WORK-LIFE HARMONY FOR CREATIVE MINDS IN THE ADVERTISING INDUSTRY

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Introduction

The past decade has seen a proliferation of research studies on work and life interfaces. However, research in this area so far has often focused on the "balance" or the "conflict" between the two preeminent domains in the lives of individuals. Friedman, Christensen and DeGroot (1998) highlighted that most companies view work and personal life as competing priorities in a zero sum game, in which a gain in one area means a loss in the other. However, they believed that rather than being competing priorities, work and personal life are actually complementary. Supporting this view, Hill (2007) proposes that "harmony" rather than "balance" be used when talking about the work-life issue. He defines work-life harmony as the ability to effectively integrate work responsibilities and family or personal aspirations. Therefore, rather than limiting questions about work-life to how time in one domain can be reduced to make more time for the other, more helpful questions would be about how both domains can complement each other.

This study builds on Hill's definition of work-life harmony in the context of creative individuals, namely copywriters and art directors, in the advertising industry. For the purposes of this study, a creative individual is defined as someone who manages the process and outcome of a creative solution. The preponderance of research on work-life balance in the advertising industry has mainly focused on countries in the West, centring on the reasons behind the male dominance in the industry (Mallia, 2009; Broyles & Grow, 2008; Kazenoff & Vagnoni, 1997). While the issue of work-life balance in the Singapore context has received considerable academic attention, there is a dearth of research in this area for creative individuals in Singapore. Given that creative individuals are typically known to be subjected to the "punishing hours" of the advertising industry (Mallia, 2009, p. 5), the potentially complementary nature of work and personal life would have important implications.

Literature Review

The issue of work-life harmony in Singapore is especially important because work intensification and work overload is becoming increasingly (Thein, Austen, Currie & Lewin, 2010). Employees in Singapore are spending increased hours at work, coming out top out of 13 countries in the average number of hours worked per week according to the Global Wages Report for 2009 (International Labour Organisation, 2008). The Labour Market Report, Q3 2010 revealed workings hours in Singapore to be at 46 hours a week for 2009; and 46.3 hours a week for the third quarter of 2010. Employees in Singapore did an average of about three hours of overtime a week in the beginning of 2009, and this has increased progressively to 3.7 hours towards the end of September 2010 (Manpower Research and Statistics Department, 2010).

The trend of long working hours has not excluded creative individuals in the advertising industry, and several key contributing factors will be discussed in the ensuing paragraphs. Ho (2009) found that creative individuals in Singapore see themselves differently from the mainstream workforce in their unwillingness and inability to distinguish between work and life. While the unwillingness to make a dichotomy between work and life stems from enjoyment and satisfaction of work, the inability to do so is based on the assumption that creative work is defined and shaped by the individuals themselves, and this requires imagination and play as critical inputs in addition to work itself. This means that play enhances work in the sense that "much of play can have the potential of creating ideas and experiences that help creative work" (Ibid., p. 1196).

Creative work requires "soft" thinking, which includes metaphorical thinking, paradoxical thinking, ambiguous thinking and fantasy thinking; rather than "hard" thinking, which includes thinking that is exact, analytical, logical and focused (Blasko & Mokwa, 1988). Such "soft" thinking is difficult to control or manage,

encourages the creative individual to explore all possibilities, and calls for uncommon mental and physical energy. Mallia (2009) concluded that "creative jobs are uniquely personally consuming" in her study on why so few women make it to senior positions in advertising agencies in the United States (p. 5), based on the consensus among interviewees that creative work is a full-time, 24-hour job that requires non-stop thinking.

Major differences and areas of dissatisfaction between account service personnel and creative individuals hinder a smooth work process (Vanden Bergh, Smith & Wicks, 1986). Creative individuals in the study done by Vanden Bergh, Smith and Wicks (1986) were highly dissatisfied with the account service personnel, agreeing that account service personnel often do not understand their job, interfere too often, do not share client information and do not ensure that the creative individuals understand what the clients want. This often-ambiguous flow of information both between the agency and the client and within the agency itself makes it difficult for creative individuals to produce advertisements that effectively meet the needs of the client. Having to manage internal agency relations both within the creative department itself and across other departments stand in the way of productivity and efficiency.

While the agency business as a client-service business has always been demanding, clients now expect more, and more instantly, due to declines in the staff–to-billings ratio and advances in technology (Mallia, 2009). Creative individuals today are expected to produce effective advertising in time to meet inflexible deadlines, putting them in high pressure situations where they find themselves unable to take breaks from the job, having to work both longer and harder in order to produce at least "some" advertising (Bengston, 1982). The propensity of creative individuals in advertising to experience burnout was discussed in a study by Kover (1995), where copywriters attributed the lack of growth and inspiration in their work to the demanding nature of advertising with its constant demand for creation. Advertising requires creativity on demand within the context of tight deadlines and strict requirements (Blasko & Mokwa, 1986), and having to deliver such creativity continually can eventually cause creative individuals to burn out.

