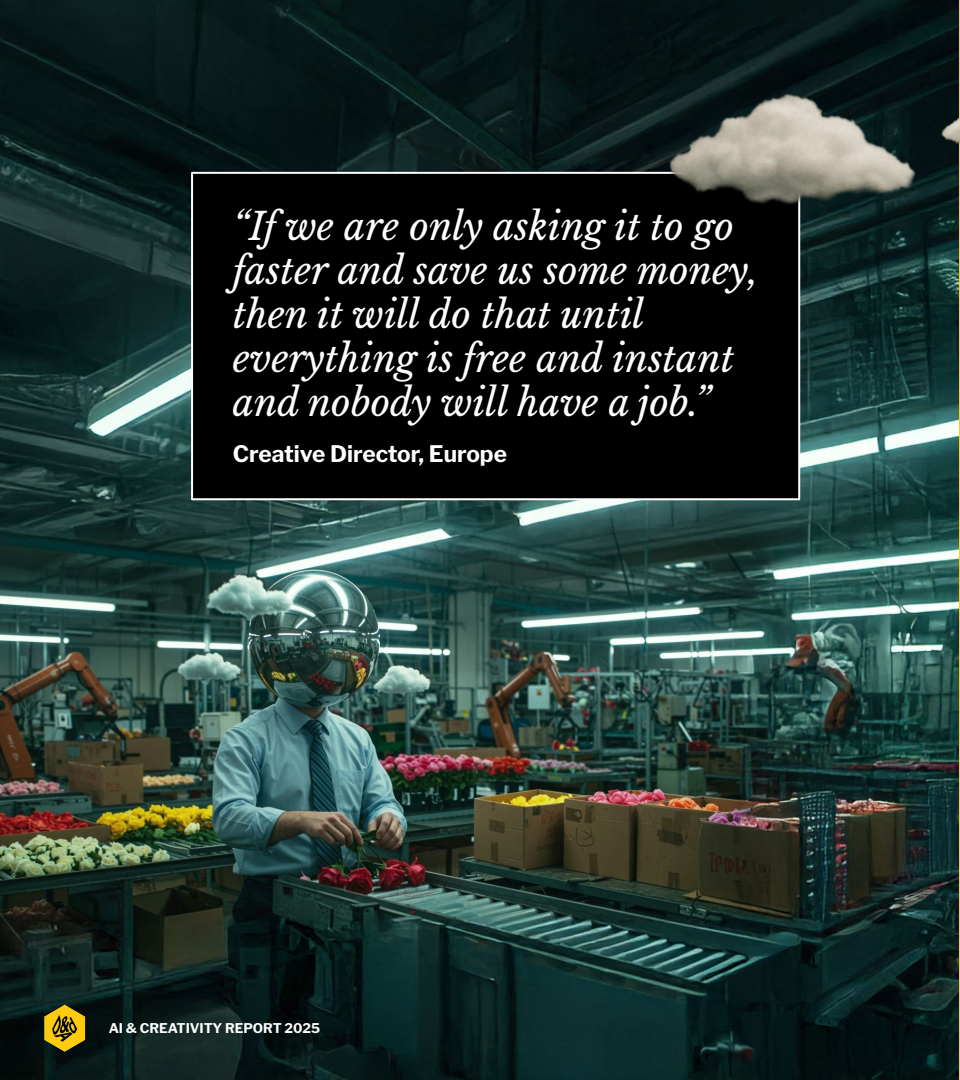
Then generative AI entered the workflow, and the timeline collapsed.

Creative assets that once took days now take minutes. Iterations that required a team can now be generated in seconds. For many agencies, that shift is liberating. For others, it's destabilising.

AI is accelerating output but it's also triggering uncomfortable questions: What exactly are clients paying for? If the process is shorter, should the price be lower? What happens when speed is mistaken for simplicity?

"Clients are starting to ask for a review of the fees thinking that AI could do the work of creatives."

Creative Leader, Barcelona

"If we are only asking it to go faster and save us some money, then it will do that until everything is free and instant and nobody will have a job."

Creative Director, Europe

Some agencies are experimenting with new models. They're **reframing value through action, not just rhetoric**, by:

- Charging for strategic impact, not production effort;
- Separating AI-driven services as their own value stream;
- Reframing value around results, not timelines.

But change is uneven. And the threat of devaluation looms.

The **creative hope is that AI frees up time for deeper thinking,** risk-taking, and bolder ideas. The commercial risk is that 'faster' becomes synonymous with 'cheaper' and that budget reductions follow, not reinvestment.

"We become faster and more efficient - allowing us to spend more time on the things that matter."

Strategy Head, Agency

Speed isn't the enemy, undervaluing thinking is

AI has collapsed timelines but that doesn't mean the work is worth less. **What's truly valuable hasn't changed: originality, cultural sensitivity, and the judgement to know what will land and why.**

But the old pricing models are under pressure. If time is no longer the measure, **agencies need to reassert the value of thinking over making**. Strategic impact over production effort. The making may now happen faster but the ideas still demand clarity, courage, craft and care.

