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# HOW TO EFFECTIVELY SUPPORT BUSY GRAPHIC DESIGN TEAMS

Operational tactics organizations can harness to inspire overwhelmed and/or fractured design teams to fire on all creative cylinders.

The page features several decorative elements: a crumpled ball of paper in the top left, two more crumpled balls in the top center, a yellow pencil in the top right, a pen nib in the middle left, and a large crumpled ball of paper in the bottom right. A red horizontal line is positioned above the main heading.

## Is your graphic design department missing the mark?

Your graphic design team is in a rut. Sure, the cogs of the design department are still turning, but the work they produce is uninspired and run-of-the-mill (and that's if they're even able to get to your projects on time). **Thanks to widespread adoption of the Agile operating model, designers—more than ever—are feeling isolated, lost, and without the creative support and feedback they need to hone their craft.** For this reason, companies are starting to pay closer attention to the orchestration and optimization of the design department's people, processes, and craft in order to amplify its value and impact at scale. It's no surprise **“Design Operations” is one of the hottest topics in operations management and one of the biggest inspirations for this guide.**

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## Before you take drastic action, take a look at the structure and function of your design team.



An in-house design team can save up to

**40%** of your costs

if managed effectively.

What many large-scale brands don't realize is that design team dysfunction is systemic. **You might be handicapping your creatives without realizing it!** And while change is sorely needed, it might not be what you expect. The barriers keeping your graphic design team from producing exceptional, inspired results may have everything to do with how they're managed—not their capabilities.

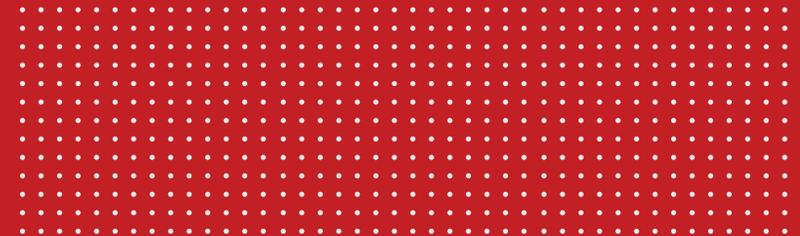
In this guide, we explore nine tactics managers and organizations can harness to inspire **overwhelmed** and/or **fractured** design teams to fire on all creative cylinders.





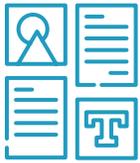
# 1

## **CREATE, CLARIFY & ADVOCATE BRAND GUIDELINES**





## Every company that's serious about branding needs to document stylistic guidelines.



The style guide should be the end-all, be-all resource for any questions about acceptable branding.

It's the foremost resource for **getting every designer on the same page**—in-house, freelance, new hire, intern and anyone else touching brand design.



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## Using your core design team, create a style guide that's exhaustive.

**Detail every design element**—from typeface to colors, imagery to word choice, to logo, slogan, trademarks, and beyond.



If there's a design question, the style guide should answer it.

**Make sure it's updated annually**—or as often as the brand itself changes. Make the style guide a living document that's the foundation for appropriate brand portrayal.

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## BUT TAKE NOTE:



It's not enough to simply have a style guide.

**Make it the standard for everything.** Distribute it to designers in both book form and electronically. Use it as part of orientation materials for new creatives and freelancers.

As the style guide becomes the center for all things design-related, the expectations and understandings amongst your creatives will **congeal into a singular vision**. Everyone is on the same page about what's acceptable.



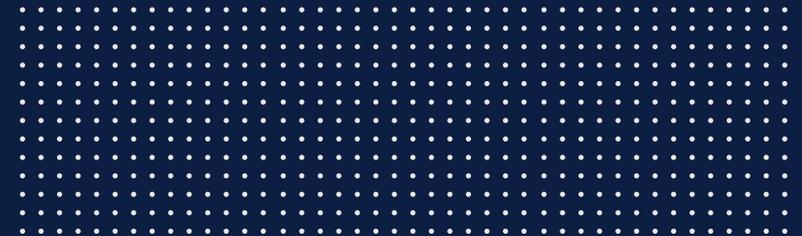
## **ABSTRACT BUSINESS CASE**

Jane gets hired by XYZ Company to be a graphic designer. At orientation, she's given a copy of the current style guide and asked to review and refer to it in all work she does. As she gets up to speed, design team leads give her feedback on her work, referencing brand guidelines for their edits.



