

HOW IS AI AFFECTING THE MENTAL HEALTH OF THE CREATIVE INDUSTRY?

AI AND THE MENTAL HEALTH OF THE CREATIVE INDUSTRY

By Andy Wright & Kate Shelton, writing alternate chapters.

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CHAPTER 1 WHY WE LOOKED

By Andy

"It has the capacity for greatness, but its capacity for evil is what scares me. I hope we emerge on the other side."

Female, caucasian, 25-34, Australia

AI's rapid rise in the creative industry prompted us to look beyond the commercial impact and ask: what is it doing to our mental health?

Key Data

- The #1 concern in this industry is AI's effect on the devaluation of creative work (rated 9.1/10).
- Job uncertainty has risen to the #2 stressor — higher than in any previous study.
- Curiosity is the primary driver of AI adoption (49%), though pressure from clients, managers and peers is mounting.
- Higher AI usage correlates with lower experiences of burnout.
- Concern about AI is consistent regardless of age, gender, or workplace type — though what people are concerned about varies.
- 80% have experimented with AI and found it useful.

The impetus for this research wasn't the commercial reality of AI. It was the inevitable effect on mental health for people who count this industry as their passion and their means of living, progressing, and putting food on the table.

On one hand, AI is innovation, an opportunity; for the most curious of us, a chance to jump on board and ride fast-forward into the future. For others, it's anxiety creating, catastrophising, end of days depressing, and sometimes both at the same time.

We've read about the disruption to business models, workflows, creativity and output. But, we haven't heard enough about the emotional stakes. We haven't seen the inside narrative. What it's doing to our brains, our confidence, our

hope and our individual and collective mental health.

If you're new to Never Not Creative, well, this is what we do. We're a charity setup to look out for everyone working in this industry. We shine a light on the challenges, the stressors, the things that bring us joy and the things that bring us crippling imposter-syndrome and everything in-between.

Rather than 'wait-and-see' what happens, we decided to get a lay of the land on where we're at right now, and ask the question, what can we do to help?

CHAPTER 2 WHO WE HEARD FROM

By Kate

206 voices from across the creative industry gave us a representative snapshot of who we are and what we're thinking.

Key Data

- 206 respondents captured over 3 months (Oct 2025 – Jan 2026), 165 completed in full.
- Largest age group: 35–44, with representation from 18–24 through to 55+.
- 80% Australia-based, with additional voices from UK, US, New Zealand and Europe.
- Just under 60% female; majority Caucasian, with representation across Asian, Indian, Hispanic and other backgrounds.
- Most common workplaces: creative agencies, design studios, UX/UI, specialist agencies.
- Role breakdown: employees (35%), sole traders/freelancers (~20%), business owners (18%).
- Company size skewed towards SMEs: 19% in teams of 5–19, 20% in 20–49, 17% in 50–199.
- Benchmarking questions aligned to the 2024 Mentally Healthy survey.

Our participants felt reflective of the studios we frequent, the conferences and meetups we occasionally attend, and the communities we play a part in. While a larger sample is always welcomed, this was enough to capture initial perspectives from the many wonderful, creative and diverse corners of our industry.

These are our peers and collaborators, and in some cases, 'competition', but we're in this together and importantly, keen to have a say on AI.

CHAPTER 3 WHAT WE EXPECTED TO FIND

By Andy

“It’s killing and homogenising creativity, and young designers and creatives are racing towards it to further their careers and get ahead quicker. The basics are being lost and no one wants to learn and or work on the fundamentals”

Male, caucasian, 35-44, Australia

We entered with seven hypotheses. Three proved correct, several surprised us – which is exactly why research matters.

Key Data

- 3 of 7 hypotheses proved correct.
- Job insecurity intensified by AI: confirmed.
- Younger people are more positive about AI: not supported — 35–44 year olds are the heaviest users.
- In-house teams more positive than agency: not supported.
- Low AI usage correlates with higher burnout: partially supported.
- AI as a top-3 stressor: almost — it sits at #4 (pressure to keep up with AI/tech trends).
- Concern over AI does not correlate with poorer sleep or higher burnout.

HYPOTHESIS	PROVED?
AI is intensifying feelings of job insecurity	Yes
AI is seen most positively by younger members of the industry	No
AI is seen more positively by in-house teams vs agency employees	No
Low AI usage correlates with higher burnout	Yes (to an extent)
AI is now one of the top 3 stressors in the industry	Yes
Concern over AI correlates with poorer sleep quality and higher burnout	No

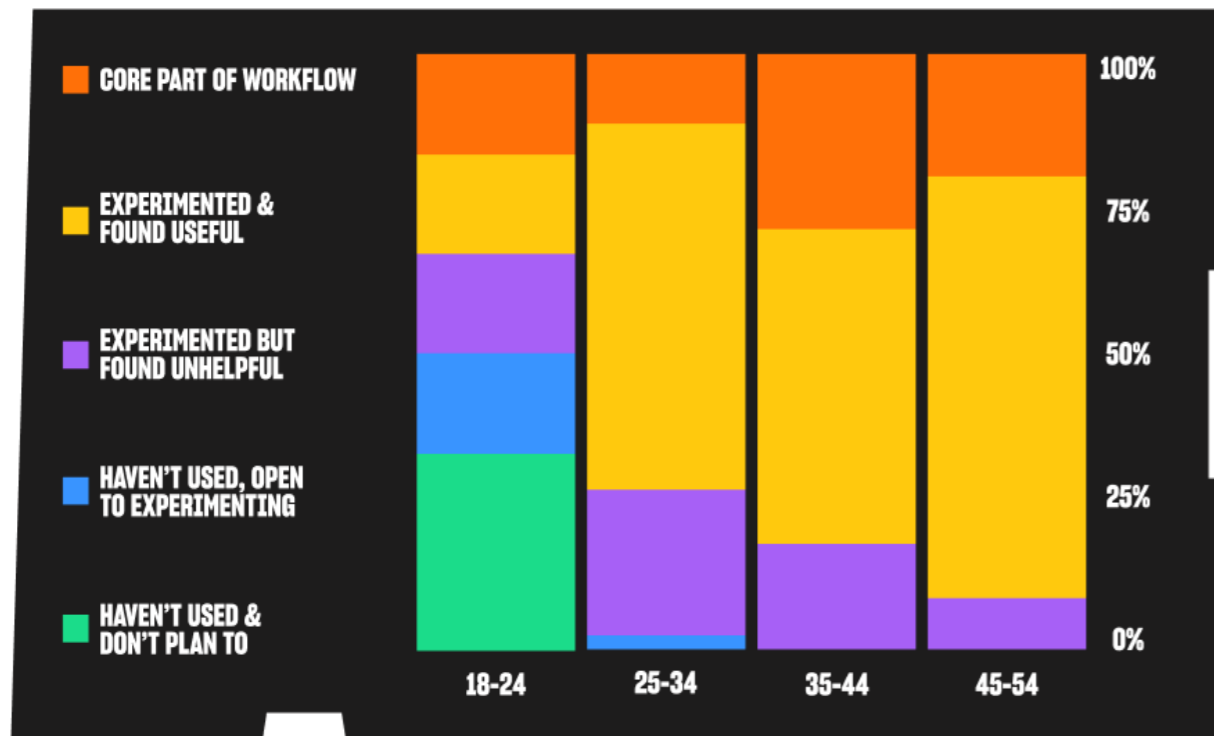
Like any plan for good research, we entered this quest to find out what effect AI is having on our industry with some hypotheses based on conversations, anecdotes, industry commentary, and of course, Reddit opinion.