This is a pivotal moment: not just to defend value, but to redefine it. Agencies that lean into this shift – educating clients, experimenting with models, and pricing for outcomes, not outputs – will stay ahead. Those who don't may find themselves replaced by **tools that look capable, but lack context, care or taste.**

Where to focus value now

- Position creative thinking as the product, not just what wraps around it.
- Make strategic insight visible in decks, decisions and pricing.
- Clarify the gap between automation and original thinking.
- Guide teams to invest in quality, not just speed.
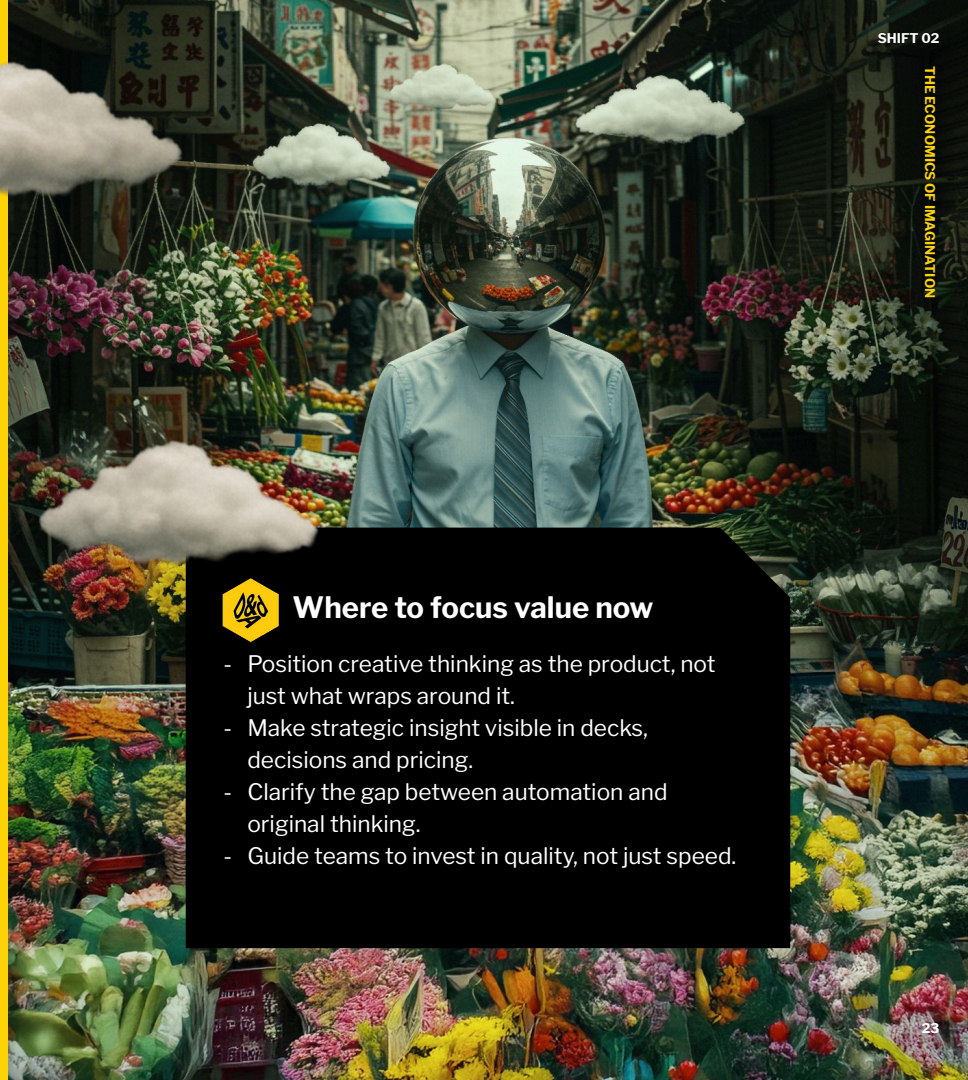
03

EVOLVING PARTNERSHIPS

Who really needs who now?

Client/agency relationships have always balanced trust, transparency and tension. But generative AI has introduced a new variable: capability. **When clients have access to the same tools as their creative partners, the boundaries begin to blur.**

The old model – where creative agencies were seen as **black boxes of expertise is eroding**. In its place, a more open, iterative, and sometimes uncomfortable collaboration is emerging.

In many cases, clients are now:

- Expecting AI to be part of the process (and asking for justification when it isn't);
- Bringing their own AI-generated concepts to the table;
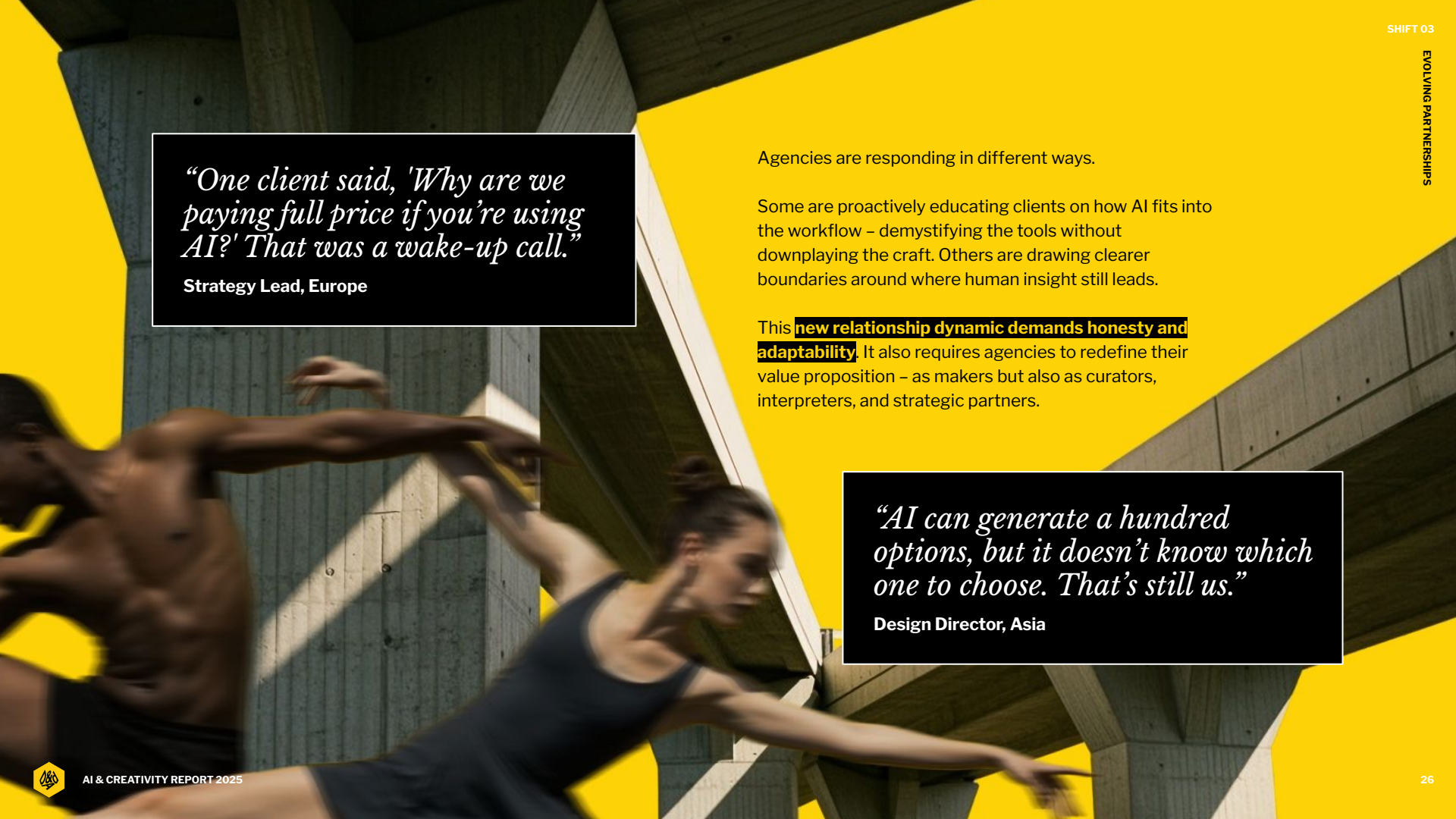- Evaluating agencies not just on ideas, but on efficiency and integration of new tools.

"Clients ask how we're using AI, but they're also experimenting themselves. It's a different dynamic now."

Creative Director, South America

"AI shows up in my day-to-day - when I'm writing, mocking up ideas, or diving into topics mid-meeting. It's made visualisations and even mood films so much easier to pull together."

**Ravi Hitchcock
Co-founder, Soursop**

> *"One client said, 'Why are we paying full price if you're using AI?' That was a wake-up call."*
>
> **Strategy Lead, Europe**

Agencies are responding in different ways.

Some are proactively educating clients on how AI fits into the workflow – demystifying the tools without downplaying the craft. Others are drawing clearer boundaries around where human insight still leads.

This new relationship dynamic demands honesty and adaptability. It also requires agencies to redefine their value proposition – as makers but also as curators, interpreters, and strategic partners.

> *"AI can generate a hundred options, but it doesn't know which one to choose. That's still us."*
>
> **Design Director, Asia**

Collaboration has changed, so must the creative contract

As clients gain access to the same AI tools as agencies, the dynamic is shifting. The old model of outsourced expertise is being replaced by co-creation, experimentation, and more scrutiny of process and pricing.

This isn't erosion, it's evolution. **Agencies that respond with openness, not opacity, will build stronger partnerships.** That means showing how human insight shapes outcomes, not just output. It means helping clients understand what machines can do and where creative leadership still matters most.

This is a moment to reset expectations on both sides. Agencies aren't just makers, they're guides, interpreters, and strategic collaborators. That's the role to protect and reinforce.

How to lead in the new partnership

- Be clear and open about when and how AI is used
- Show where human oversight turns tools into taste
- Co-create new ways of working with creative leadership at the centre.

CITIZEN IMPACT

Do audiences care?

04

While the industry obsesses over tools, teams, and timelines, the audience is simply scrolling.

So do they notice when content is made by AI? And more importantly, do they care?

For many consumers, AI-generated content is already part of the feed. On TikTok, Spotify, YouTube and beyond, synthetic voices, AI-edited video, and machine-made music sit side by side with human creativity.

Most users don't stop to check the source, they engage based on feel, not fact.

"The consumer just wants to be entertained or engaged. Most of them don't care whether it's made by a human or a machine."