# 2

## UNCHAIN YOUR DESIGN TEAM



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**Creative stagnation occurs in even the best designers, often because they fall into a rhythm.**

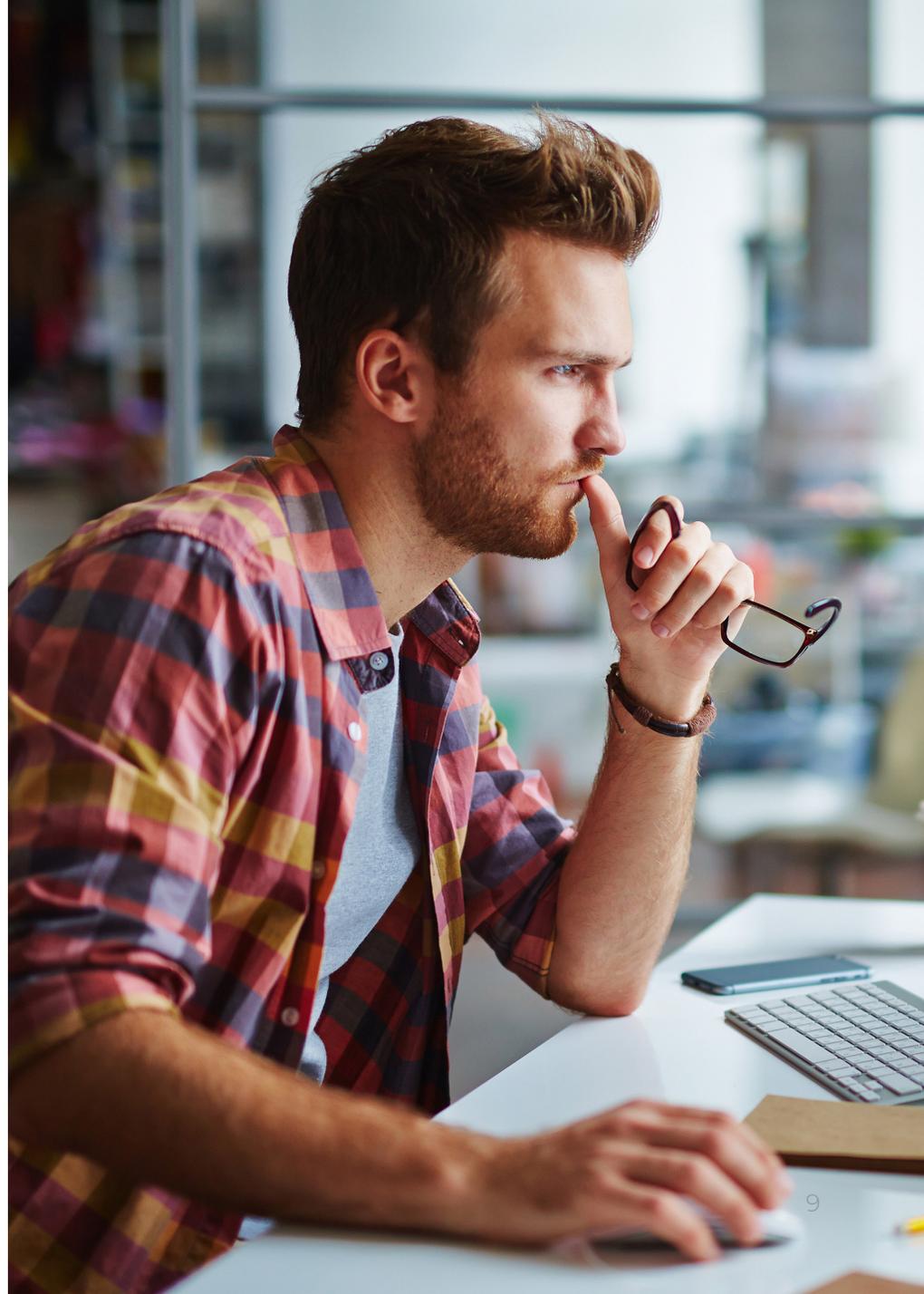
They get familiar with the branding and, after enough similar concepts, default to particular standards when creating something new.



It's a habit best broken by exalting creative individualism.