While many advertising professionals have concluded that there is no universally satisfactory way to satisfy the needs of both the agency and the family, given the increased demand for availability, decreased project time, and scarce provision of flexi-time or flexi-place policies by advertising agencies (Mallia, 2009), the advertising industry has an added compelling reason to pay attention to the merits of work-life harmony. Bengston (1982), by drawing upon the idea generation model by James Webb Young (1960), suggested that taking a break from work could be the decisive factor in attaining the final creative concept for advertising. This relationship between taking a break from work and idea generation was also highlighted in a study done by O'Leary (2010), where a creative individual recounted how she found the solution to the task that she had been stuck at during work by taking a total break from work. Cleveland (2008) also emphasized the merits of work-life harmony on the work performance and creative process of an individual, stating that "the key to productivity is balance" and knowing when to take a break from work (p. 17).

Amalgamating the unique work challenges that creative individuals face and Singapore's culture of prioritising work, our study aims to investigate the work-life conflict of creative individuals in the advertising industry in the Singaporean context by proposing the following research questions:

RQ1: What work-life conflicts do creative individuals experience?

RQ2: What factors contribute to the work-life conflicts creative individuals experience?

RQ3: What effects does work-life harmony have on creativity?

Methodology

Advertising agencies vary both in terms of size and specialization, thereby presenting many factors that potentially affect the attainability of work-life harmony of its employees. To make more meaningful comparisons, this study focuses on creative individuals employed in full-service advertising agencies under the four global providers of advertising and marketing services – WPP, Omnicom Group, Interpublic Group and Publicis Groupe (The Ad Age Group, 2010). Parent holding groups control a large number of agencies across the world. They help member agencies set out corporate strategies and objectives, advise simple organizational structures, and provide the basic framework to guide general personnel policies of member agencies. Full-service agencies provide market strategies for clients from the start till the end of the project. By streamlining the agencies in this study to full-service agencies under the four parent holding companies, this study is applicable to a wider and more prominent group of agencies.

The research design included in-depth interviews with two groups of people, namely human resource personnel and creative individuals. The qualitative method of in-depth interviews is "optimal for collecting data on

individuals' personal histories, perspectives, and experiences, particularly when sensitive topics are being explored" (Mack, Woodsong, Macqueen, Guest, & Namey, 2005, p. 12).

Preliminary Study on Human Resource Policies

Preliminary studies were conducted with the aim of understanding agency processes, culture and initiatives, which are factors affecting the work-life harmony of creative individuals. In order to obtain more information about the initiatives and programs that support work-life harmony in the respective agencies, four in-depth interviews with human resource personnel from each of the four parent holding companies were conducted between January 2011 and February 2011. The length of the semi-structured interviews was usually 15-25 minutes. All interviews were conducted in English, recorded on tape and transcribed verbatim.

Preliminary HR Interview Findings

Compensation for Working Overtime

There is a general reluctance across the board to grant time off in lieu to employees as compensation for working overtime, and it is not common practice to do so. Conditions that the granting of time off in lieu is based on are vague, as evidenced by the absence of official policies regarding this in all four agencies. Whether this form of compensation is administered or not is usually at the discretion of the bosses. Two agencies prefer to reward rather than compensate their employees for working hard, and do so by sending them for award shows for the betterment of their careers.

Flexible Working Arrangements

In terms of flexible working hours, all four agencies make allowances for employees to report to work later the next day should they have worked late the day before. Employees regularly take advantage of this flexible arrangement. There are no strict protocols regarding flexible working hours, and only one agency mentioned the need for employees to work for at least 8 hours regardless of the time they report to work.

Flexi-place arrangements are not commonly utilised even though all agencies mentioned that they make provisions for it. Employees need only to notify their direct superiors should they choose to work outside of the office. There are no strict protocols regarding flexi-place arrangements.

Policy Guidelines from Parent Holding Companies

In general, parent holding companies loosely control the employee welfare policies that the individual agencies under them implement. Parent holding companies provide guidelines rather than strict mandates, and individual agencies are encouraged to implement employee welfare policies and initiatives according to the strategic needs of their business. Table 1 shows a list of initiatives that agencies have implemented outside of Ministry of Manpower (MOM) and parent holding company guidelines to encourage work-life harmony amongst employees.

Table 1: Agency-Initiated Employee Welfare Initiatives

Initiative	Parent Holding Company Group that Agency is under
Marriage Leave	WPP
Zoo Pass	WPP
Subsidised Gym Membership	WPP
	Publicis Groupe
Birthday Leave	Publicis Groupe

Promotion of Work-Life Harmony by Agencies

None of the agencies have implemented policies that actively encourage their employees to have a life outside of work. However, one of the HR interviewees mentioned that the agency does take note of individual employees' well being, and regulate the workload where they see fit.