Senior Creative, Global Network

Screen images by The Dor Brothers, unknown (X) liaozeen, Pixel (Sora) and @axiang67 (TikTok)

This is a sign that authenticity isn't dead, it's just that the concept is shifting. For audiences, authenticity is about intention, not authorship. What matters is whether the work feels real, not how it was made.

"Fooling people with AI creates only disappointment, rejection or irritation. There's no value in pretending to think."

**Jonathan Kneebone
Founder, Glue Society**

"Audiences care about originality but it's not their job to audit it. That's our responsibility."

Brand Director, US

Audiences may or may not ask, "Was this made by AI?" – but they'll feel when it's made without care.

The challenge isn't as much about grabbing attention (AI can do that); **it's about earning trust, connection, and emotional impact.** That's still the prerogative of human creativity.

Intention builds trust

This is a creative opportunity, not a crisis.

Audiences are more perceptive than we give them credit for – they can tell when work lacks care or thought, and they respond when something feels real. We should respect their intelligence.

That starts with intention. Be clear about how AI fits into the work; not to over-explain, but to show that it's been used with purpose, not as a gimmick. Trust isn't built through perfection – it's built through honesty.

If we treat AI as a shortcut, the audience will spot it. If we use it with care to sharpen ideas, deepen meaning, or unlock expression, they'll feel that too.

That's the bar now.

Lead with intention

- Treat AI use as context, not concealment – audiences value intent;
- Optimise for emotional impact, not just attention metrics;
- Make originality and nuance a creative non-negotiable.

05

CODE MEETS CRAFT

Where do humans still win?

As AI becomes more capable, a new question emerges: what remains uniquely human?

AI can scale output, remix references, and generate endless variations. But it still can't care. It doesn't feel risk, or humour, or timing. It doesn't know what matters, or why.

That's where craft comes in. **The creative edge is still human – in the taste, the edit, the restraint, the idiosyncrasy.** In the moments we know less is more. When we feel something's off and fix it. When we break the rules – not because we can, but because we should.

Craft isn't just what we do, it's how we think. It's knowing when to sit with ambiguity, when to go deeper, when to fight for better. It's the silent decisions behind the work: the references on which we draw, the audiences we understand, the instincts we trust. **AI can generate the options, but it can't read the room.**

And in a world of infinite outputs, the patience to make something by hand – **with care and intent – is more valuable than ever.**

Traditional craft isn't obsolete. It reminds us that just because something can be made fast, doesn't mean it should be.

> *"AI can give us hundreds of options. What it can't do is choose the right one for the right moment."*
>
> **Executive Creative Director, Asia**

Gen Chess
A Google Labs experiment that transforms your ideas into playable art pieces.

Generate your set

Make a creative ⌄ chess set inspired by sushi

✦ Your set is ready.

Tap to edit individual pieces, or Generate Opponent to play.

♟ Generate Opponent

✦ Regenerate Set

AI outputs may sometimes be offensive or inaccurate.

Privacy   Terms of Service

O2's AI-powered "Daisy"
A lifelike digital grandmother designed to waste fraudsters' time with meandering conversations, protecting real customers from phone scams.

> *"You can feel when something's had care put into it. AI doesn't know what care is."*
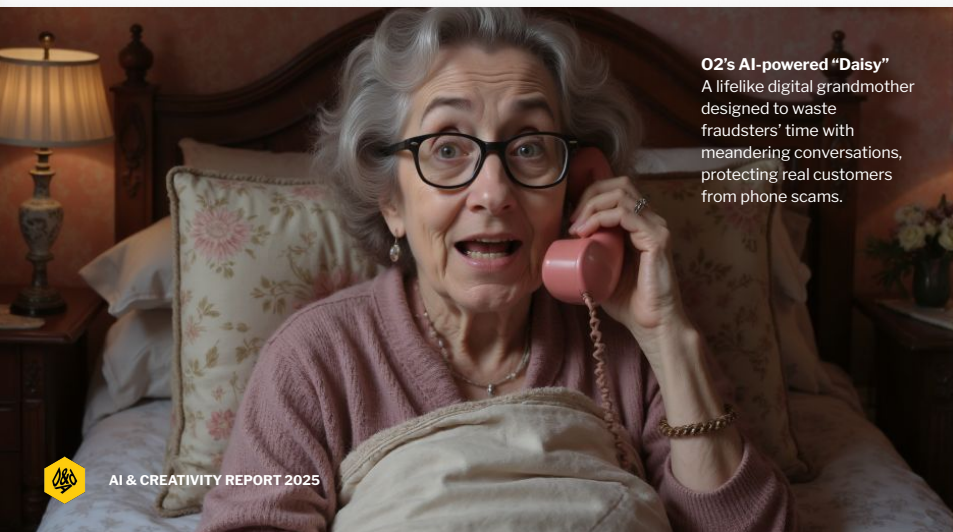>
> **Creative Director, Nairobi**

Some fear AI will replace designers, writers, editors.

But **what it's really coming for is mediocrity**: the templated, the obvious, the expected. That's where we show up. With instinct. With emotion. With intent.

If you're a creative who's been displaced, this may feel like cold comfort. But it's not a reflection of your value, it's a reflection of an industry still catching up with the tools it's adopted. That's painful, and real. But it also creates space. Space to redefine what's worth paying for, and to **lead with the kind of thinking machines can't fake.**

And in that space, there's still room for the tactile, the analogue, the slow. Far from relics of a different age, they're reminders of what care looks like.

