

BOTTOMLINE

Business

If you're a design manager, the structure of your firm or in-house creative department impacts the work you produce. Learn about the organizational alternatives and determine which one works best for your situation.

Design Management: What's Your Style?

By Joseph P. Giunta

For creatives involved in design management, whether in an independent firm or an in-house design department, it's important to think, plan and implement an organizational structure that functions efficiently and comfortably for both managers and staff. If you do, you'll have a group of people that meshes well instead of being at odds.

An organization's structure usually reflects the style and personality of its management. If the firm is dominated by the talent of the owner, for example, the organizational structure usually reflects and supports that talent. If the firm is run by a partnership of designers and administrators, management will probably be more focused on employee development, budgeting and account supervision.

Good design organization begins with an understanding of the role management plays in the design process and how the creative group satisfies the needs of its clients. For those reasons, it's important to give some

thought to the way you want to develop the structure of your firm or in-house design department.

Structuring Your Own Firm

Begin with you. What kind of designer are you? Do your clients come to you because they want your talent or because they like doing business with you? Look at the kind of work you do. Are you designing highly creative posters and T-shirts or well-planned identity programs?

After you answer these questions, you'll find yourself in one of three organizational structures: the boutique, the department or the team. Although every firm is unique, each one's structure usually fits one of these three formats.

The Creative Boutique

The creative boutique approach generally appeals to the designer whose name is on the front door: John Smith Design. Speaking of doors, this person will probably open his with a number

of good clients in the waiting room. They come to him because they want *his* work, not someone else's.

This kind of designer will need—either as an employee or on a freelance basis—a strong production person to coordinate projects, an organized business manager who can handle all the details of record-keeping and billing, and a good accounts manager to facilitate client communications.

This firm will probably stay small, accepting only those accounts that fit the designer's personality and talents. "Small design firms are very much run by the personality of the principal of the firm," says Adam Kallish, design director at the Design Unit of Andersen Worldwide in Chicago. Kallish's design background includes working for boutique firms or what he calls "shingle operations."

The designer who runs a creative boutique will employ a few people, to maximize his design time. He may hire two or three junior designers who can take his roughs and finish them.

But he will carefully supervise their work for consistency with his personal style. This structure allows for variety in job descriptions but does pose some problems for smaller shops. "You have a lot of flexibility on different levels,"

Kallish says. "What you don't have are massive amounts of resources."

Of course, this designer may decide to take on a partner—another designer who could bring in more business and help the firm grow. If he

does that, he'll need to re-evaluate his firm's organization and decide if he's ready for the next approach.

The Departmental Approach

Unlike the boutique set-up, the depart-

Design-Management Resources

If you're struggling with structuring your own design group, the following sources can help.

- *Digital Harmony*, by Arno Penzias, Harper Business, 1995. Although *Digital Harmony* discusses the impact of digital information on a variety of organizations, the section on architectural firms will be of interest to designers.

- *How to Really Recruit, Motivate and Lead Your Team: Managing People*, edited by Ruth G. Newman with Bradford W. Ketchum Jr., Inc. Magazine, 1994.

This anthology of helpful articles on team building and leadership focuses on practical advice, with numerous examples of how successful companies are leading their organizations.

- *How to Make Your Design Business Profitable*, by Joyce M. Stewart, North Light Books (800/289-0963), 1992.

This book offers excellent advice on general business issues facing design organizations. And the book features a chapter on knowing when you need help, how to hire that help and how to manage your staff.

- The Design Management Institute focuses on management techniques for design firms. DMI sponsors seminars and publishes a newsletter and professional journal.

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mental approach is better for larger firms owned by a partnership. This approach looks for more experienced designers who can tackle projects with minimal supervision. These firms may also have a production department that reviews jobs before delivering them to the printer.

This formal management structure has definite distinctions between design, production, sales and administrative duties. Tom Taras, manager of the Communication Design Center of Andersen Worldwide in Chicago, says his company's current design organization meets its clients needs better than the group's previous structure. Although part of the Andersen Consulting organization, the Design Center competes with outside design groups for Andersen business. "Sometimes we win and sometimes we lose," Taras says. "We want to raise the consciousness of the corporation to the value of design."

This departmental approach provides employees with a visible career path to climb the ladder to senior design or account management positions. At Andersen Worldwide, for example, employees enter the company as level-one designers and progress to level-two status, art directors and could eventually be design managers.