In some cases our hypotheses were well founded, in others, we were surprised, but on further reflection, able to better understand why we were incorrect.

The most important thing was to sort hyperbole from fact, fear-mongering from day-to-day reality. Read on as we unpack the findings.

“I’M STILL PRETTY UNCOMFORTABLE WITH HOW MUCH I USE IT”

Male, caucasian, 35-44, United Kingdom



CHAPTER 4 THE TOOL EVERYONE'S USING, BUT FEW ARE FULLY COMFORTABLE WITH.

By Kate

80% have found AI useful, yet concern about adoption sits at 6.7 out of 10. The adoption paradox is real.

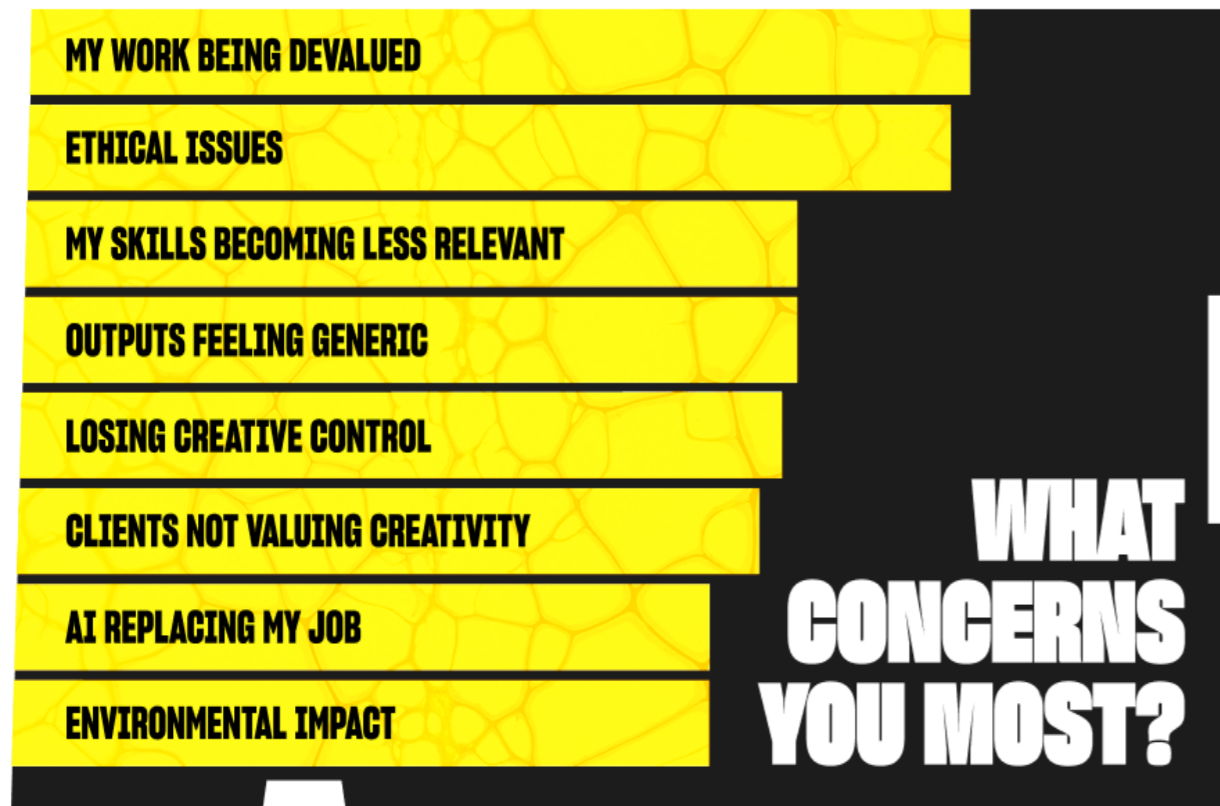
Key Data

- 58% have experimented and found AI generally useful; only 16% found it unhelpful.
- 23% have integrated AI as a core part of their day-to-day workflow.
- 39% use AI every day; 45% occasionally (few times a week/month); 12% experimentally; 3% not at all.
- 35–44 year olds are the heaviest daily users, not younger creatives. Only 17% of 18–24 year olds use AI daily vs ~49% of 35–54 year olds.
- 95% have tried generative text tools (ChatGPT, Claude); 61% AI-assisted editing (Photoshop, Figma); 58% text-to-image (Midjourney, etc.).
- AI tools used almost 50% more in design studios than creative agencies.
- However, creative agencies have a larger proportion of people with AI as a core workflow tool.
- Average concern about AI adoption: 6.7 out of 10.

Maybe our chapter title is too bold of a statement? But when it comes to usage, let's face it, most of us have tried AI. From the survey, we can see that at least 58% have experimented with various tools and found AI generally useful, whereas only 16% have given it a go and said it was "unhelpful". It's likely why we're even having this discussion about AI adoption in the first place, because AI can be of benefit to us. But it is likely that many of us don't know how to move beyond this initial experimentation. And there are plenty of reasons for why not: a lack of know-how, valid environmental concerns, or simply having a level of anxiety about what this might mean for us as an industry. That said, 23% reported they are taking it in their stride and learning how to master AI, integrating it as part of their 'day-to-day workflow'.

Here's a surprising trend for you. In contrast to the assumption that younger creatives might be the most eager adopters of AI tools, the survey results showed 35-44 year olds were most likely to be integrating it firmly into their workflows. Younger people, on the other hand, are more likely to use it sparingly or not at all. In terms of overall usage regardless of what tools you're using, we can see reports that 39% are using AI every day, 45% are occasional users (a few times a week or month), 12% still see it as something to experiment with now and again, and only 3% haven't used it at all.

