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Applying Principles of Management in Creative Industries: A Study on Graphic Design and Multimedia Firms

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ABSTRACT

This paper examines how classical and contemporary principles of management are applied, adapted, or resisted in graphic design and multimedia firms. Drawing on a qualitative multi-case study of six small-to-medium creative firms, the research investigates managerial functions (planning, organising, leading, controlling), the fit between formal management practices and creative work processes, and emergent managerial strategies that balance creativity and commercial demands. Data were collected through semi-structured interviews (n = 28), participant observation, and document analysis, and analysed using reflexive thematic analysis. Findings reveal that while core management principles remain relevant (e.g., clear objectives, role clarity, feedback loops), their enactment in creative contexts requires flexibility, trust-based leadership, project-based organising, and distributed decision-making. The study contributes a contextualised framework — the Adaptive Management-for-Creativity (AMC) model — and practical recommendations for managers in creative industries to foster both creative autonomy and organisational performance. Limitations and avenues for future research are discussed.

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1. Introduction

Creative industries — encompassing graphic design, multimedia production, advertising, animation, and related sectors — are major drivers of cultural value and economic growth worldwide (Florida, 2002). Characterised by intangible outputs, project-based workflows, and high dependence on individual and collective creativity, these firms present unique management challenges: balancing client demands and deadlines with the need to preserve creative freedom; coordinating small, specialist teams; and sustaining innovation under market constraints (Amabile, 1996; Caves, 2000). Traditional management principles (planning, organising, leading, and controlling) provide a starting point for structuring activity, but their direct application in the creative context often proves problematic or incomplete (Hesmondhalgh & Baker, 2011).

This study asks:

How are principles of management applied within graphic design and multimedia firms, and what adaptations do managers use to support creative work without stifling it?

The research aims to

- Identify which classical and contemporary management principles are used in creative firms,
- Analyse how those principles are adapted in practice, and

- Propose a theoretically grounded framework for management that aligns with creative work logics.

The paper proceeds as follows: Section 2 reviews literature on management principles and creative work; Section 3 presents the theoretical framework guiding the study; Section 4 details the qualitative research methodology; Section 5 reports findings; Section 6 discusses implications; Section 7 concludes with recommendations and limitations.

2. Literature Review

2.1 Principles of Management: Classical to Contemporary

The classical management functions of planning, organising, leading, and controlling (Fayol, 1916; Gulick, 1937) continue to underpin managerial discourse (Robbins & Coulter, 2018). Fayol's principles (e.g., unity of command, scalar chain, division of work) emphasised hierarchy and formalisation. Later scholarship nuanced this view: contingency theory argues that there is no one best way to manage and that structure should fit environmental conditions (Lawrence & Lorsch, 1967), while Mintzberg (1973) described managerial roles that emphasise interpersonal and informational work.

Contemporary management stresses agility, knowledge work management, and people-centred leadership. Drucker (1954/1999) shifted attention to knowledge workers and decentralisation. Nonaka and Takeuchi (1995) posited knowledge creation as central to organisational advantage, requiring practices that facilitate tacit-explicit

knowledge conversion. These advances suggest that management in knowledge- and creativity-intensive settings demands flexibility, empowerment, and learning orientation.

2.2 Management in Creative Industries

Creative organisations differ from manufacturing and services in key ways: outputs are heterogeneous and judged subjectively, workflows are often project-based and ephemeral, and the labour force is highly skilled and motivated by intrinsic rewards (Caves, 2000; Florida, 2002). Scholars have highlighted managerial tensions: the need for structure vs. creative autonomy (Amabile, 1996), the role of leadership in enabling creativity (Mumford et al., 2002), and the importance of a supportive climate for innovation (Oldham & Cummings, 1996).

Studies in advertising, design, and media industries show managers adopting hybrid practices — combining standard project management (Gantt charts, milestones) with looser studio practices (crit sessions, iterative prototyping) (Jones, 2012; Hesmondhalgh & Baker, 2011). Leadership styles ranging from transformational (Bass, 1985) to servant leadership have been proposed as effective in creative settings (van Knippenberg & Sitkin, 2013).