Teams need to make space for these practices, not edge them out. Sometimes, the most original work doesn't come from scaling up but rather from slowing down.

Originality is a point of view

AI doesn't know what to value. That's still our job: to choose what matters, and why. To make work that resonates, not just reaches.

Craft is what happens when instinct overrides instruction. It's the silent, human judgement to do the bold thing a machine wouldn't choose.

The creatives who thrive now won't just prompt well, they'll know when to stop generating and start deciding. They'll create space for nuance, contradiction and surprise.

The tools may be new, but the creative edge is still human. That edge depends on how we use the tools. Not to churn, but to challenge. Not to shortcut thinking, but to stretch it.

**Craft now isn't just what you make – it's how you wrangle the system, and still make it yours.**

"It's like the move from the pre-Mac era to the Mac era. Creatives who adapt will drive the future of development."

**Malcolm Poynton
Global CCO, Cheil Worldwide**

Keeping the creative edge

- Prioritise the human lens across concept, craft and critique;
- Protect space for traditional craft — the thoughtful, the tactile, the slow;
- Use AI to explore, but let people decide, challenge and elevate;
- Don't settle for the shortcut. Push past the first idea;
- Embed creative thinking from first spark to final sign-off.
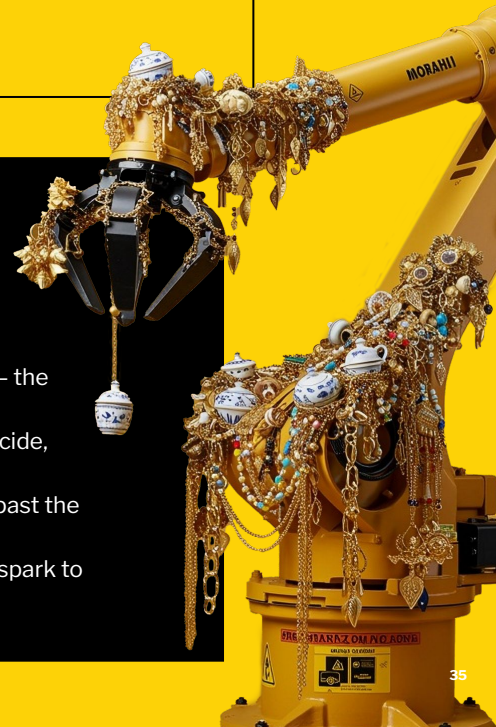
HUMAN CAPITAL REIMAGINED

What is creative talent now?

06

AI is a talent disruptor.

Creative roles are being redefined in real time. Some skill sets are fading, others are rising. From prompt engineers and AI-literate art directors to ethical strategists and cultural translators, new hybrid roles are emerging fast.

The disruption is real, and for many, it's personal. Gen X creatives in particular, who helped build the industry, are now facing the sharpest edge of change. Their experience isn't outdated but it is potentially undervalued.

As reported by *The New York Times* in March 2025, "AI seems likely to replace many of the remaining Gen X copywriters, photographers and designers. By 2030, ad agencies in the United States will lose 7.5 percent of the industry's workforce to it."

For many around the world, that pressure lands at the worst possible time – rising costs of living, tuition, elderly care – just as roles are being questioned, compressed or cut. **This isn't just a talent strategy issue. It's about care, equity, and timing.**
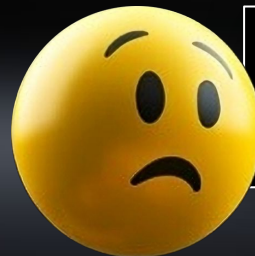
But fear isn't the whole story.

"If used well, AI can unlock human potential in ways we've never seen before."

**Michelle Gilmore
CEO, Juno**

Atlas Robot
WPP collaborated with Boston Dynamics to utilise the humanoid robot Atlas as a camera operator.

"I think we all need widespread education in this area."

CCO, medium agency, Johannesburg

> *"The most exciting people on our team right now are those asking better questions, not just making better outputs."*
>
> **Managing Partner, South Asia**

Across regions and roles, **creatives aren't resisting change, they're asking for help to navigate it.** There's a genuine hunger for re-skilling: from structured training to real-world case studies, from technical fluency to cultural leadership. This is an inflection point.