But for younger people, this skews more heavily towards occasional use or experimentation.



Perhaps this adoption rate comes down to the tools we're using? We measured the types of AI tools in play, and almost 95% had tried generative text tools (like ChatGPT or Claude), followed by 61% using AI-assisted editing tools (like Photoshop or Figma), and 58% using text-to-image tools (e.g. Midjourney, Nano Banana). Interestingly, AI tools of all types were used almost 50% more in design studios than in creative agencies.

In other areas, though, creative agencies are nudging ahead in terms of adoption. A larger proportion of those who said AI was a core part of their workflow worked in creative agencies, rather than design studios or specialist agencies. Take from that what you will. Perhaps the desire (or, the commercial demand) to optimise has been greater?

It's worth noting, and this might be reflected in the lower adoption among younger creatives, that concern over AI adoption isn't insignificant. On average, people rated concern about adoption at 6.7 out of 10, with plenty of concerns that Andy will dive into shortly. So while on average, we're willing to give AI a go (and even find it quite helpful!) you're arguably more likely to see your older colleagues using it more and more. And perhaps overall as an industry, we really are not entirely comfortable with it just yet.

CHAPTER 5 WHAT KEEPS PEOPLE UP AT NIGHT?

By Andy

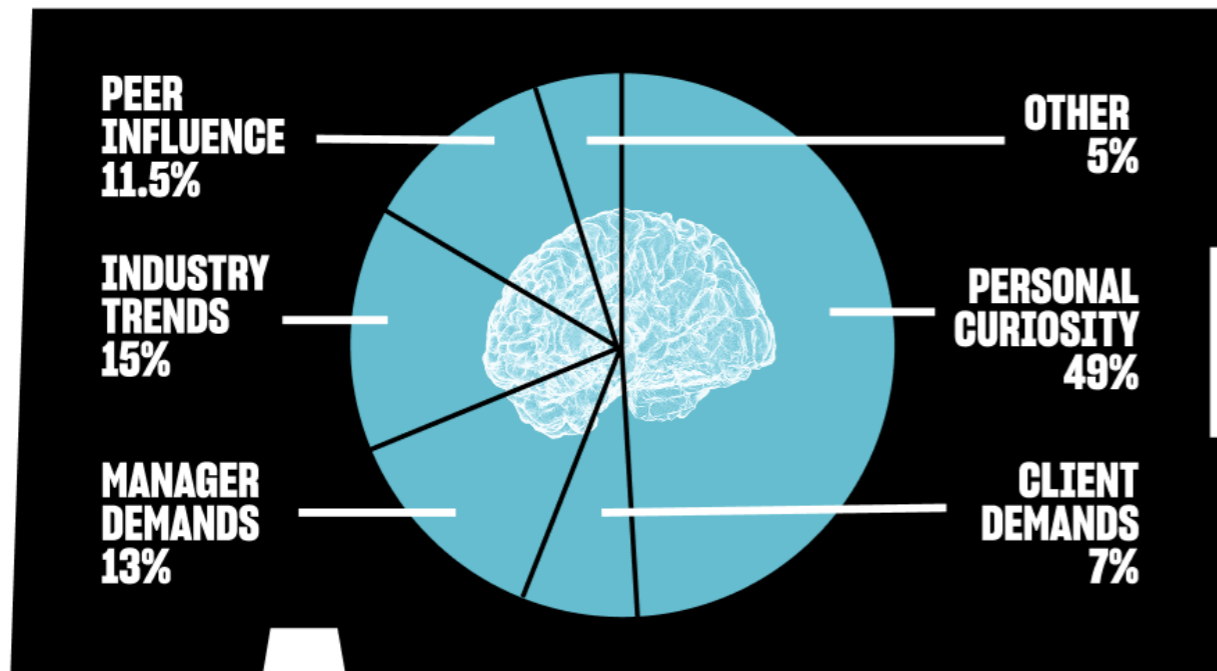
“That our industry will be so devalued it will be impossible to continue to run a business, clients will take everything in house with cheaper resources”

Female, 35-44, Australia

Work being devalued and ethical concerns top the list – this industry cares deeply about the value of creativity.

Key Concerns

- #1: “My work being devalued” (rated 9.1/10 overall; 9.52 men, 8.72 women).
- #2: Ethical issues (stolen data, copyright).
- #3: My skills becoming less relevant.
- #4: AI outputs feeling generic or inauthentic.
- #5: Losing creative control.
- #7: AI replacing my job — consistent across age groups and workplace types.
- 18–34 year olds rank ethical issues as their #1 concern (vs devaluation for 35+).
- Client-side workers mirror younger cohorts: ethical issues top their list too.



To say our industry is worried about AI is to take a shallow view of what the real issues are. The key question that allows us to unpack what's keeping us up at night was "what concerns you most about the use of AI at work?"

Our analysis quickly uncovered a top 5. The top 2 selected concerns were, "my work being devalued" and, "ethical issues, e.g. stolen data, copyright." These 2 were clear of the chasing pack and reaffirmed our industry's care and thoughtfulness for the value of creativity.

Next, was "my skills becoming less relevant;" in line with what we're being told by AI advocates, business and mainstream media. It is indeed a scary thought to be confronted with everyone telling you that you're no longer needed. Even with technological advances throughout history, machines have leaped ahead, but have still required significant human involvement in operation and direction of the output. With AI the

story is one of not machine replacing machine, but machine replacing human. Even if the story isn't that desperate, it also tracks with the 5th placed concern, "losing creative control."

In between at number 4 is the critique of "AI outputs feeling generic or authentic." It's true that at the time of our research being in market, many of us would feel that we could "spot a fake." However, even since then, and with the rapid advancement of the technology, that's certainly becoming harder and harder. The University of New South Wales' research into face recognition of AI generated images is a fascinating test of our abilities as well as shared understanding of how AI is learning to re-create real life.

The concern, "AI replacing my job," came in at number 7 overall and was at a consistent level across age groups and other segments we analysed like in-house vs agency.

As we dug deeper, we found some differences in what was concerning depending on who you are. For example, while the top 5 were the same for most of our respondents, we noticed differences in 18-34 year olds. Their top concern was "ethical issues", while "my work being devalued" remained number 1 for those over 35. This same difference was mirrored for those working client-side (ethical issues) vs agency.

So, how much are our concerns driven by intrinsic or extrinsic factors?