The interviews with the HR personnel served as a guide on the employee welfare benefits that agencies provide and allowed for further probing into these areas when interviewing the creative individuals. Information from these HR interviews was also used later during data analysis where cross-referencing between responses from creative individuals and HR personnel was done to check for discrepancies between the two.

In-Depth Interviews with Creative Individuals

Interviewees came from any one of the selected 17 advertising agencies, and were obtained by purposive sampling to enable the selection of information rich-cases for in-depth analysis related to the central issues being studied (Devers & Frankel, 2000). Interviewees were selected through snowball sampling, where the sample of the study was gathered through referrals who know of others who meet the requirements for the study (Lindlof & Taylor, 2010). Interviewees were either introduced by HR personnel whom the researchers previously interviewed or through personal contacts.

Interviewees were screened based on a minimum of two years of experience in the advertising industry, in order to eliminate inexperience in the industry as a contributing factor to work-life conflict. Interviewees participated in this study voluntarily, and no incentive was given for their participation. Prior to each interview, a short survey questionnaire was administered to examine and investigate the existence of work-life conflict affecting the interviewee, as well as to get a gauge of his/her work-life priorities. The questionnaire was divided into two parts. Part I listed a consolidated set of eight ideal circumstances for the interviewees to rank, adapted from Skitmore and Ahmad's (2003) study on work-life conflict of Singaporean workers. Part II comprised 13 questions relating to the background and demographic data of the interviewees.

A pilot interview was conducted in February 2010 to determine the effectiveness of the approach, questions and topics. The survey questionnaire and interview questions were then modified and refined. In total, nine individual face-to-face in-depth interviews were conducted between February 2011 and March 2011. At least one copywriter and one art director from agencies under each of the four parent holding companies were interviewed. As the audio recording of an interview from Publicis Groupe was damaged, data analysis for the study was based on eight interviews (four copywriters and four art directors). Table 2 summarises the general background of the interviewees.

Table 2: General Background of Interviewees (Creative Individuals)

Designation	Parent Holding Company	Age	Gender	Years of Experience	Size of Creative Department	Personal Status	Working Hours/Week	Hours Spent Working After Leaving Office per day
Senior Copywriter/ Creative Group Head	Omnicom	41	M	17	30	Married with children	45-60	Blank
Senior Art Director/ Creative Group Head	Omnicom	35	M	12	40	Married	45-60	2
Copywriter	WPP	26	M	2	30	Single	45-60	4
Art Director	Publicis	28	F	9	Mini	Single	Lost Count	Every single hour
Senior Art Director	WPP	31	M	6	5	Single	>61	2-3
Art Director	Interpublic	31	M	8	5	Single	36-44	1
Copywriter	Interpublic	30	M	9	5	Married	36-44	1-2
Copywriter	WPP	28	M	2	60	Single	45-60	3

The transcripts were analysed according to the Grounded Theory approach (Glaser & Strauss, 1967), an inductive methodology that uses a systematic set of procedure leading to the emergence of conceptual categories grounded in data (Bitsch, 2005). The approach was selected as it allows the exploration of all potential relationships

related to the topic rather than just preconceived ones identified by previous literature (Simmons, 2006). The flexibility of the system also allows research questions and theories to be modified as new relationships emerge (Ibid.).

As analysing data using the Grounded Theory approach is based on constant comparison to identify patterns and variations, three researchers would independently examine the transcripts following each interview to code the data openly and inductively, identifying themes, ideas, relationships and meanings, categories and sub-categories. The researchers would then come together to discuss the themes identified, contradictions and variations to the initial theories formulated, and to account for differences in interpretation. These themes would then be compared against the initial research questions, which would then be revised and qualified to pertain to themes that had newly emerged. Following all the interviews, the themes identified were organized into broader categories, and a coding protocol complete with descriptions was drawn up. Transcripts were then carefully recoded. Key relationships between the broad categories, subcategories and themes were then mapped out against the main research topic to formulate theory, and a final revision of the research questions was made. The findings were then collated and analyzed with the results of the survey.

Findings

RQ1: What work-life conflicts do creative individuals experience?

Competing priorities

Interviewees were given a list of 8 items that they were required to rate according to their importance. Table 3 shows the mode of the responses. In general, issues involving leisure time were rated lower, while work-related issues were rated higher. This indicates that work is a priority for the creative individuals in this study.

Table 3: Ideal Necessities in an Individual's Life

Item	Mode
Overseas holiday	5, 8
Social activities with friends	2, 7
Job Security	1
Job advancement and promotion	2, 4
Time to pursue personal hobbies	7
Exceeding employer's expectations	2, 6
Spending time with family	6
Convenient or flexible working hours	8

**Mode score was tabulated by calculating the frequency of all the interviewees' responses where most important =1, least important =8*

However, this does not mean that creative individuals do not attempt to maintain a balance between work and life, with five interviewees pointing out the difficulties they face in allocating sufficient time to the two domains.