The future of creative talent won't be defined by who learns the tools fastest, it will belong to those who **combine curiosity with care,** who know how to ask better questions, and who can lead others through the noise.
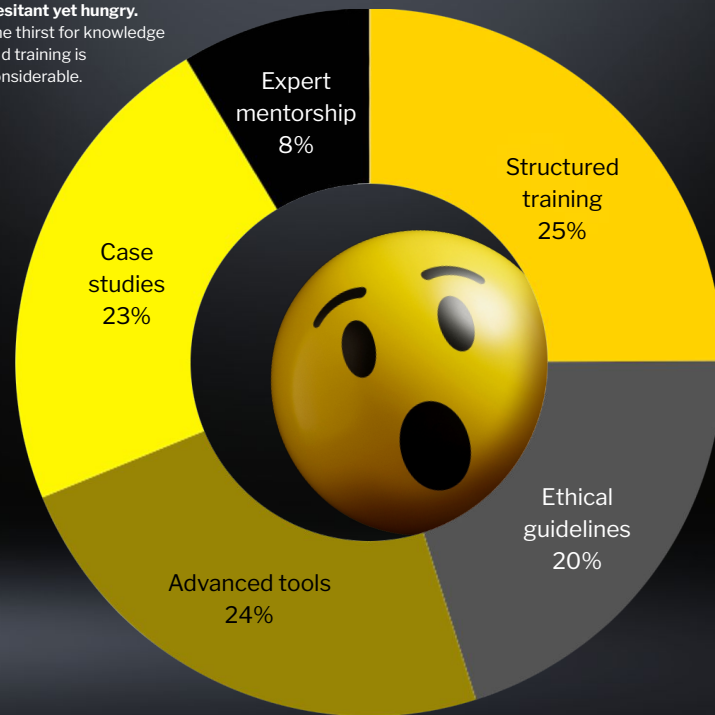
> *"AI can give us back the time to be our original selves."*
>
> **Jonathan Kneebone**
> **Founder, Glue Society**

'Which resources would help you use AI most effectively?'

Hesitant yet hungry.
The thirst for knowledge and training is considerable.

- Expert mentorship 8%
- Structured training 25%
- Ethical guidelines 20%
- Advanced tools 24%
- Case studies 23%

WHAT NOW DEMANDS

If you're a CEO, CSO, ECD, strategist, creative or producer, this is the moment to act with intention.

This is your reality checklist for right now. What to hold onto. What to let go of.

How to keep your edge when the ground is moving beneath you.

For Practitioners

- Think with the tools. Learn how AI works, but don't let it lead.
- Make your process visible.
- Clients don't buy magic, they buy method.
- Push past the first prompt. Your judgment is the edge.
- Train your taste, not just your technique.
- *Don't fear the machine. Make it your co-pilot, not your boss.*

For Leaders

- Price for outcomes, not hours.
- Value what's strategic, not just what's produced.
- Redefine roles. Some will fade, others must evolve.
- Retrain deliberately. Technical fluency plus emotional intelligence wins.
- Empower experience. Elevate senior talent as mentors, not casualties.
- Build a new process. AI isn't a plug-in, it's a rethink.
- Lead with care. Creative culture needs space to adapt.

This shift is hard. But not hopeless. What you build now will shape what comes next – for you, your team, and your craft.

This is a reset, not a write-off

AI is changing what creative work looks like. Some roles are under pressure. Some are disappearing. The disruption is real, and the flow-on effect personal. But this isn't the end of creative talent. It's a chance to reimagine how that talent is valued and applied.

What makes **creative work meaningful hasn't changed: judgement, instinct, emotion, lived experience.** These remain essential and uniquely human.

The future won't be built by platforms. It will be built by people. By agencies that upskill across every level, and elevate experienced creatives as mentors and guides.

By leaders who rethink roles around taste, ethics and adaptability. That embed care as deliberately as they embed AI.

This isn't just a reckoning for senior talent, it's a reset for everyone. From juniors learning to think with the tools, to mid-levels adapting to hybrid roles, to leaders rediscovering how to teach what can't be templated. The shift is shared. And reinvention must be collective, not siloed.

Future-proofing creativity

- Build teams fluent in both AI tools and creative judgment;
- Redefine roles around taste, context, and cultural fluency;
- Champion experienced talent as mentors, not relics;
- Invest in learning to build capability
- Make adaptability and ethical thinking core to the culture.

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CREATIVITY
UNCHAINED
The infinite muse

The tools are no longer the frontier. The mindset is.

After months of global interviews and research, one theme emerged with clarity: the **creatives thriving with AI aren't just using it, they're playing with it.** Letting go of old assumptions about process, speed, authorship, and who gets to create what, and how.

"AI didn't unlock creativity. It just exposed the difference between that and mediocrity. The unconventional, the honed and the brilliant are impossible to ignore."

Ben Cooper
Founder, Brainstrust

Namae Koi
AI-generated artist and avatar created by German creative director Mieke Haase. Dubbed an Artificial Audio Visual Artist (AAVA), she merges music, fashion, and storytelling - blurring the line between human expression and machine-made creativity.
@namae_koi

"It's a moodboard, a co-pilot, and a provocation. It gets you to places your brain might never start on its own."

Creative Director, Paris

The most energised creative leaders **aren't debating whether AI is good or bad, they're using it to stretch their thinking.** To surface unexpected directions. To start weirder, explore faster, and go beyond what their process once allowed.

This is what happens when curiosity leads.

"It's allowing an entirely new world to be built."

**Kwame Taylor-Hayford
Co-Founder, Kin**

Funkuncle
The alias of Melbourne artist Edward J. Funkuncle (Jr), known for blending retro inspired music with surreal AI-driven visuals.
@funkuncle_productions

The friction is lower. The spark comes faster. Deadlines feel less like cliffs and more like springboards. **AI hasn't replaced the process, it's blown it wide open.**

"It's an alternative perspective. It breaks monotony, like a digital version of staring out the window."

CCO, small agency, Johannesburg

That doesn't mean everything AI makes is good. Of course, it isn't. But it means creatives now have more ways to explore, shape, test and twist.

And what matters is still the same: meaning, taste, timing, originality.