**Work to balance the immutable standards of the brand with the creative voice of each person on the design team.**

- Hold creative round tables and encourage idea-bouncing.
- Scale back rigid design instructions where possible and leave room for a little creative expression.
- Initiate internal design projects that empower designers to flex their creative muscles.



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## IN SIMPLEST TERMS:



Give designers ongoing reasons to be expressive in their own way.

**The key here is to encourage creative contributions outside of standard brand guidelines.**

Open the door for possibilities outside of what the team works on every day. It's surprising how many good, viable ideas come out of unrestrained brainstorming—and how many more comply with branding standards after a little tweaking.

**Embracing true creativity yields great results for the brand and the design team.**





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## Design is judged in the eye of the beholder.

Two people can look at the same thing and have drastically different opinions about it. It's when one person overrules another that creativity dies.



Such is the case when an executive or manager squashes the creative efforts of an enterprise design team.

**Often, the reason is subjective.** The idea is “too bold” or “a strong departure from our voice,” or doesn’t align with one person’s expectations.

That person shouldn’t be the gatekeeper for an entire department’s creativity and nothing will kill the motivation of a design team like the death knell for a great concept.

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## Let the design team do what they do best!



And, if a design comes up with mixed emotions, put it to the test.

## Use focus groups or A/B testing

to get feedback on a divisive idea.

Moreover, small market campaigns or limited run concepts go a long way in gauging public perception. If the idea is close, but skirts the line for acceptable brand standards, encourage modifications instead of tabling it for good.

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## Designers want to know they're heard and that their ideas are really and truly considered

— not extinguished by someone with a differing viewpoint. Encourage designer input and give audience to all ideas with merit.



Your next big campaign may very well likely come from the ranks of your own creative team—**if only they're given the chance to be heard.**



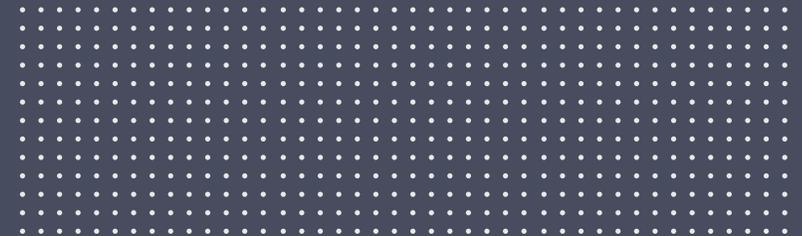
## **ABSTRACT BUSINESS CASE**

Roger has a creative concept for a new product launch campaign, but his team lead doesn't like it. Roger creates a mockup of his concept that's presented to a group of 20 employees outside the marketing department. It goes over well, so the company brings in 20 more outsiders for a focus group, which also goes well. Roger's design is tweaked slightly to comply with branding standards and rolled out in select markets.



# 3

## **PROVIDE CLEAR, SUCCINCT DIRECTION & EXPECTATIONS**





**Another problem with design subjectivity is variance between expectations and reality.**



To ensure they align, management needs to present the design team with clear, succinct, descriptive direction.

Break down instructions plainly. Give designers a list of parameters for the project without dictating exactly how to achieve them.



## **It's important to delineate standards, without restricting creativity.**

Being upfront about the expectations creates accountability within the design process. Designers know exactly what they have to accomplish, and they can measure their work against the standards given to them.



The clearer you are in providing instructions, the better the outcome.

You'll go through fewer rounds of revisions, while building the morale and confidence of designers who know what's expected of them.



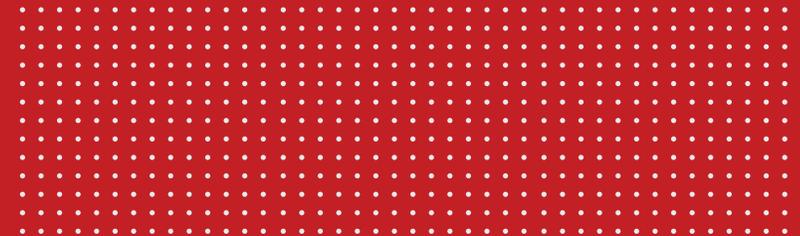
## **ABSTRACT BUSINESS CASE**

John tells his designer, “we need an image of a happy-looking tabby cat for a marketing flyer, in vector format, by Friday.” Compare this to unclear instructions like “we need a picture of a cat.”



# 4

## **ESTABLISH A WORKFLOW & STICK TO IT**



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## Imagine trying to focus on something, only to be continually interrupted.