> **Interviewee 1:** "Yeah, it's actually difficult, you're with...wondering if you are spending enough time at home,...or if you are spending enough time at home then are you spending enough at work? It is something that any creative or professional of any kind would have... being fair to one is not being fair to another."

Six interviewees demonstrated awareness of the sacrifices that they have had to make as a result of such heavy time investments in their job. It is notable that the sacrifices mentioned were long-term in nature i.e., sacrifices that had to be made as long as they remain in the advertising industry.

> **Interviewee 8:** "Because of work you have like commitment issues to your friends, to your family, to anything actually. You can't really plan for holidays, because, because you don't know what's coming up next."

Four interviewees acknowledged that they were currently devoting more time towards work and neglecting their personal life, but felt they could afford to do so while they were still young and had fewer commitments outside of work. They recognized that as they grow older and progress to different life stages, the priority they place on life might eventually supersede that of work. In fact, one interviewee acknowledged this change in priorities as he grew older.

> **Interviewee 5**: "I mean at the start I don't mind (the long working hours). Uhh when I first started out, I really don't mind. Then ... ya as you grow older, you sort of ...try to place more priority onto your life instead. There are times when you feel that it's not worth it...what the hell am I doing? Why am I here? Why am I still in the office? Or you know what, I should be outside, I should be having fun or whatever, but I'm not...you just feel that, you know what this isn't life. Why am I doing this? Hey I want go back home, I want to play with my nephew, you know, I want to talk to my mom, I want to talk to my dad, I want to have dinner with my friends, I want to party, I want to go to a concert, I want to go to like, whatever, you know."

Passion for the job

Passion for the job was apparent in all eight interviewees, albeit for different reasons. One striking indicator of this passion was their willingness to attribute a higher priority to work, choosing to plan leisure activities around their work schedule.

> **Interviewee 8:** "(Engaging in non-work related activities) is important but ... it's important but it still has to depend on how much time I have left after work. As in, plans out of work ... can only be made after work."

Another indicator of this passion was the fact that interviewees treat their jobs as a means to gratify personal aspirations rather than as a source of income. The income that the job generates was perceived as a bonus rather than the reason why they engage in work.

> **Interviewee 4:** "To me, agency is a platform, okay, to get my...my....my objective out to the world, to reach out to the world ... I don't know, I never see advertising as earning a living to me. I treat advertising as part of my life than a living."

> **Interviewee 3**: "It's nice to marry your personal hobby with like... uh, money. When your money can earn you money, I mean when your hobby can earn you money...it's really good."

RQ2: What factors contribute to the work-life conflicts creative individuals experience?

2.1 Factors Related to the Work Environment

Inconducive office space

Five interviewees commented that their office environment was not conducive for them to work in, especially during the idea generation stage where they highlighted the need for an uninterrupted thought process. This is due to the presence of distractions and them having to attend to other responsibilities such as attending meetings and handling paper work while being in the office. One interviewee even went to the extent of taking a day off to work at home as he felt he could be more productive at home than in the office.

> **Interviewee 8:** "I took leave, to work at home... I know that I can't really concentrate (in the office) because it's an open concept right, so people talk and ya,...so I did that...to have more productive hours."

Rigid workflow resulting in miscommunication

All eight interviewees mentioned the rigid workflow of the agency, in particular the hierarchical flow of information, as causing miscommunication and hindering a smooth work process. Being at the end of the information chain, creative individuals are heavily dependent on those higher up in the workflow to be made aware of what is requested by the client. Three interviewees mentioned that the lack of clarity and misrepresentation of information in the briefs written by account servicing personnel contributed to the difficulties they faced in

performing their jobs, posing them the additional challenge of having to read in between the lines to decipher the clients' request. To minimize such problems of miscommunication, three interviewees expressed their desire to communicate directly with clients.

> **Interviewee 4**: "Yeah, because you are always at the end of everything, if you...if you can't read whatever that happened in between the client and the suits right, you will suffer because the work will goes to you, bounce back, to and fro, to and fro, to and fro and you will be wasting a lot of time in between."

Difficulty in maintaining positive internal relations

All interviewees acknowledged the importance of establishing good internal relationships with their colleagues to facilitate a smooth work process. Key internal relationships that creative individuals have to manage include those within the creative department itself as well as inter-departmental relationships between the creative and account servicing department.

According to all interviewees, copywriters and art directors work in tandem to devise the overall concept (also known as the "creative" or "big idea"), with the copywriter being responsible for the textual content and the art director for the visual aspects. Six interviewees highlighted the importance of having good "chemistry" in this two-person team, citing it as a key element in producing quality work. "Chemistry", as defined by the creative individuals in this study, includes having the same wavelength, being like-minded and having mutual trust.

Inter-departmental conflict between the account servicing and creative department is not uncommon, and mainly stems from the brief (written by the account servicing department).