Still G.I.N.
Dr. Dre and Snoop Dogg share a toast with AI-recreated versions of Frank Sinatra and Sammy Davis Jr., blending classic and contemporary icons through advanced generative technology.

Adidas' spec ad 'Floral'
AI-crafted ad by director Blair Vermette and studio RabbitHole, blending fashion, technology, and Japanese inspired visuals to reimagine brand storytelling.

floral
by

CREATIVITY UNCHAINED

Images
1,2: Leilanni Todd
3: Becky Constantinides
4: Jeannette Bergen
5: Olya Golovko

"...get past this moment of 'look at these icons I made in AI' - because who cares? Would we ever say, 'look what I made in Photoshop'?"

**Lisa Smith
Global ECD,
Jones Knowles Ritchie**

This shift isn't about doing more - it's about thinking differently.

The best creatives aren't outsourcing decisions to AI. They're taking on new roles: as editors of the unexpected, curators of possibility, choreographers of systems. They know how to push past the obvious. They know how to finish.

The craft has shifted from making to shaping, from using tools to setting taste, from execution to discernment.

The new standard

- Creativity now belongs to those who use AI not as a crutch but as a catalyst;
- Not to cut corners but to find stranger paths;
- The tools are everywhere. The playing field is level. What matters is what you bring to it;
- The real revolution isn't the tech. It's the people who know what to do with it.

We've heard the fears. The excitement. The resistance. The reinvention.

Across seven shifts and 55 countries, one thing is clear: AI is no longer on the edge of creativity, it's inside the process, reshaping it from within. **Accelerating the best. Exposing the lazy.**

This isn't just technical change. It's cultural. And it's happening on our watch.

What's evolving isn't just how we work, it's what the world expects from creative work. **Faster and cheaper isn't the brief. Sharper, deeper, braver is.**

And now we have the tools to deliver it, if we choose to use them with care, with courage, and with intent.

AI won't replace originality – but it will expose anything less. It will challenge the old habits, old hierarchies, and old excuses that once held the industry back.

The creative leaders who'll thrive from here aren't standing still. They'll be the ones who experiment, provoke and reimagine. The ones who shape what comes next and bring others with them.

The tools are here. The standard has shifted. Now it's our move.

CREATIVITY UNCHAINED

THIS ISN'T A TIME TO WAIT AND SEE.

This is a time to shape the shift.

A PLAYBOOK FOR PROGRESS

We don't need more hype. We need better habits.

This isn't about having a 'point of view on AI.' It's about building the creative practices, processes and standards that will hold up – next month, next year, next client.

Here's where to begin:

1 Play with it, don't pose with it

The best work is coming from teams who treat AI as a tool, not a trophy. Make it part of the mess. Prototype with it. Break it. Surprise yourself.

2 Recode your creative process

AI changes how ideas form, and how they flow. Rewrite your briefs, your timelines, your feedback rituals. Don't bolt new tools onto old habits. Redesign around what's newly possible.

3 Define your red lines

Every agency, team and freelancer needs a working ethics position. Where will you use AI? Where won't you? How will you disclose it? This clarity builds trust – and protects the work.

4 Audit for bias and boredom

Test your outputs. Who's included? What's being repeated? Are we remaking old tropes in shiny new ways? Be ruthless about sameness. Push for nuance, weirdness and edge.

5 Price for value, not just time

AI compresses timelines and erodes old pricing models. If you're still charging by the hour, you're behind. Reframe your value around originality, intelligence and business impact.

6 Back your talent, shape the future

The agencies that win this transition will invest in people, not just platforms. Upskill with intention. Build confidence, not just capability. AI doesn't replace teams, it reveals how strong your creative culture is.

7 Stay loud, stay honest

Your clients, your team, your audience – they're all learning too. Share your experiments. Flag your failures. Show your process. Transparency isn't a disclaimer. It's a leadership move.

8 Protect time for deep work

Just because AI moves fast doesn't mean you should. Make space for thinking, slow exploration, and human instinct. The most powerful ideas come from what machines can't replicate: time, tension and taste.

Don't wait for the rules to be written.
Write your own.
Shape what comes next.

KEEP BUILDING THE FUTURE TOGETHER

This report is a beginning, not an endpoint.

If you're a creative director, strategist, designer, client or founder - what you do next shapes not just your workflow, but the creative culture around you. The standards you set. The experiments you run. The risks you choose to take.

At D&AD, we're not just tracking the shift. We're **building alongside it - across education, emerging talent, and professional growth.**

Where to go from here

Contribute to the conversation: Through our AI Council D&AD will continue to provide insight and solutions to ensure AI enhances, not erodes, creative excellence. We're shaping this future together. To stay involved and informed - let's talk 🔗.

D&AD Masterclasses: Learn from global experts in our expanding series on AI and creativity - from ethics and innovation to hands-on toolkits for your team.

Shift: Our free, industry-led programme for emerging creatives now includes AI-powered learning, helping underrepresented talent build a future-facing portfolio.

New Blood: Our education-to-industry platform supports emerging talent through real-world briefs, mentorship and exposure - and now includes awards that recognise AI-infused creativity.

D&AD Awards: Draw inspiration from our archive of award-winning work and see how in recent years AI has integrated into creative practice.

Prompts & pictures

Juno sparked the thinking. Shutterstock brought it to life.

