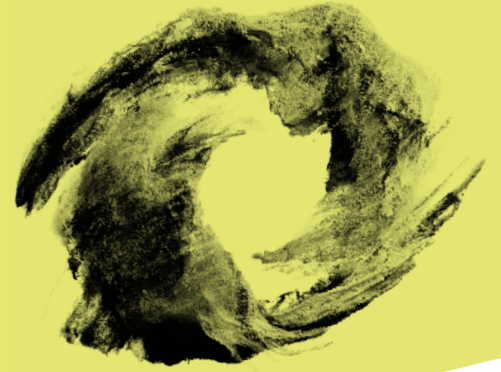


Productivity–Creativity Paradox in Creative Agencies

by Scott Cressman, Founder, Assistant Professor, AUArts



Why This Paradox Matters Now

Agencies are under unprecedented pressure. Marketing, PR, and creative firms face shrinking margins, tighter timelines, and rising client expectations especially with AI. Productivity is scrutinized in billable hours, deliverables, and efficiency metrics. Yet at the same time, clients demand ideas that surprise, inspire, and shift culture.

This tension reveals a paradox at the heart of agency life: the systems built to maximize short-term productivity often erode the very conditions that generate breakthrough creativity.

This is not a marginal issue. Neurodiverse professionals—those with ADHD, autism, dyslexia, and other cognitive differences—are disproportionately represented in creative industries. Nearly half of employees in advertising, marketing, PR, and media identify as neurodivergent, compared with only 31% of the general population (Understood & Havas, 2022). These are the very minds agencies rely on for innovation. Yet agency structures designed for efficiency—rigid sprint cycles, time-tracking, and relentless output—can suppress or even drive out this talent.

The result: a costly cycle of burnout, turnover, and creative stagnation.

The Business Reality: Productivity as Survival

Agencies operate in a business model where:

- Time is money. Every hour must be tracked, billed, and justified.
- Margins are thin. Small inefficiencies can determine profit or loss.
- Client demands are accelerating. Projects are delivered faster and often with fewer resources.
- Productivity is therefore seen as non-negotiable. Without systems to protect efficiency, agencies cannot meet contractual obligations or sustain financial viability.

But here lies the paradox: a campaign delivered on time but lacking originality does not serve the client—or the agency's long-term growth. Output without impact is not true productivity.

The Human Reality: Creativity Under Strain

Inside agencies, the clash is more personal. Neurodiverse professionals often bring exceptional strengths:

- ADHD thinkers excel in ideation, reframing problems, and rapid, nonlinear connections.
- Autistic professionals spot patterns, inconsistencies, and deep insights others miss.
- Dyslexic thinkers thrive in storytelling, big-picture strategy, and visual communication.

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Yet under rigid productivity systems, these strengths can feel like liabilities. Many neurocreative employees resort to masking—suppressing natural work rhythms or hiding cognitive differences to “fit in.” Research shows neurodivergent professionals are twice as likely to mask, leading to higher stress, lower job satisfaction, and greater attrition (Botha & Frost, 2020).

Attrition is not just a human cost. It is a financial one. The Society for Human Resource Management estimates turnover costs 1.5–2x an employee’s annual salary. In agencies, where client continuity and cultural insight are critical, the loss is amplified.

Redefining the Paradox: It’s Not Either/Or

Framing this as “neurodiversity versus productivity” misses the point. The deeper paradox is the assumption that agencies can sustain productivity without valuing inclusion.

Research consistently shows the opposite:

- Neurodiverse teams outperform homogeneous ones in creative tasks (Kuo et al., 2023).
- Inclusive organizations are 75% more likely to bring new products to market and 87% more likely to make better decisions (Deloitte, 2024).
- McKinsey reports that companies with inclusive practices are 35% more likely to achieve above-average returns (McKinsey & Co., 2020).

Inclusion is not a compliance issue. It is a business strategy.

The Deeper Opportunity for Agencies

1. Redefine Productivity Beyond Output

Agencies often measure productivity in speed and volume. But creative productivity must also include originality, resonance, and impact. A deck shipped early that fails to connect with culture is not more productive than one that lands with power.

The Reframe:

Productivity = efficiency + creative impact.

2. Inclusion as Retention and Risk Management

Turnover drains agency margins. Neurodiverse professionals are more likely to leave environments where their strengths are undervalued. Creating

flexible, inclusive structures reduces attrition and protects continuity.

Evidence: Inclusive teams have 30% higher productivity and 50% lower turnover (Harvard Business Review, 2022).

The Reframe:

Inclusion is not cost—it’s a hedge against churn.

3. Dual-Speed Workflows

Delivery mode and innovation mode can coexist. Agencies can design dual-speed systems: one optimized for client efficiency, another for exploratory thinking. Neurodiverse creatives thrive when allowed time for reflection and experimentation alongside structured delivery.

The Reframe:

Efficiency and exploration are not opposites—they are complementary.

4. Competitive Differentiation in an AI Era

As AI automates production, agencies will compete on originality. Neuroinclusive teams consistently generate more novel solutions to complex problems (Clouder et al., 2024). Agencies that fail to harness this will fall behind.

The Reframe:

Inclusion = differentiation in an AI-saturated market.

5. Human Sustainability = Business Sustainability

Burnout is not sustainable. Deloitte’s 2023 Global Human Capital Trends report warns that organizations ignoring human sustainability risk long-term decline. Agencies that support neurodiverse professionals not only reduce burnout but also unlock deeper commitment, loyalty, and “all-in” creativity.

The Reframe:

Human sustainability is the foundation of business sustainability.

A Playbook for Agencies: Where to Begin

Audit workflows: Identify where sprint cycles or rigid processes stifle divergent contributions.

Expand metrics: Measure impact and originality alongside speed.

Build flexibility: Offer multiple modes of communication, ideation, and delivery.

Train leaders: Equip managers to recognize and leverage neurodiverse strengths.

Communicate value: Position inclusion as part of the agency's competitive edge in pitches and recruitment.

Turning Paradox Into Advantage

Agencies that cling to outdated definitions of productivity risk losing their greatest asset: talent. The future will not belong to the fastest agencies—it will belong to those that consistently deliver ideas that move markets and culture.

The paradox dissolves when we stop asking “Productivity or creativity?” and start designing systems where they amplify each other. Agencies that embrace neuroinclusion will not only keep their best people but will also deliver the bold, original work that defines the future of the industry.

About the Author

Scott Cressman is the founder of Neurocreative, author of *Designed to Disrupt* and *Sky Rat* (a storybook for middle school kids about excelling through difference), and creator of NeuroPowers neurotraits game.

With 33 years in leadership positions in marketing and communication and 26 years in university design and PR education, Scott's research investigates the potential of neurodiversity to support students, educators and industry leaders and unlock the power of neurodiverse potential in creative settings.

Scott discovered his neurodiverse traits through a student in one of his classes at Alberta University of the Arts in Calgary, Canada. He believes that his life with ADHD is a gift that has enabled him as an industry leader, inclusive educator and award-winning creative.

Simply put, he says, “There was no diagnosis for ADHD when I was a kid. I was lucky to have supports at home growing up, from a wonderful life partner, and in workplaces that supported my unique way of thinking and being that have shaped the creative I am. I want to share that supportive experience with my students toward more inclusive career journey for them and the industries they will experience and excel in”.