> **Interviewee 4:** "So, basically once I receive like a job brief, I usually get very angry, because the job brief is being written by the suit side...the suits, they usually take the briefing from the client, okay, and I think most of the suits what happened to them is they act like a MSN messenger. So whatever the client wants, they just write down lah, without deciphering what is the objective, okay, of the whole client request."

2.2 Factors Related to the Nature of the Advertising Industry

Unpredictability of idea generation process

The work of creative individuals revolves around generating ideas. However, the idea generation process is not systematic, and instead appears to be sporadic and even beyond the control of the creative individuals. Six interviewees noted this unpredictability both in terms of the amount of time it takes them to generate ideas, as well as the absence of a structured modus operandi in doing so.

> **Interviewee 2:**"I think it just hits you anytime. Like, maybe sometimes you might get it in the first minute, or sometimes it might take day."

Inability to stop the mind from working

In line with Blasko and Mokwa's (1988) view that creative work calls for uncommon mental energy, our findings suggest that the nature of creative work requires thinking that is difficult to control and manage. Five Interviewees described the inability of their minds to completely stop thinking despite leaving the office and not having the intention to continue working.

> **Interviewee 8:** "One thing about advertising is you actually don't stop working. There's no working hours, even when you go home your brain still keeps going. When you wake up, it still keeps going."

Three interviewees attributed their engagement in a non-stop thinking process to impending deadlines and outstanding briefs. Deadlines demand creative individuals to deliver work within a certain time frame, which sometimes entails the need to work even after leaving the office.

> **Interviewee 2:** "Because when... when... when... when you have a... when you come by a really tough brief right sometimes even if you don't intend to bring homework home... the... the... subconsciously you are still thinking about it. On the way home or whatever. It happens."

Other interviewees attribute this inability to stop thinking to inspiration being an ongoing process, rather than a deliberate effort only when the job calls for it or when faced with writers' block.

> **Interviewee 1:** "Every creative person has to be a good observer, you got to look around you and...the little things, and little trends, and little behaviours, and you know, observations, that you got to...keep filing away...in your head. And you don't know when you can bring it out some day at a point and use it. So, you need, you need to build up a bank...a bank of these little insights, little observations."

Unpredictable demands of the job

Working in the advertising industry demands a high level of commitment because of the erratic and demanding nature of the job. It is not uncommon for creative individuals to unexpectedly have to work overtime at the last minute, and they have come to anticipate such possibilities.

> **Interviewee 7:** "Yeah, I think there are occasions that yeah, it actually happens, I end up making plans already...something comes up like 6 o'clock, maybe just before you leave where it's absolutely necessary for you to stay back, so yeah, some appointments are actually cancelled."

***RQ 3:* What effects does work-life harmony have on creativity?**

Fuels inspiration for ideas

Responses from interviewees largely highlight the link between personal life experiences and the ideas they generate. Seven interviewees pointed out that being immersed in, in touch with, and exposed to the world complements creative work. They feel the need to keep abreast of not just the latest trends in the advertising industry, but also that of the world. This requires them to engage in non-work related activities in order to expand their minds. Seven interviewees also acknowledged that having a proper balance in their life helps to improve their performance and efficiency at the job as it provides them with fresher perspectives.

> **Interviewee 4:** "Yeah, I think, I think it's like two times a week right, I will try to engage in my hobbies or something... Just not to think about anything, yeah, about work. Yeah, I think that's very important because once I can get out of the whole thing, I come back with a much more fresh perspective."

Facilitates the idea generation process

Six interviewees agreed on the need to take a break and engage in activities completely unrelated to work when experiencing a "creative block" or when they feel stressed, which they feel aids the idea generation process. However, one interviewee chooses to work on a different project when faced with a "creative block" instead of taking a complete break from work.

> **Interviewee 5:** "I think the best way, if you can't think of anything at the moment, then don't think – you know, just do something else. Ya just do some mundane stuff, you know. Like reading a web, read a blog or something. Just don't think about it. Just give it a rest. The more frustrated you get, the more you can't think."

Discussion

Our findings suggest that even though copywriters and art directors have slightly different job scopes, the work-life conflicts and challenges they face do not vary. Creative individuals from the four parent holding groups also gave similar responses, with no identifiable differences across the various holding groups in terms of the work-life conflicts and challenges that they faced.

According to the HR personnel of the four agencies interviewed, the official working hours of creative individuals as agreed in their contract of employment is 9 a.m. to 6 p.m. Findings from a self-administered questionnaire reveal that creative individuals in the present study work an average of 8.75 hours in the office a day. While these hours exceed the official working hours, creative individuals are not working as many hours as initially expected. However, interviewees indicated that in addition to working overtime in the office, they spend a mean number of 2.33 hours engaging in work-related activities after leaving the office. Due to the unpredictability of the idea generation process and nature of thinking required by creative work as discussed in the previous section, the actual number of hours creative individuals work a day is difficult to track and the reported number of hours spent working in the office is not indicative of the actual number of hours they work a day (as spontaneous thinking is not accounted for).