The finished product—when you finally finish—**won't be the best it can be.** It's simply too easy to overlook details or cut corners when the pressure is on from all sides. Prevent your design team from succumbing to overload by establishing a clear-cut workflow and sticking to it.

The easiest way to reduce interruptions is to make designers less accessible.

This seems counterintuitive, but it's necessary to prevent fire drills.

Have a liaison team between other departments and designers.

People with the power to control project hierarchy and workflow

### TYPICAL REQUESTS FOR THE DESIGN TEAM:

- “Can you design this webpage? I need it ASAP.”
- “I need this event banner for a social post. ASAP.”
- “We decided the text on that infographic should be green, not blue. Can you change that ASAP?”
- “I need this keynote presentation re-designed by Monday. Can you do that?”



Control the revision process.

Addressed in the next chapter!

Limit the number of projects in any designer's queue at any one time.



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## Workflow Management

**Design teams are constantly overwhelmed by requests...**



So having a solid graphic design process in place is essential to keeping projects on scope, on budget, and on time.

Although the design process is relatively standardized, there are always ways to improve the workflow.

**Graphic designers' function in team environments, and working in a team means two things:**



Communication



Task delegation

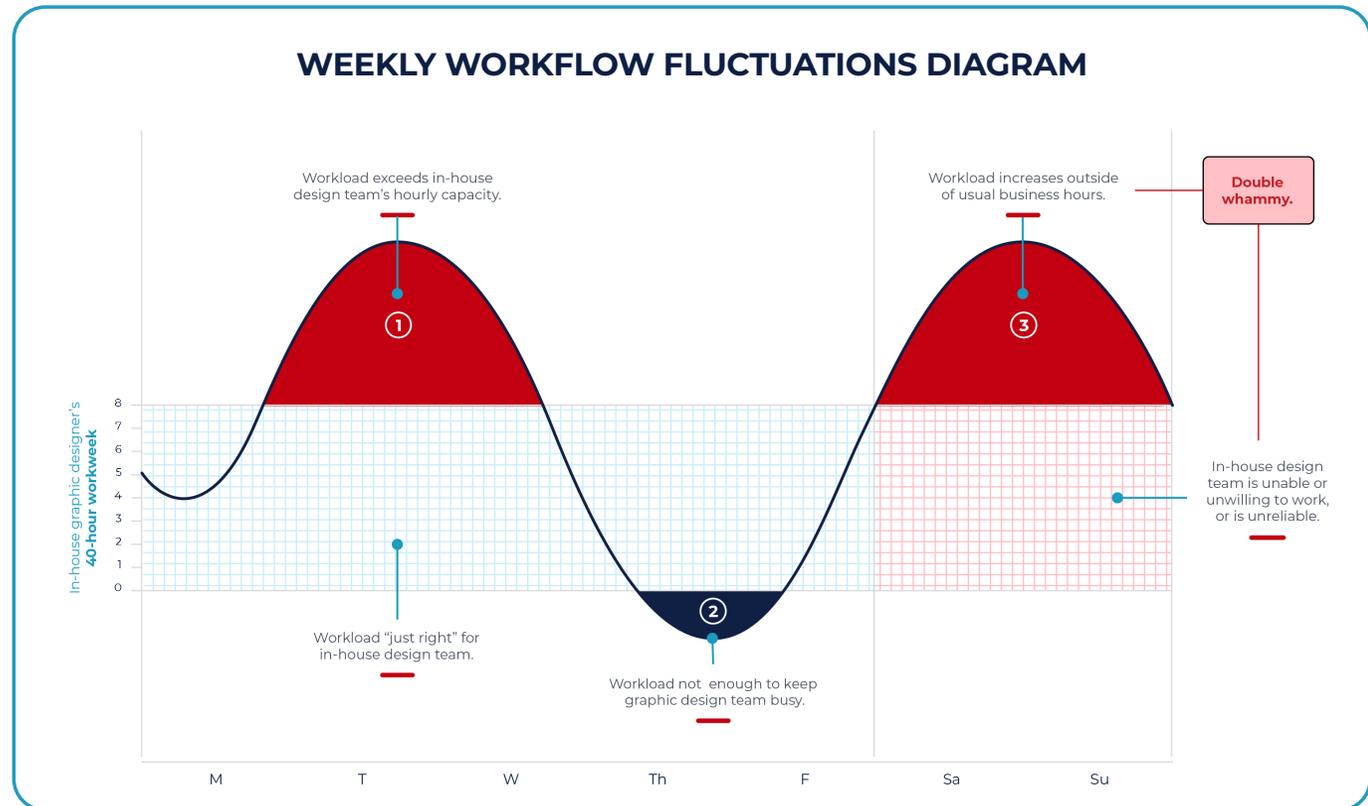


## Weekly/Yearly Graphic Design Workflow Fluctuations

Depending on the size of your company you may have one internal designer or a full creative department with a team of designers. Either way, the following diagram might feel familiar to you.

You can see how during the week—on average—this fictional graphic design team experiences **heightened workloads** on Tuesdays and Wednesdays (number “1” above), a **shortage of tasks** on Thursdays and Fridays (number “2”), and then **another increase** by week’s end (number “3”—probably because the CEO & CMO keep requesting last minute presentation redesigns!).

If #1 or #3 ever happens to your design team workflow, you need to optimize your graphic design process. Outsourcing design services from a trusted partner is usually the way to go here.