The advantage to this approach is the diversity of talent that can come out of the designers in the firm. It's possible to hire a strong entry-level person and, much like a law firm, mentor him up to a formal partnership. The support staff can help

designers put more time into design and less time into administrative or production details. By having specialists handle these jobs, the firm is better able to serve its clients.

"We've been able to shift our direction while providing a value-added service," says Taras, whose design organization is split between a design group that does the conceptual work and a graphic-services group that supports the design process.



But with the departmental approach, partners need to be careful of becoming too structured. Sometimes this approach can lead to bureaucratic thinking. Projects can get lost in minutia and people may argue over who's supposed to do what for whom. Perhaps at this point, the partners are ready for design teams.

Teaming with Excellence

Design teams, a common organization structure in architectural and industrial design firms, can work well for most graphic design studios. The design-team approach generally puts a number of people from different disciplines together in the hope that each will bring a special contribution to the final design solution. For example, a typical team

might be composed of a senior designer who acts as a project leader, junior designers, a production staff and an account person. A marketing analyst might help evaluate research.

This approach provides employees with the best professional development because many people at many different levels in the organization can participate in the design process. It's also beneficial because it allows for ideas from a variety of viewpoints. This can enhance creativity and increase the number of design solutions produced. With more ideas come more design options.

A drawback of this approach, however, is that it requires strong project managers to lead the team. Not all creative designers are skilled at facili-

tating a group. It takes training and practice to do it well.

And while your people are participating in team meetings, they aren't at their computers and drawing boards. They aren't answering their phones or reading their mail. This can often pose logistical problems requiring additional support staff

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Bill Johnson, vice president and partner with Pressley Jacobs Design in Chicago, says his successful firm combines a formal departmental approach with a team concept. "Our philosophy," Johnson says, "is to assemble a team at the beginning of a project to make sure a solution is found."

According to Johnson, once a concept is approved by the client, the project is handled by design and production people under the supervision of one of the firm's partners and the designer who developed the concept.

The decision to use a team approach, Johnson says, is based on two criteria. The first is scheduling: Is there time and staff available? The second is talent: Is there a designer to head the team whose talent is right for this project?

Organizing an In-House Staff

Design managers dealing with a corporate in-house situation have specific issues to handle distinct from those of the commercial design firm. The departments these managers supervise are a "captured" organization whose only purpose is to serve the graphic needs of the parent company. Often, in-house managers are required to satisfy those needs with shrinking budgets and reduced staffs. This can force in-house managers to focus on maximizing productivity, which can detract from design solutions. This, in turn, can cause parent companies to seek outside designers who talk less about budgets and more about marketing communication.

The challenge for the in-house manager is to keep his people creatively sharp and meet the needs of the parent company while keeping costs down. Grant Hoekstra, design manager for Trinity University in Deerfield, Ill., solves this problem by designing projects that aren't costly to produce. "If you design right," Hoekstra says, "you save money."

Hiring only experienced designers is another way he keeps creativity high and costs low. "I've found it most cost-effective to hire experienced

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designers," Hoekstra says. "Use good people and you get good work."

Similar to the design firm, the structure of an in-house group should be based on the role of the manager. If the higher-ups want the art director's design style to dominate, then a boutique orientation can work. If the art director is a strong manager and organizer, a departmental or team approach might be better depending upon the nature of the work this group does.

Consider the Options

As a design manager, whether in your own firm or in a corporate environment, you might need to be creative about your group's organizational structure and develop a hybrid of the formats that will work best.

Most organizations reflect the styles of the people who work in them—creating a variety of differences in each of the management structures. That's what makes design management challenging and exciting. **HOW**

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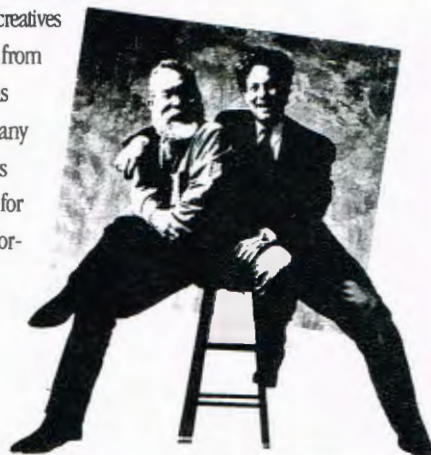
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