About half of the interviewees recognize that working in the advertising industry has had a limiting effect on their social circles due to the incompatible working hours with friends outside of the industry. It is therefore notable that when asked to suggest policies that would improve their current work-life harmony, rather than proposing policies that would enable them to spend more time with people outside the industry, two interviewees indicated the desire to engage in more activities with their colleagues so as to establish better relationships with them. This reveals a work-oriented mindset since almost all interviewees emphasized the importance of "chemistry" between working partners as essential in producing quality work. It is therefore not surprising that interviewees are satisfied with their current lifestyles (in terms of the amount of time currently being apportioned to "work" and "life"), and this is in congruence with Ho's (2009) conclusion that the unwillingness to distinguish between work and life stems from enjoyment and satisfaction of work.

Most interviewees agreed that inspiration for ideas come from anywhere, and emphasized that the more exposed they are to "different perspectives" and the more "in touch (they are) with pop culture", the more enriched and "better" their ideas become. This corresponds with Ho's (2009) assumption that non-work related activities have the potential of creating ideas and experiences that help creative work. However, despite recognizing the benefits of engaging in non-work related activities and interacting with people outside of the industry, interviewees continue to expend little time to do so. Again, this can be attributed to the incompatible working hours, which pose difficulties to creative individuals in maintaining social circles outside of the industry. For some, the long working hours also leave them with little energy to engage in other activities after work.

It is also interesting that most of the interviewees felt the need to take mental breaks rather than physical breaks from work. When faced with "writer's block", several interviewees sought to move from job A to job B, signifying that they felt the need to take a break from thinking about that particular project rather than a need to take a complete mental break from work. While other interviewees sought to do something completely unrelated from work, it usually did not entail them having to leave the office. Just one interviewee suggested a physical break from work by sleeping because "usually at this point (he's) really tired". Interviewees' responses therefore suggest that creative individuals are subjected more to mental exhaustion rather than physical fatigue.

One significant finding is that passion is the main driving force behind all interviewees' dedication to their job. Responses from interviewees denote the mentality that the amount of time invested in their work signifies their level of commitment to their job. As creative individuals treat their job more than just a source of income, they assume a positive attitude towards working hard and working long, with one interviewee stating that he "liked the idea of working late" and another willing to put in longer hours because the "fruit tastes sweeter". Creative individuals are also not satisfied with producing work that only serve to meet clients' expectations, but desire to produce work that is "award-winning" and up to "personal standards". Interviewee responses indicate that achieving such high standards of work necessitates an investment of time that exceeds regular office working hours.

None of the interviewees mentioned that their passion was in creating advertisements. Instead, their passion for art, design or writing for example, was what compelled them to join the advertising industry. As mentioned in the previous section, interviewees view the advertising industry as a means to gratify personal aspirations, such as allowing them "to be in the heart of creation" and to use advertising as "a platform to get (their) objective out to the world". As their passion lies not in the advertising industry itself, half of the interviewees had little reservations about leaving the industry in the future. While one interviewee recognized that there were "not many options" that would be able to pander to their passion as the advertising industry does, other interviewees considered teaching art and design, joining the film industry, and starting their own business.

It is interesting to note that "passion can only last a certain mileage". Particularly when individuals grow older and progress to different life stages, it is no longer passion but rather practical considerations that compel people to stay in the industry. The practical consideration most mentioned was that of having financial responsibilities and dependents. On the other hand, most interviewees recognized that investing less time in their job or even leaving the industry will be inevitable unless work remains the key priority in their lives. This is in line with Mallia's (2009) study on why so few women become creative directors in advertising agencies, where it was found that the punishing hours and inescapable nature of creative work were extremely difficult to reconcile with parenthood.

Majority of interviewees brought up the difficulty they face in controlling the direction of the work they produce. Clients decide on their desired direction for advertising communications and convey this to the creative department via the account servicing personnel. As a result, creative individuals often suffer from a lack of work autonomy, and one interviewee expressed that "there is no love in creating something when your hand is being controlled...tied up". Boey et al (2000) highlighted this loss of work autonomy as increasing work stress and ultimately influencing the quality of employee work-life harmony. Our findings suggest that interviewees have found a way to circumvent this loss of work autonomy (while continuing to maintain the delicate relationship

between them, the clients and the account servicing personnel) by producing both work that adhere to clients' requirements and preferences, as well as work that they are more satisfied with and feel "works better for the brand". Although presenting a solution, producing additional work not only results in a longer time spent at the job but also places more stress on the creative individuals.

Interviewees mentioned that this solution is not always effective as clients may be too conservative or persistent. Creative individuals have thus adopted a coping mechanism to protect themselves from potential burnouts as a result of being overly disappointment or jaded when their "expression gets killed off". They do so by "pick(ing) heir battles to fight", strategically choosing how much to invest in each piece of work depending on how plausible they feel they would be able to convince the clients of the idea. A study by Kover (1995) similarly points towards a strong emotional investment by creative individuals in their work as it identifies them as a fierce defender of their work due to their perception of advertising as an extension of themselves.