2.3 Organising Creative Teams

Teamwork is central in multimedia and graphic design projects. Tuckman's (1965) model (forming–storming–norming–performing) remains useful for understanding team dynamics, but ad hoc,

cross-disciplinary teams in creative firms require quick norming and flexible coordination (Sundararajan & Aggarwal, 2017). Agile-inspired workflows (sprints, standups) have been imported into creative contexts with modifications to preserve inspiration cycles (Highsmith, 2009).

2.4 Gaps and Research Opportunities

While prior literature identifies tensions and strategies, few empirical studies deeply trace how fundamental management principles are reinterpreted within small and medium creative firms, especially by combining multiple data sources (interviews, observation) to derive practice-grounded theoretical models. This study addresses that gap.

3. Theoretical Framework

This study synthesises two strands to form its theoretical framework: classical management functions (Fayol, 1916) and contingency theory (Lawrence & Lorsch, 1967) as baseline, and creativity and knowledge-work literature (Amabile, 1996; Nonaka & Takeuchi, 1995; Oldham & Cummings, 1996). The resulting framework — Management Principles in Creative Contexts (MPCC) — posits that core managerial functions remain necessary but must be filtered through three mediating mechanisms for creative effectiveness:

- Flexibilization — replacing rigid rules with adaptable processes (e.g., flexible milestone setting).

- Relational Leadership — emphasis on trust, psychological safety, and coaching rather than directive control.
- Boundary Management — deliberate negotiation of boundaries between client demands, commercial constraints, and creative autonomy.

These mechanisms map onto managerial activities: planning becomes iterative and

vision-oriented; organising becomes projectized and fluid; leading becomes facilitative and developmental; controlling becomes learning-oriented and formative (feedback for iteration rather than punitive control). Figure 1 (conceptual) presents the MPCC framework: core functions → mediating mechanisms → creativity & performance outcomes.

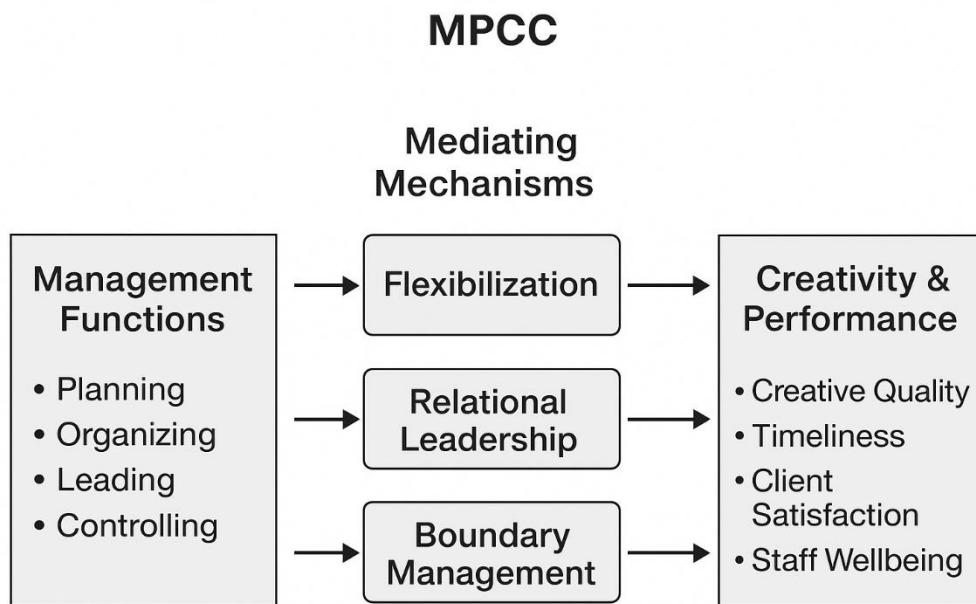


Figure 1: The MPCC framework suggests that classical management functions

Figure 1: The MPCC framework suggests that classical management functions (planning, organising, leading, controlling) operate through three mediating mechanisms — flexibilization, relational leadership, and boundary management — to influence outcomes such as creative quality, timeliness, client satisfaction, and staff wellbeing. This view integrates classical managerial tasks with contemporary needs of knowledge and creative work.