"IT FEELS LIKE I HAVE TO DO MY JOB WORSE IN ORDER TO SHOW THAT I'M 'BOUGHT IN' TO 'THE FUTURE.'"

Non-binary, Hispanic, 25-34, United States

CHAPTER 6 THE PRESSURE COOKER

By Kate

Almost half of us say curiosity drives adoption, but beneath that, the pressure from managers, clients and peers is harder to escape than the data alone suggests.

Key Data

- 49% cite personal curiosity as the primary driver of AI adoption.
- Only 12% name manager demands as an external factor — but when asked directly about pressure, the split is roughly 50/50.
- “Pressure of my own expectations to perform or be creative” rated 7.55/10.
- “Uncertainty regarding the future of my role” rated 6.62/10.
- “Pressure to stay up to speed on trends and technology, like AI” rated 6.51/10.
- “My work being devalued” was the most concerning at 9.1/10.

While there are many valid concerns about the adoption of AI, how much do we really feel like we have a choice about whether we use it? This felt like an important question for us and we were curious about how much, if any, pressure is getting applied across the industry in regards to adoption by employees.

When we asked about significant external factors influencing your adoption of AI, we were surprised to learn just under half (49%) put it down to personal curiosity (a rather nice reminder of what makes our industry so great, we’re keen experimenters!) However, when it came to Manager Demands as an external factor, that came in markedly lower at just 12%. However, when specifically asked whether there’d been pressure to use AI by clients, managers or collaborators, we see a rough split between Yes or No.

What people told us

“(I felt) pressured to embrace it, and if I didn’t I was made to seem ‘behind the times’. I had a co-worker tell me that AI being a core part of my job was ‘inevitable’. Imagine being told your work is soon to be redundant by your own co-worker.”

“Timelines have become ridiculously compressed. We expect outputs turned around nearly overnight. Any resistance is met with “can’t AI just do it?”

“Every level of management above me asks regularly if I am using AI, how I’m using it, and how I can use it more. They’ve spent money on fairly crappy AI tools and we spend more time talking about using AI than we have saved actually using it. I work in-house at a large organisation and it’s definitely about proving to the Exec level that the organisation is modern and moving with the times. It’s not about work or even outcomes, just performative box-ticking.”

“Death by 1000 cuts to accept AI into the work flow in order to keep the peace”

“My boss will always ask me to use Gemini or ChatGPT to solve quick problems. I once wrote a paragraph and asked for a review from them. They then proceeded to ask if I had put it into AI to shorten it first (which I had not done). This felt like words from AI were prioritised over human skill.”

“Have definitely felt a sense of being behind / stubborn / less clever for not leaning wholeheartedly into AI tools. My concerns around developing my own skills (I’m relatively new to the industry) before deferring to AI have often been dismissed by those with more experience in the industry.”

“I do wish AI didn’t exist, but am willing to use it to stay in the game.”

“It’s more the pressure I put on myself to use AI in a considered manner, but also efficiently”

There’s a lot to unpack in these insights, and perhaps some of these will resonate beyond the creative industries. They might be versions of stories everyone is experiencing in some form or another across workplaces. We do know though, that this pressure is perhaps uniquely felt by internal and external factors in the creative industries.

When we look at how we consider stress, “the pressure of my own expectations to perform or be creative” (7.55 out of 10) is a key internal stressor. Combined with “Uncertainty regarding the future of my role” (6.62) and “Pressure to stay up to speed on trends and technology, like AI” (6.51), we can perhaps see a hint of an industry internalising anxiety about its own relevance. Concerns about using AI at work, “My work being devalued” was the most concerning at 9.1 out of 10.

Perhaps these insights into how our industry is thinking and feeling about internal and external factors of AI adoption reveal a more complex and nuanced sentiment, where it isn't a false dichotomy of to-use or not-to-use.

There's more going on under the surface.

“EVERYONE LAUGHS NERVOUSLY AT WORK SAYING THEY DON'T KNOW IF THEY'LL HAVE A JOB IN THE NEXT 3 YEARS.”

Male, caucasian, 45-54

CHAPTER 7 THE STRESSOR THAT NOBODY NAMED A FEW YEARS AGO

By Andy

Key Data

- “Pressure of my own expectations” remains #1 (as it has since 2018).
- NEW at #2: “Uncertainty regarding the future of my role” — has never placed this high before.
- NEW at #4: “Pressure to stay up to speed on trends and technology, like AI.”
- 44% have been diagnosed with a mental illness at some point; 23% with a neurodiverse condition.
- 60% experienced burnout in the last 12 months, down from 70% in the 2024 survey.
- Key insight: those who had NOT experienced burnout were more likely to be using AI every day.
- Non-burnout respondents valued “staying adaptable to AI developments” much higher than the survey average.

We've been measuring the industry's experiences and challenges with mental health since 2018. In every one of our studies, one of our foundational questions has been to help us understand the relative levels of stress associated with different dynamics within the industry.

Every study has consistently placed the pressure of our own expectations at number one. The overall top 5 had remained stable, until now.

The top 5 has been cracked open, and AI has asserted its presence. At number 2 is “uncertainty regarding the future of my role” and at number 4, “pressure to stay up to speed on trends and technology, like AI.” Both reflecting the turbulence and uncertainty we're currently facing.

For the first time, AI-related uncertainty has broken into the top 5 industry stressors, reshuffling a list that's been consistent since 2018.



**28% HAVE TURNED
DOWN A REQUEST
TO USE AI**

As context to these findings, we also asked about overall levels of mental wellbeing. 44% shared that they have been diagnosed with a mental illness at some point, with 23% having been diagnosed with a neurodiverse condition. The number of people who shared they experienced burnout in the last 12 months was at just under 60%, down from 70% in our 2024 survey.

As we dove further into burnout though, we found one of this study's most interesting insights. If you 'had not' experienced burnout in the last 12 months, you were more likely to be using AI everyday in your work.

Here's what people in this segment shared about their experiences.

"I'm optimistic about AI as a creative partner because it expands what's possible in my workflow. It allows me to prototype ideas faster, explore more directions, and add powerful new capabilities to my toolkit. I've always been a tech optimist and adopt new tools, and AI fits naturally into that mindset. For me, it's not about replacing creativity but amplifying it, giving me more space to focus on insight, craft, and high-value thinking."

"AI is a tool that accelerates execution. As a Creative Director it gives me superpowers."

"I am optimistic about the things it allows us to do and increase my ability to deliver more, I am concerned about the loss of jobs and potential to increase in-housing."