Surprisingly, three interviewees claimed that they were currently able to have work-life harmony. A closer inspection revealed two common factors between the advertising agencies that they are employed under: (1) a small creative department, and (2) slow business period for the agency. Regarding the size of the creative department, it has been found that creative individuals from smaller markets are better able to achieve work-life balance because of friendlier agency cultures, where there is less or no internal competition for creative assignments (Mallia, 2009). As for slow business period for the agency, one agency is in the midst of folding up its Singapore office, while the other has not had "a lot of business coming in". This represents an anomalous factor and indicates that it is only under unusual working conditions that creative individuals are able to have work-life harmony.

While a heavy workload was initially thought to pose a key challenge for creative individuals in achieving work-life harmony, our findings indicate the unpredictable nature of the job emerged as the key challenge creative individuals face in achieving work-life harmony. Last-minute tasks and revisions contribute to this unpredictable nature, and a majority of interviewees brought up occasions where plans were cancelled due to urgent or last minute tasks cropping up just before the end of their working day. It is noteworthy that these incidents occur frequently enough for several interviewees to have permanently given up on making any plans after work.

Apart from two interviewees bringing up the fear or inability of employees to leave the office earlier than their superiors, there were no indicators of any unique Singaporean culture contributing to creative individuals' lack of work-life harmony. While interviewees made comparisons between the working culture of Singapore and other countries, stating that it was similar to that of Shanghai, less relaxed as compared to Los Angeles, and less hectic than Bombay, they did not bring up factors unique to Singapore's working culture. This suggests that creative individuals face the same challenges universally, and is substantiated by the fact that the challenges and issues brought up by interviewees in the present study were closely tied to the very nature of the advertising industry itself.

Implications for the Advertising Industry

Encouraging work-life harmony as a key factor in employee retention

One of the aims of the study was to explore the issue of high burnout and turnover rates in the advertising industry. Findings from the present study indicate that the (lack of) work-life harmony the job permits is a key reason why creative individuals choose to leave the industry, with majority of the interviewees highlighting that this inability to achieve work-life harmony would not be agreeable with their work-life priorities in the long run. This indicates that encouraging and making provisions for employees to have work-life harmony is key to boosting the retention of creative individuals.

Interviews with human resource personnel and creative individuals reflect that there are currently no official policies addressing employee work-life harmony, and while non-official initiatives such as the granting of time off in lieu exist, they are rarely exercised. In addition, these non-official initiatives are usually exercised at the discretion of the bosses. There is a need for some standard protocol regarding these non-initiatives, especially since creative individuals are not bold enough to take advantage of them on their own accord. For example, it should be made known to creative individuals that they are eligible to take a day off after working a certain number of hours past office hours. Formalising initiatives that address employee work-life harmony and promoting the use of them are ways in which agencies can strengthen their employee-retention strategy.

Need for flexi-place arrangements

More than half of the interviewees found their physical workplace to be inconducive for productive work, especially during the idea generation process, and mentioned the need to be in a quiet place such as at home or in a cafe. While agencies are flexible regarding employee working hours (e.g., allowing employees to report to work at a

later time should they have worked late the previous night, allowing employees them leaving office for a few hours during office hours to run personal errands, etc.), interviewees revealed that the agency is less flexible in terms of the place creative individuals are allowed to work during office hours as they are largely required to be in the office. This is in contrast to human resource personnel stating that they do make provisions for flexi-place arrangements. While acknowledging that creative individuals are required to be in the office because it facilitates discussion and the work process, advertising agencies should be more receptive to flexi-place arrangements at least during the idea generation stage. Being more flexible in this aspect helps to improve the productivity and efficiency of creative individuals, which ultimately benefits the agency.

Forming tight-knitted communities via agency social events

As mentioned earlier, two interviewees indicated the desire to engage in more activities with their colleagues when asked to suggest policies that would improve their current work-life harmony. One interviewee shed light on how close relationships with colleagues promotes work-life harmony by describing how the creative individuals in his agency try to help each other as much as possible, whether bouncing off ideas with each other to "crack" a brief or helping each other to execute tasks during busy periods. In addition, several interviewees also noted that those in the creative department help to motivate and inspire each other to perform better at the job. Therefore, strengthening the bond between creative individuals is mutually beneficial, and agencies can encourage creative individuals to interact with one another in a social setting by organising company events or social activities.

Limitations and Future Research

As this was an exploratory study, the results cannot be generalized to the larger population and cannot be taken to be conclusive. Furthermore, our findings might be limited by the somewhat small scope of the study. Due to time and resource constraints, only nine creative individuals were interviewed. Unfortunately, the audio recording of one interview was damaged and could not be transcribed. Data was therefore analysed based on eight interview transcripts. While obtaining more responses would have been favourable, it was felt that a point of data saturation had been reached. Arguments and descriptions presented by the creative individuals interviewed largely pointed to similar passions, conflicts and challenges, and according to two researchers' recollection, interviewee response from the damaged audio recording was consonant with the other responses as well.