4. Research Methodology

4.1 Research Design

A multiple case-study qualitative design was used to explore managerial practices in real-world settings (Yin, 2018; Stake, 1995). The case study approach allows in-depth investigation of context-dependent practices and the development of mid-range theory (Eisenhardt, 1989).

4.2 Research Sites and Sampling

Six graphic design and multimedia firms in a metropolitan region were purposively sampled to maximise variation in size (6–45 employees), client focus (commercial, non-profit, education), and project types (branding, UX/UI, animation). Criteria included: (a) active engagement in client-facing creative projects, and (b) willingness of management to participate. Firms are anonymised as Firms A–F.

4.3 Participants

Twenty-eight participants took part: 6 owners/managers, 12 creative staff (designers, multimedia artists), 6 project managers/coordinators, and 4 clients (who had engaged the firms). Participants ranged in experience from 2 to 20+ years. Sampling combined purposive and snowball techniques to reach staff with diverse roles.

4.4 Data Collection

Data collection took place over eight months and used triangulation of methods for credibility (Denzin, 1978):

Semi-structured interviews: 28 interviews (45–90 minutes) explored managerial practices, decision-making, planning, feedback, and tension points. Interview guides were informed by the MPCC framework but open to emergent themes. Interviews were audio-recorded and transcribed verbatim.

Participant observation: The lead researcher conducted short-term participant observation (a total \approx of 80 hours) in the firms during project meetings, critique sessions, and day-to-day work to capture practice-in-use.

Document analysis: Project briefs, timelines, design critiques, and organisational charts were reviewed to contextualise practices.

Field notes: Reflexive field notes captured observations and the researcher's impressions.

4.5 Data Analysis

Data were analysed using reflexive thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2006), appropriate for identifying patterns across qualitative data. The analytic process included:

- Familiarisation: repeated reading of transcripts and notes.
- Generating initial codes: both deductive (mapping to MPCC functions) and inductive codes for unexpected patterns.
- Theme development: clustering codes into candidate themes (e.g., "adaptive planning", "trust as currency", "client boundary negotiation").
- Reviewing and refining themes: ensuring coherence and distinctness; linking themes back to data extracts.
- Defining themes and constructing the AMC model: synthesising themes into the Adaptive Management-for-Creativity (AMC) model that extends MPCC with practice-level mechanisms.

NVivo-style memoing supported analytic transparency. To enhance credibility, member-checking was conducted: preliminary findings were shared with participating managers and designers for feedback and refinement.

4.6 Trustworthiness and Ethical Considerations

Trustworthiness was addressed through methodological triangulation, rich description, reflexivity, and member-checking (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). Ethical approval was obtained from the university research ethics board. Participants provided informed consent; firm and participant identifiers were anonymised. Special care was taken to avoid jeopardising participants' employment by anonymising sensitive quotes and aggregating findings.

4.7 Limitations of Methodology

The purposive sample from a single metropolitan region limits generalizability. The study's qualitative nature emphasises depth over breadth. Social desirability bias may have influenced interview responses; participant observation and document analysis mitigated this risk.

5. Findings

Analysis produced six overarching themes describing how management principles are enacted in creative firms. These themes informed the Adaptive Management-for-Creativity (AMC) model presented below.

5.1 Iterative & Vision-Oriented Planning

All firms practised planning, but planners emphasised vision and iterative milestones over rigid Gantt schedules. Managers described planning as a two-tiered activity: a high-level vision-setting session followed by flexible sprint-like cycles. One firm manager explained:

"We set the north star — the brand idea — and then plan in two-week sprints. Deadlines are real, but scope is flexible so designers can play with ideas." (Manager, Firm C)

Planning practices included client co-creation workshops at project start, internal "moodboard" sessions, and staged deliverables that allowed creative exploration before finalisation. Traditional forecasting and long-term strategic planning were present but lighter than in non-creative firms.