We also found that they viewed one of the top skills for the future to be staying adaptable to developments with AI, valuing this much higher than the survey average. This seems consistent with conversations with other creatives and leaders in the space. While the future may be uncertain, we can choose to keep it at arms length, or we can choose to lean-in, learn and make it a less scary unknown. Better to assert control and gain understanding, than to give in to the fear and doom-mongering; much, the same way that this industry has survived in the past, by embracing change and opportunity. As the respondent below, shared;

"I'm optimistic that it'll change how we work, we might get to discover new things we hadn't thought of or free up our time for the more exciting conceptual parts of the job. The world is pushing this upon us whether we like it or not, it's important we come to the table so we can have a say in how it's used in our industry and how we can make it work for us, not against us."

CHAPTER 8 THE PUSH BACK

By Kate

“I told them I was hired for my creativity and that is also why clients come to us.”

Female, 25-34, Caucasian, Australia

Respondents shared why they’ve turned down AI. Their reasons reveal values, not stubbornness.

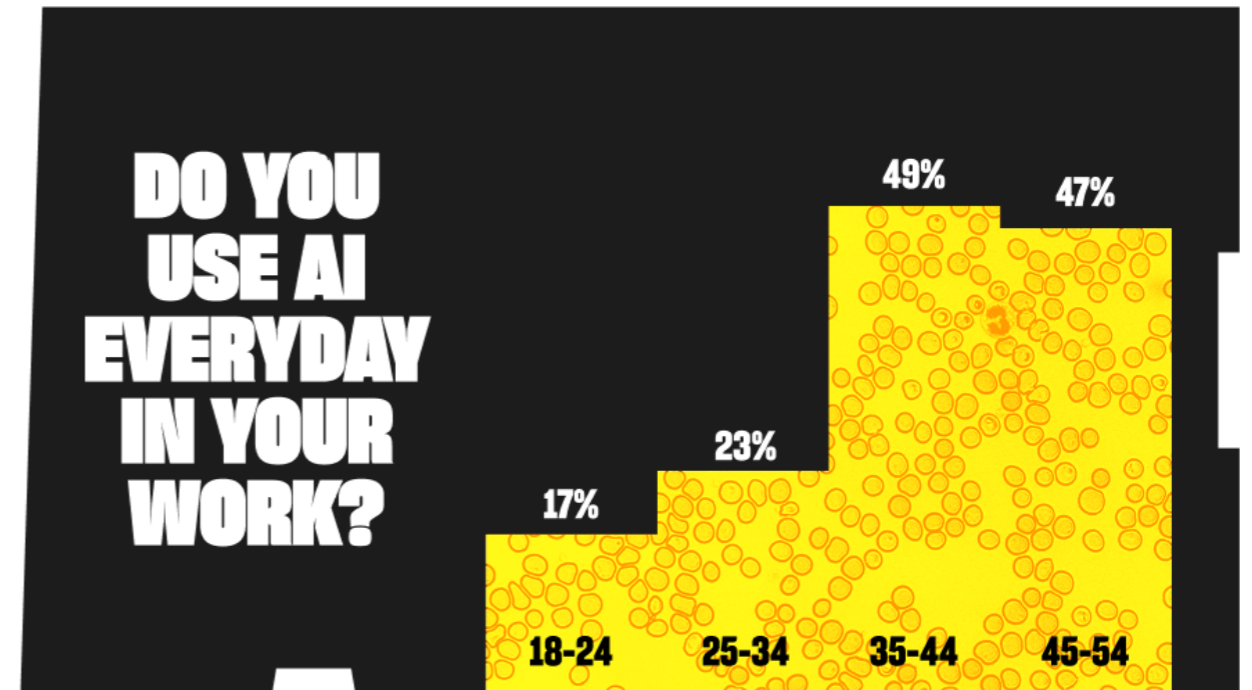
Key Data

- 66 respondents described turning down an AI tool they were asked to use.
- Top 5 themes: creative identity & skill, ethical/environmental concerns, low quality, irrelevance to the task, bad experience.
- AI is being reached for in mundane tasks (summarising, research, grunt work) rather than final output or asset production.
- In a rapidly evolving space, some concerns will solidify (ethics, environment) while others may fade (bad experience, quality).

In any age of “disruption” (dare we use the word!) there are always some who choose to stand against the tide of change. From marching or shouting in the streets to quietly quitting or rebelling in smaller, more personal ways.

In the case of AI, the pushback within the creative industries is rooted in a feeling that AI threatens the very things we hold dear: creativity, originality, human truth.

When asked, “Have you ever turned down using an AI tool you were requested to use, and why?”, we captured 66 responses.



Why people are saying no:

Creative identity & skill

“I can think for myself, I want to be a human, not a cog”

“If we start outsourcing creativity to AI, then why would clients come to us?”

“I want to come to a solution through my own discovery path of educating myself on the problem and exploring solutions. It is in the grey area that exciting thoughts percolate and rise to the top.”

Ethical, social and environmental concerns

“Added no value and the environmental impact and unknown copyright issues made it not worth it”

“I don’t want to contribute to the environmental impacts associated with AI (energy use, water use, mineral mining...)”

Low or varied quality

“The output quality was exceptionally bad”

“Our Marketing department was given a rebadged ChatGPT product to use to do creative, write briefs and do strategy. It sucked. I used it and then gave up because it was no better than Copilot. I’ve told them I’m no longer using it.”

Relevance to the task isn’t always there

“I don’t enjoy using it. I don’t find it gives me the outcome I want or a unique perspective. I find it’s generic and the same thing is spurted out to everyone”

“It was ineffective at the task it was made to do. I will not use something purely because it’s AI.”

Bad experience

“The output wasn’t functional for our needs. In one particular instance we required illustrations that were layered in preparation for animation. The output from the AI tools we were using at the time were flat.”

“It didn’t deliver the results my manager was looking for”



Across these themes, we begin to see people finding their footing and defining the reasons they may not be willing to adopt AI for everything. In a rapidly evolving space, some of these concerns will likely solidify, while others may fade (more likely concerns about bad experiences than any ethical or environmental concerns, to be fair). But these insights also give us a window into where AI might begin to settle into our daily lives.

Interesting, as we begin to adopt AI use, researchers have begun to measure its effect on us and our brains.

In a very early study, reported in The Conversation last year in June, an MIT team measured the cognitive engagement of two groups of students - one using AI and one going without, to write a series of essays. The AI group when they finally had the chance to use their brains they were “unable to replicate the engagement or perform as well as the group going without”. The authors claim this demonstrates how prolonged use of AI led to

participants accumulating “cognitive debt”, and a “likelihood decrease in learning skills”.