**On a macro level, standardize as much of the workflow as possible.**

So everyone is on the same page about what to expect. Funneling everything into one point and controlling the workflow allows the design team to work comfortably and attentively in their fullest capacity.

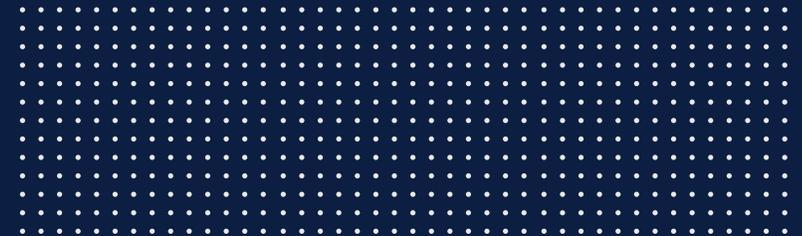
**ABSTRACT BUSINESS CASE**

Instead of working on three projects with different points of contact, Cindy's workflow goes through Admin Tom. Tom manages the workflow for a pod of designers, ensuring all requests are delegated appropriately to his pod. Projects, deliverables, and communication go through Tom, reducing Cindy's burden.



# 5

## CONSOLIDATE THE REVISION PROCESS



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**Round after round of revisions will kill any momentum in the creative process, along with the confidence of the design team.**

Getting the best product isn't the result of endless tweaks and edits—it's the result of clear, comprehensive feedback.



The revision process isn't the job of the designer—**it's the job of a manager.**

**Management needs to streamline the process for designers.**

The design team shouldn't field revisions from individuals in an endless stream of tweaks. They should expect one to two major rounds of revisions, wherein the suggestions of all stakeholders are addressed.





### FOR LARGE GROUPS

Provide copies of a design for stakeholders to mark-up individually.

### FOR SMALLER GROUPS

Have individuals send notes back to a single manager, who can clarify and cross-check them before submitting feedback to the designer.



Make sure any differences in philosophy get resolved before the designer starts revisions, else the creative process could get stuck.



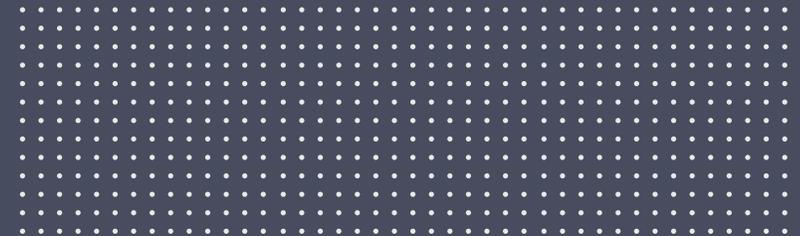
## **ABSTRACT BUSINESS CASE**

Four people need to approve a banner design ahead of a trade show. Manager Steve prints images of the banner and gives them to each stakeholder to mark up. He collects the revisions the next day and consolidates the feedback into one email for the design team.



# 6

**DON'T ISOLATE  
DESIGNERS—  
INCORPORATE THEM!**



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## Enterprise design teams can't afford to live in a bubble.

If their sole job is to design, they miss out on understanding the bigger picture. They can't see the forest from the trees in isolation.



Incorporate the design team in all aspects of the creative process.