Interviewees were selected through personal contacts of researchers and referrals from the HR personnel interviewed. This method of selecting interviewees may give rise to a sample of interviewees that does not provide objective representation of the actual industry. There is a possibility that interviewees who have strong opinions on their working lifestyles are more likely to agree to participate in the study as oppose to individuals who are satisfied with their current lifestyles. However, the data collected did not reflect unhappiness of interviewees in the study, and there was no hint of them using the study as an avenue to express their concerns of work-life harmony in the advertising industry.

While statistics for the ratio of male to female creative individuals in the advertising industry in Singapore is unavailable, it appears that creative departments of advertising agencies in Singapore tend to be male-dominated, as highlighted by the only female interviewee in this study. While no identifiable differences between the sole female interviewee and the rest of the (male) interviewees were found, this is an area that can be further looked into, as other studies done overseas point out gender-specific factors that contribute to the male dominance in the creative departments in the advertising industry (particularly in more senior positions) (Kazenoff & Vagnoni, 1997; Mallia, 2009). Future research can look into whether this trend indeed prevails in the local context.

One interesting finding that emerged was that it is possible for creative individuals to achieve work-life harmony, depending on certain characteristics of the advertising agency they are employed under (e.g., size of creative department). It must be noted that this study examined work-life conflict solely from the vantage point of creative individuals employed in full-service advertising agencies under the four global providers of advertising and marketing services. Given that different types of advertising agencies have different demands, and therefore present different work-life challenges and conflicts (as noted by interviewees based on their past experiences in other advertising agencies such as in-house and boutique agencies), variation by type of agency should be considered in future research.

Nonetheless while certain limitations abound, findings from this study are significant because no study has yet to investigate the lack of work-life harmony of creative individuals in Singapore. Much more research on this unique yet understudied workforce population could certainly be done in the future, and could include a broader triangulation of research methods e.g., quantitative research to validate the findings in the present study.

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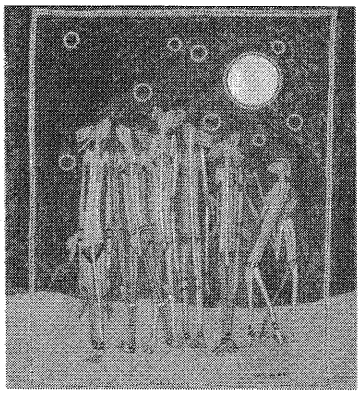
INTERNATIONAL CONFERENCE PROCEEDINGS OF THE AMERICAN ACADEMY OF ADVERTISING



2011 ASIA-PACIFIC CONFERENCE

In Cooperation with the
Queensland University of Technology
and the
Australian and New Zealand Academy of Advertising

Carrie La Ferle
Southern Methodist University

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Edited by

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AMERICAN ACADEMY OF ADVERTISING

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PREFACE

This volume of the 2011 International Conference Proceedings contains the competitive and special topics sessions presented at the 2011 Asia-Pacific Conference of the American Academy of Advertising held June 8-10, 2011 in Brisbane, Australia. The papers in this volume are organized in the order in which they appeared in the 2011 International Conference Program.

A total of 35 competitive papers were presented at the Conference. As in previous years, the competitive papers were selected by a "double blind" review process in which neither the authors nor the reviewers' identities were known to each other. Co-chair, Carrie La Ferle of Southern Methodist University was in charge of the competitive paper process. Authors had the option of publishing an abstract only or a paper in full. The special topics sessions were coordinated by co-chair Gayle Kerr of Queensland University of Technology. There were 6 special topics presented at the conference. Summaries of the sessions presented at the conference are included in the Proceedings.

The conference participants, including guest speakers reached 93 with representation from approximately 13 countries. The conference was a great success due to the efforts of many and therefore we must recognize the role of the AAA members who contributed to the quality of the work contained in this publication. As authors, reviewers, and session participants we have collectively added to our understanding of advertising theory and practice.

In addition, we wish to acknowledge the many session moderators who volunteered their time and expertise, the sponsors who provided financial support, and our AAAs Executive Director, Pat Rose, for a wonderful conference! Finally, we want to thank Queensland University of Technology for hosting the event and the Australian and New Zealand Academy of Advertising for their support as well as Southern Methodist University for sponsoring the opening reception.

Permission to reprint, or in any other manner reproduce, the copyrighted material contained in this volume should be obtained from the American Academy of Advertising by contacting the Executive Director of the AAA (see www.aaasite.org for contact information). We hope you find the 2011 International Conference Proceedings of the American Academy of Advertising a worthy intellectual investment and that you will support the Proceedings by citing this publication whenever possible in your own research and work.

Enjoy!

Editors, 2011 International Conference Proceedings of the American Academy of Advertising

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