While it’s a very early study, only taken on 18 students, it adds complexity to the conversation of only AI use for what we might deem ‘low stakes tasks’.

As it stands, an industry we can see we’re reaching for AI for more mundane tasks like summarising or research or that initial grunt work rather than for final outputs or asset production. And in that sense, maybe we’re seeing AI fall into a position as a workhorse, not a creative partner?

CHAPTER 9 THE JUNIOR QUESTION - WILL THERE EVEN BE AN ENTRY LEVEL?

By Andy

“My concern? Decrease in agency revenue and further shrinkage in junior roles”

Female, caucasian, 45-54

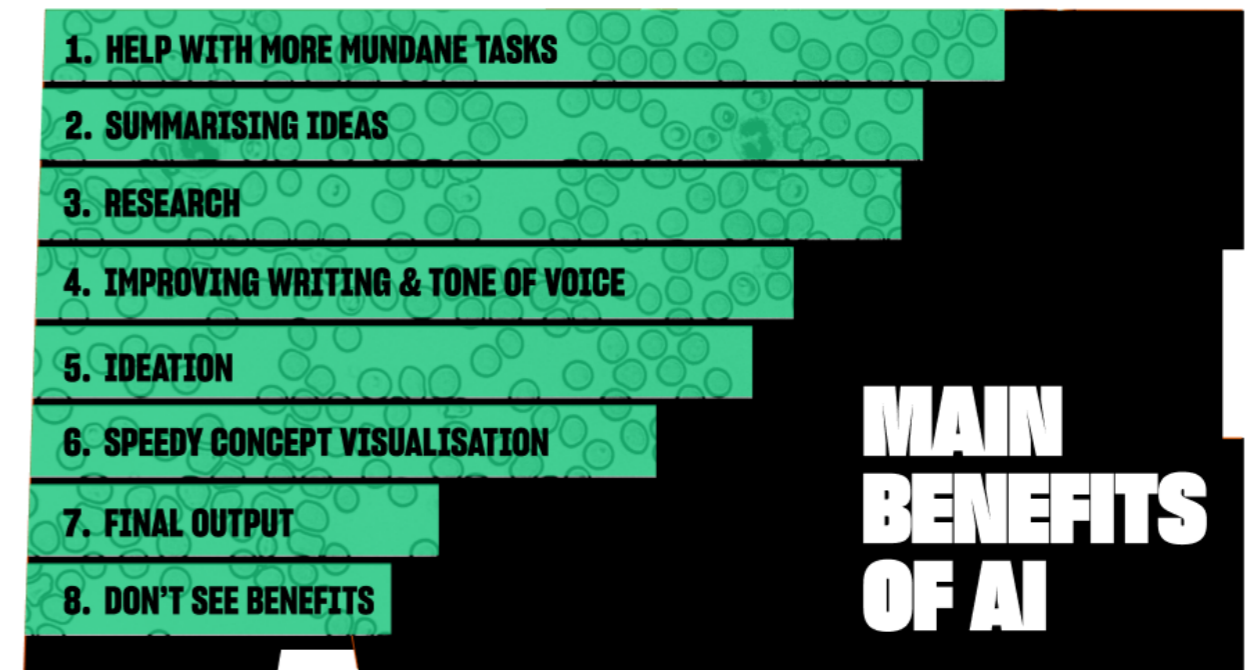
AI does the work of an intern. That’s useful for senior creatives – and existential for the juniors trying to get a foothold.

Key Data

- 18–24 year olds claim the least frequent AI usage vs other age groups: only 17% use AI daily.
- Almost half of 35–54 year olds use AI every day.
- Multiple unprompted responses expressed concern about the talent pipeline.
- Smaller AI tasks (e.g. note-taking) are pushing interns and juniors out of the room and reducing opportunities to upskill.

I’ve always been impressed with our industry’s drive to give back to future generations of talent. When you approach people for support in mentoring, reviewing a folio, or giving a talk to students there is never any shortage of hands in the air. At the same time, I don’t see any drop in the number of people learning and graduating, searching to make a career in the creative industry.

But for a few years now, at NNC, we’ve observed fewer and fewer entry-level roles on the market, and an increasing number of unpaid internships. It led to us starting Never Not Finishing School, a program for graduates who have yet to find employment. While we can educate, teach some of the softer skills that have been abandoned by colleges and universities, and create peer support and community, we can’t wave the magic wand so that jobs appear – and while AI is promising a lot, we’re not sure that it’s



going to wave it for us here.

Throughout the survey, there were plenty of unprompted responses that expressed concern about the future of our industry from a talent pipeline perspective.

“Smaller AI tasks e.g. note taking are pushing interns and juniors out of the room/reducing opportunities to upskill, witness important meetings, etc.”

“I worry about the entry level jobs people do to learn the profession, I worry about the public getting used to low quality, I worry about my dreams and aspirations getting shattered and so many more things”

“I have director and photographer friends who are losing out. Also I’m

worried that young people will find it much harder to get an entry level job into the industry”

Of course, this isn’t just a creative industry problem. It’s a challenge for almost any white-collar, entry level role. You’ve no doubt heard of people referring to AI as a really good intern, or a decent junior. While that might be a helpful descriptor of its capabilities, it does little to reassure of the future of such a role.

From a different perspective, we’ve been here before. Roles get replaced by technology, the people displaced find different roles, or different skillsets, or new roles arise from a different set of market dynamics.

Consider desktop publishing. In the late 80s and early 90s, a Mac and a copy of PageMaker could suddenly do what an entire production department used to. Typesetters, paste-up artists, people who’d spent years learning to spec fonts and assemble camera-ready artwork.

Their roles didn't evolve. They just stopped existing.

At the time, the industry commentary and response was remarkably similar to what we're hearing now. Typographers warned that designers would butcher the craft without proper training. Others said quality would fall off a cliff. And for a while, some of that was true. But in that case, design didn't shrink. It exploded. Suddenly, every business could afford a brand identity. In-house marketing teams appeared. Small studios could punch well above their weight. Entire new disciplines emerged that nobody had a name for yet.

The catch (and it's the same catch we're facing now) is that "new roles emerged" is only reassuring if you're looking at it from a distance. If you were a typesetter in 1991, the fact that UX design would exist in 20 years' time wasn't particularly comforting.

That's the real problem with calling AI a good intern or junior. It might be accurate, but it tells the actual interns exactly where they stand. The leaders and business owners in our industry still need to balance costs and entry-level staff help to achieve that balance. The conundrum is in reframing and creating what that role should look like now.