These images were created using Shutterstock's GenAI Pro tools, trained on rights-cleared data including their own library, with a creative approach that embraced the strange over realism.

But it's the human judgement in between that made it matter.

This is AI-enabled, human made – curious, considered, and anything but automatic.

Prompt: A traditional art gallery with grey-green walls, where paint flows across the floor cascading down from the edges of the paintings on the walls like waterfalls. the paint is vibrant and fluid, defying the traditional limits of paint, blending and shifting in impossible ways. the gallery captures a fusion of human craft and digital innovation, with paint moving in unexpected, dynamic forms that feel both organic and otherworldly. the scene evokes a sense of wonder, as if the impossible is coming to life through the marriage of traditional artistry and modern possibilities.

Prompt: A surreal, staged scene set in an expansive, environment with pastel tones and theatrical lighting. the space features a mix of indoor and outdoor elements, with diverse people placed in strange poses — some working at 1950s desks, one person reclining on a sun lounger, others peering through cut-out windows or climbing unexpected architectural details. each person appears absorbed — thinking, waiting, watching — creating quiet tension. the composition feels like a behavioural study or installation. the mood is still and slightly uncanny, hinting at introspection and unseen connections. the scene represents a global research study, capturing culturally diverse creative voices and viewpoints. stylised, conceptual, emotionally rich.

Prompt: Indoor photo of a portrait of a loyal, trustworthy dog, labrador retriever wearing a, transparent, glass suit and helmet. the helmet wraps around the dogs nose, and the helmet is formed to create glasses around the dogs eyes. the suit symbolises the machine and the future, the suit has square detail, panels and a few random wires. the background is dark with subtle background light, allowing details of the reflective glass suit to stand out. the dog's expression should be calm, focused, and exude trust, symbolising the harmonious relationship between nature and technology. the overall mood should be surreal, and inspiring trust in the machine.

Prompt: Outdoor photo of a surreal and vibrant asian marketplace bustling with activity. in the foreground, two figures are bartering over a sale: one has a flower for a head, symbolizing creativity and nature, while the other has a mirrored sphere for a head, representing reflection, abstraction, and the multifaceted nature of imagination. the market is alive with energy, filled with other people who also have unique heads—some with flowers, others with mirrored spheres, and some with clouds for heads, all representing different facets of imagination and creativity. the stalls are colorful, and the scene is rich with details of bartering and exchanging ideas, goods, and concepts. the atmosphere is playful, surreal, and filled with contrast.

Prompt: Outdoor photo of a surreal dance between three figures in a barren urban setting, with only minimal structures around. the dancer's movements are weird and strangely balanced on each other. the scene features part of a concrete bridge, its lines clean and angular, cutting through the otherwise empty landscape. the dancers, in simple, minimalist attire, move together on the open concrete floor beneath the bridge, their motions flowing with purpose and harmony. the surrounding environment is stark and devoid of life, with muted tones of grey and earth tones setting the scene. there are no signs of life or distraction, just the raw, still presence of the concrete and dancers in fluid motion.

Prompt: A surreal and provocative scene of a person sitting in their armchair in a sparsely furnished room, the person is all covered in greenish-brown slime. The slime coats their heads and bodies, dripping from their phone, symbolising the overwhelming consumption of 'AI slop.' The individuals are holding their phone, absorbed in the digital world, with the slime acting as a visual metaphor for the saturation and messiness of AI-generated content. The atmosphere is unsettling yet captivating, highlighting the excessive consumption of technology.

Prompt: Indoor photo of a surreal, high-fashion portrait. a close-up of an indian model's face, partially obscured by an intricate, avant-garde headdress made of ornate, glossy materials — porcelain, gold filigree, and embroidered fabric. the model's head is gently leaning back into a large, yellow industrial robotic arm, which supports them with unexpected grace. the lighting is dramatic and cinematic, with deep shadows and glowing highlights, evoking a sense of futuristic intimacy. the background is soft and abstract. a stunning fusion of human creativity and machine precision — elegant, emotional, and strange.

Prompt: A photograph of a narrow inner-city alley featuring a cool creative agency in the windows above. a large, inflated yellow smiley face is extremely squeezed into the back of the alley, it is squashed, creased and looks like it might pop under the pressure because it's too big for the narrow space. more inflated smiley faces are squeezed out of shape stuck in the gaps of several window openings above, creating a surreal and playful atmosphere. the alley has an, urban vibe with graffiti on the walls and soft natural light casting shadows, while the yellow, oversized smiley faces add an unexpected pop of color and whimsy. the concept is to demonstrate humans trying to stay happy under extreme pressure.

Prompt: Outdoor photo of a vibrant and surreal scene, with a fluid, plastic-like and abstract shapes. the scene includes intertwined brains, eyes, ears and the odd hand, and other distorted organic forms, all melting together in a glossy, liquid texture, the elements are sparse. it's vibrant and absurd, pushing the boundaries of imagination, with some strange figures and people subtly integrated within the chaos. at the center, a young woman's face is emerging from the bizarre, liquid-like tangle, her eyes are closed, her face emerging from the liquid and expressing a dreamlike sense of wonder and joy. the style is playful, vibrant, and absurd, evoking a sense of freedom and excitement in a world unbound by traditional creativity.

Creativity has always adapted.
This time, it's adapting with us — and with you.