## Have project leads sit in on sales and marketing meetings,

where they can immerse themselves in the full scope of the project.

This is where a concept like project-specific pods comes into play.

SOLUTION:



### USE PROJECT-SPECIFIC PODS

If designers X, Y, and Z staff a project from conception to fruition, they're certain to have a **better understanding of it from all standpoints, leading to more thoughtful and cohesive design.**



For larger conglomerates with a multinational presence or subsidiary brands, **keep design teams connected.**



What works for **Brand A** could springboard the next campaign for **Brand B**.

**We're starting to see more and more design guilds forming inside large corporations to accomplish just that.**

SOLUTION:



### **IMPLEMENT DESIGN GUILDS**

Design Guilds bring designers from many teams together for regular design reviews and discussion of design strategy and style. This approach helps designers get the feedback they need to grow.

**Cross-department or company collaboration encourages creatives to broaden their expressive views** and consider new ways of approaching the work they do under specific projects.





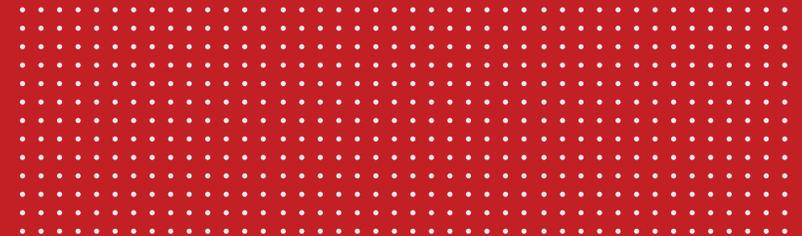
## **ABSTRACT BUSINESS CASE**

Company XYZ is launching Product N. The design team attends the brainstorming sessions on how to portray it, as well as the sales meetings, to understand the benefits, values, and audience. When Product M eventually launches, this same team will work together to build on the successes of the product N launch.



# 7

## INCLUDE MORE THAN ONE DESIGNER ON PROJECTS





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**Designers want to grow and learn from other talented creatives, push boundaries, and hone their skill.**



However the reality is that the Agile operations model has encouraged the democratization of design.

Where **a solo creative is often mixed in with employees and clients that have very little experience with design** in a fast-paced and multi-tasking environment.

It's a great opportunity to learn from others with different perspectives, but it **often leaves designers craving the feedback and camaraderie of other designers** that's needed to improve their craft.

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## In isolation, many designers feel their growth has stagnated as has their career,

they grow disenchanted with their work, and can find themselves searching for greener pastures where their creativity can be more freely expressed.



Combat this by pairing designers.

SOLUTION:



### “PAIR DESIGN” AT SLACK

Slack pairs designers on projects so they get the feedback they need to work through ideas quickly and thoroughly.

“Pair design gives you a partner in crime to help you explore ideas. It’s two people with similar or complementary skills riffing off each other. Plus when you have two people, it helps you get unstuck faster when you hit a roadblock.”

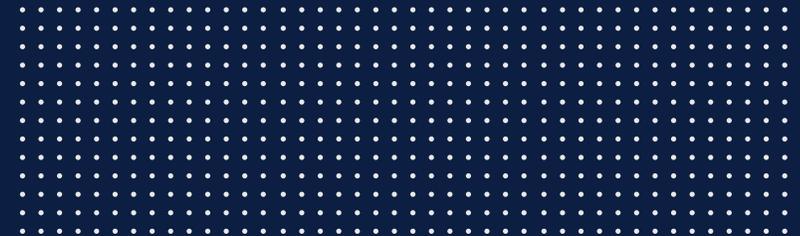
*Diogenes Brito, Slack*





# 8

## **PAY ATTENTION TO WHAT YOUR DESIGN TEAM NEEDS TO SUCCEED**





## Not every enterprise design team faces the same struggles.

Some feel handicapped by unknown expectations. Others see their creativity smothered by overruling managers. Many aren't privy to the broader needs of their abilities, because they're isolated.



Learn what's holding back your design team before pursuing changes.

**Change for the better will reinvigorate them; change for the sake of change only leads to more disruption.**





## **Use this guide as a roadmap for diagnosing and addressing creative struggles.**

More than likely, a few changes to the way you structure, manage, and enable your creatives will result in marked improvement in the work they're doing.

**When your designers flourish,  
so does your brand.**