One final point on the status of the "junior". The reframing or creating only works if we're training and educating students and graduates on the tools and opportunities that AI brings. As an industry, we'll often herald new entrants to the industry as the ones with the new ideas and the fresh perspectives.

That only works though if they actually come with those ideas and perspectives.

From our research, 18-24 year olds actually claimed to have the least frequent usage vs other age-groups. While almost half of 35-54 year olds are using AI everyday, only 17% of 18-24 year olds said the same.

CHAPTER 10 THE THINGS WE CAN'T IGNORE

By Kate

“I am terrified that we are handing over the design to a pre-biased training data set we cannot see.”

18-24, Trans Non-Binary, Caucasian, Australia

There's a gap between how important we say disclosure is and how we actually act on it, and that's just one of the structural issues underneath the personal ones.

Key Data

- Average importance of AI disclosure: 7/10.
- Only 44% always or usually disclose AI use; 20% sometimes; 36% rarely or never.
- Disclosure is mostly verbal.
- Consensus: disclosure matters most when AI affects final output (visuals) or financials (high-risk areas).
- Less consensus on mundane use (e.g. rewriting emails).
- Structural concerns underneath the personal: copyright, bias in training data, environmental impact.

There are some considerations that we as an industry are obviously uncomfortable with, and feel bigger than us. It was clear in the survey that beneath the personal issues with AI, sit structural concerns that give you a nagging sense we're not operating on an even playing field.

For example, take the topic of disclosure of AI use in our work. On average, the data showed that we feel disclosing the use of AI is important (rating it at 7 out of 10). Yet when asked how often we're disclosing, only 44% are always or usually disclosing, whereas 20% say sometimes, and 36% say rarely or never.

When we look at how and why people are disclosing, it's mostly done verbally, and the assumption is that you probably don't need to tell people you're using it to tweak emails. But the strongest responses came from when you are using it to affect work output (for example, visuals) or financials (things that can present high risk if the AI was to misfire).

“We use (AI) to aid concepting mock-ups and to retouch image assets. It's rarely used solely for final assets. We often disclose it to clients to explain the limitations of the mocks/concepts presented.”

“I don't (disclose) because it's irrelevant. (For example) I am mostly rewording emails with ChatGPT and not using it for actual work”

“Depends on the use case. AI integration is incredibly broad now. If I use ChatGPT to help bounce initial ideas, I wouldn't disclose it, but if I used AI to generate assets I would disclose it. Depends on how integral it is to the final public facing delivery.”

“I have never encountered a client who expected a detailed breakdown of which tools were used to deliver their outcome. The clients aren't buying the tools themselves, they're buying the solution to their problem”

“We explain the process we've been through when presenting the work. We are very open about it.”

The opinions seem mixed. There's a gap emerging between how important we say disclosure is and how we're actually acting on it. Maybe that comes down to a lack of clarity as an industry on when disclosure is expected, and if so, that feels like an area we can certainly improve on (or even rally around together).

“FEELS LIKE EARLY CHRISTMAS... TODAY. IT FEELS THAT WE HAVE SO MANY TOOLS TO PLAY WITH.”

Female, Hispanic, 35-44

CHAPTER 11 WHAT'S ACTUALLY WORKING

By Andy

AI is helping with the mundane, the repetitive, and the early-stage – freeing people up for higher-value creative thinking.

Key Data

- Almost ¾ of people surveyed use AI every day or a few times a week.
- Top 3 cited benefits: help with mundane tasks, summarising ideas, research.
- Closely followed by: improving writing/tone, and ideation.
- “I don’t see any benefits” ranked as the lowest selection on the list.
- AI is being used effectively at multiple steps in the creative process, particularly during pitching and ideation.
- Skepticism remains around use for final output, but earlier stages are embraced.

It’s important to recognise that this narrative does not have to be doom and gloom. Things are moving so fast that the script is not already written, and is certainly nowhere near finished. There is hope, there is optimism, there’s even excitement. It seems the best way to find it, is to scratch the curiosity itch and discover what’s possible.

AI is genuinely helping many people in our industry. Almost ¾ of people surveyed are using AI everyday or a few times a week. The top 3 benefits being cited as, “help with more mundane tasks,” “summarising ideas” and, “research.” These are closely followed by “improving writing and tone,” and “ideation.” It was also encouraging to see the answer, “I don’t see any benefits” ranked as the lowest selection on the list.

While the skepticism around AI for final output was strong, it’s clearly being used efficiently and effectively at different points and levels throughout other steps in the creative process. In more than one conversation with an agency leader that I’ve had recently, AI is rapidly reinventing the concept phase of creative work during pitching and ideation.

An article on the World Economic Forum website, points to the need, but also human opportunity to shape the future of a world with AI. (www.weforum.org/stories/2026/01/ai-and-need-for-more-human-creativity/)

“If we use AI creatively, we can do much more than just generate text and images – we can drive social value and innovation. This field is still untapped, and creatives are well-positioned to lead this change.”

Is that not what we love to do?

And in our study, this participant shared,

“I am quite enthused about the counter to AI in creative industries. Examples like stop-motion animation. The AppleTV ident, which was done with real-world practical effects. The Ying of AI should have its yang. If it means that there will be an opposite to 'faster, smarter AI' - more human creativity, then that is an unexpected upside.”

While this summed up almost perfectly the positive opportunities ahead.

“Boosting creative confidence. AI is not going away. Positioning it as something to be fearful of puts people into freeze states, and a sense of hopelessness and helplessness. Right now, we need humans to see the good and possible.”

**“BE A VOICE FOR HUMAN CREATIVITY.
NOT BURYING OUR HEADS IN THE
SAND, BUT ADVOCATING FOR AI USE
THAT RESPECTS THE HUMAN ROLE
IN CREATIVITY.”**

Male, 35-44, Caucasian, Asia

CHAPTER 12 WHAT YOUR PEERS ARE ASKING FOR

By Kate

Our community sets the agenda: learning, honest conversation, shared case studies, and ethical guardrails.

Key Data

- 4 clear themes emerged from what respondents want: learning & training, honest conversations, case study sharing, safe & ethical usage.
- The Graphic Artists Guild (US) has launched the “NaNa: No Artists, No Art” campaign with ethical use guidelines.
- Conversations globally are shifting from ‘what is AI?’ to ‘how do we co-exist with it?’
- IDEO (Dec 2025): “Companies are sprinting to implement new technologies, but few are fundamentally rethinking how their teams learn, collaborate and adapt.”

An important part of this survey was getting insights and an understanding from our peers in the creative industries on how best NNC can support. In conversations we’d had with creatives prior to the survey, we were aware of the demand to start having conversations at an industry level about how we adopt AI - what’s working, what isn’t and how we begin to adapt as a broader cohort.

What we're asking for:

Learning and training

- Provide education and open dialogue to support, not scare, people

Honest conversations and debate

- Working with agency bodies on impacts on people and wellbeing.
- Bring people together to discuss new tools
- The value of human-centred thinking vs AI

Sharing of best practices and uses (case studies)

- How are others integrating AI into their workflow
- Examples of when it has, and hasn't worked well

Safe and ethical usage

- Petitioning for copyright laws surrounding use of original works
- Environmental and ethical impact of AI
- Reporting on updates and evolution in the space

“I wish we were having more honest conversations about AI and acknowledging that whilst it can be useful, there are obvious downsides to it that we need to consider. We need some guardrails”

The call out for guardrails is quite common, particularly online in associations or communities. In the US, the Graphic Artists Guild based in New York, has a current campaign called “NaNa: No Artists, No Art” which has outlined a position on AI use and developed Ethical Use Guidelines to help support the credit, consent and compensation of graphic artists.

www.graphicartistsguild.org/nana
www.graphicartistsguild.org/generative-ai-ethical-use-guidelines

Of course, these themes we identified in our survey aren't necessarily unique to the Australian or US creative community (as seen through the GAG). We see around the world, similar conversations happening in the UK, European and South American creative communities. And while the conversation early on in the rise of AI focused on the 'what', conversations have now

turned to 'how' we can live or co-exist with such tools.

IDEO published a piece in late 2025, detailing the strengths they've identified that can help support employees through this transition, or the risk posed to companies that face a real disengagement from this new technology and any good potential it presents either side.

www.ideo.com/journal/in-the-ai-era-growth-depends-on-people-not-tech

“(Companies) are sprinting to implement new technologies, but few are fundamentally rethinking how their teams learn, collaborate and adapt. The result is a growing gap between technological capability and human capacity, driven by tech-first initiatives. And in that gap lies the real risk: technology will keep advancing, but without adaptable people, processes and systems, organisations will struggle to turn potential into progress”

IDEO, In the AI era, growth depends on people not just tech, Dec 2025.

These early conversations and moments as an industry could help us define how it is we want to progress with the technology moving forward.

As IDEO's article mentions,

“Leaders need to build cultures where adaptability is practiced every day, where every person knows how to respond, influence and move forward amid uncertainty”.

We as an industry are looking for those leaders who will help us navigate this uncertainty. If one thing is certain, we need to get clearer on how we want to embrace this emerging technology.

CHAPTER 13

WHERE WE GO FROM HERE

Kate and Andy reflect on what the data means, what Never Not Creative's role should be, and what happens next.

By Kate Shelton.

I'm not surprised we as an industry are hungry to know more about AI. While I initially suspected we might be behind other industries in our adoption rates, I was surprised to see that so many people had already experimented with AI and recognised its benefits. I think the hesitancy to fully adopt it as a sector, doesn't come from an outright resistance, but more from a lack of push within our studios or agencies - alongside some really valid concerns about ethics and environmental impacts. And rightly so. As creatives, we're hardwired to question. And we're fiercely protective of what this means for copyright, originality, and our livelihoods.

But that's what makes this moment really interesting. There is concern, but also a clear appetite to learn. And right now, it doesn't really feel that our industry is doing enough of that learning out loud. It feels discrete, secretive, protective. And that can be isolating. I think what our industry does so well is sharing, but where are our advocates? The loud voices?

This is where I hope Never Not Creative can step in to help us start conversations that build understanding and structure in how we adopt AI. Thoughtfully, not blindly. I personally look forward to the forums, advocacy and sense of community that could be built through this giant evolution in our industry. Because it's not the first time we've evolved alongside technology as Andy mentioned, and we're uniquely equipped to do it well. We have the curiosity and the creativity to do it in a way that feels right for us.

By Andy Wright.

In all of the uncertainty and pessimism, there is quite clearly, hope. For me, this participant summed up the situation nicely...

“AI is accelerating a shift the creative industries were already grappling with. Design has always had a relatively low barrier to entry, and it’s becoming even lower as powerful tools become open and free. When anyone can generate “good enough” work, the real differentiator isn’t access to tools but the expertise, taste and authority behind the outcomes.”

Even in just recent years, we’ve seen disruption and transformation, we’ve seen global pandemics, forced leave and redundancies. Yet, the creative industry has had to adapt. New businesses and business models have been born; new skills have been learnt, and with the right leadership and mindset, creative businesses have grown.

As many people who participated accepted, AI is not avoidable or ignorable. It brings great benefits and opportunity. It also brings fear and terror of the unknown and yet more environmental, ethical and geo-political challenges stacked on what already exists. Having read every single response in this research I still believe that AI represents an incredible opportunity beyond the initial shock of “are my skills even relevant?”

Creatives and creative businesses are more than the sum of their parts; more than the final output that gets seen by the world. We’re problem-solvers, change-makers, debaters, challengers and, in so many cases, with a passion that is irreplaceable by a robot or algorithm.

Our biggest failure right now, would be to miss the opportunity that’s right in front of us. Importantly though, we must recognise it as an opportunity. Understood correctly, it’s an opportunity that we can take control of, shape, manipulate, speed up, re-frame. I’ve seen first-hand, people and businesses begin to take that opportunity. However, I’ve also seen the other side. A view that AI is the enemy, that it will take our jobs, steal our clients and briefs.

If we let it, perhaps it will. But if we stay in control, utilise it as the tool instead of the competitor, we have an opportunity to write the story of the next thriving chapter of the creative industry.

Endnote:

How much was AI used in this research?

We used some clear agreements among our team regarding our use of AI in this research project. AI was used at clear intersections to help with quick analysis of initial data, along with ideas for structure and format. It saved us a little time, and helped us explore themes in a timely way. Everyone involved in this report also has a day job, so we saved some late nights and gained some more sleep.

Specifically; Claude Opus 4.6 was used to evaluate raw quantitative and qualitative data from the survey, identify recurring themes across open-ended responses, and help shape the chapter structure of this report. Humans led and were used in everything else. This meant evaluating the data in surveymonkey and exporting to excel to create cross-tabs and deep-dive on specific segments of respondents to pull out deeper insights.

No written content in the final report was created by AI, that’s all down to Kate and Andy.

Special thanks to Kate Shelton, Louise Berger, Luke Stewart, Isobel Baker, Carol Mackay and Andy Wright.