5.2 Projectized Organising and Fluid Roles

Organising in creative firms was project-centred. Teams formed around projects and dissolved afterwards; personnel often had overlapping roles (designers doing client communication, project managers participating in creative critiques). Job descriptions were intentionally broad to allow role fluidity. Participants reported that this fluidity enabled rapid reconfiguration but sometimes produced role ambiguity and workload tensions.

Document analysis revealed lightweight structures: project boards, shared digital asset folders, and flexible allocation of "creative time" (blocks reserved for exploration). Formal hierarchies existed for administrative functions, but were minimal in creative decision-making.

5.3 Relational Leadership and Psychological Safety

Leaders in these firms emphasised relational leadership: coaching, mentorship, and fostering psychological safety. Creative

directors described their role as “holding the brief” and protecting the team from excessive client direction:

“I shield the team from scope creep. My job is to manage expectations so designers can do their best work.”
(Creative Director, Firm A)

Psychological safety was operationalised through critique cultures that prioritised constructive feedback, paired reviews, and a non-punitive stance toward failure. Trust and autonomy emerged as currencies; designers valued freedom to experiment, with accountability held through mutual peer review and client outcomes.

5.4 Formative Controlling: Feedback as Learning

Control mechanisms were formative and iterative: continuous feedback loops (daily stand-ups, design critiques) replaced end-of-project audits. Quality control is centred on critique sessions and peer review rather than top-down inspection. Managers used version-control systems and checklists to ensure technical consistency but relied on human judgment for aesthetic quality.

5.5 Boundary Negotiation with Clients

Boundary management with clients was a prevalent practice. Firms actively negotiated the interface between creative autonomy and client demands via structured briefs, staged sign-offs, and client education about creative processes. Effective boundary negotiation involved early stakeholder workshops to align expectations and using tangible prototypes to reduce ambiguity. When clients

insisted on prescriptive directions, firms adopted co-design techniques to reframe decisions collaboratively.

5.6 Balancing Commercial and Creative Imperatives

Managers continuously balanced commercial viability (budgets, timelines) and creative integrity. Several firms introduced “sandbox time” — allocated unpaid or low-accountability hours for speculative projects that could become IP or marketing material. Financial controls were modest but enforced: clear project scoping, fixed-price vs. hourly negotiation, and post-project retrospectives on profitability.

6. Discussion

6.1 Reinterpreting Classical Functions: Support for the MPCC

Findings support the MPCC framework: classical management functions remain relevant but are adapted through flexibilization, relational leadership, and boundary management. Planning becomes iterative and co-created; organising becomes projectized and fluid; leading emphasises trust and mentorship; controlling converts into continuous formative feedback. These adaptations echo contingency and knowledge-work theories (Lawrence & Lorsch, 1967; Nonaka & Takeuchi, 1995) and align with scholarship that emphasises the need for supportive climates for creativity (Oldham & Cummings, 1996).

6.2 The Adaptive Management-for-Creativity (AMC) Model

Building on empirical themes, the AMC model articulates practical mechanisms that managers can deploy to reconcile management imperatives with creative processes. Key components:

- Iterative Visioning: High-level vision anchored in client goals; short cycles for exploration.
- Projectized Flex-Structures: Temporal teams, overlapping roles, and lightweight governance.
- Relational Leadership Practices: Coaching, critique culture, and psychological safety.
- Formative Control Systems: Continuous feedback, prototypes, and versioning.
- Boundary Rituals: Briefing workshops, staged sign-offs, and client education.
- Sustainability Mechanisms: Time for experimentation (sandboxing), profitability retrospectives, and staff development.

The AMC model foregrounds practice-level actions rather than prescriptive organisational charts, making it suitable for small-to-medium creative firms.

6.3 Implications for Theory

The study extends management theory by empirically demonstrating how classical functions survive in modified forms in creative contexts. It suggests that management should be reconceptualised as a set of adaptive practices tailored to

knowledge- and creativity-intensive work. Moreover, the AMC model contributes to the literature on leadership for creativity by emphasising relational trust and structured boundary rituals as mechanisms that reconcile client demands and creative autonomy.

6.4 Practical Implications

For practitioners:

- Adopt iterative planning with clear “north star” objectives but flexible intermediate milestones.
- Structure teams project-wise; maintain administrative roles for continuity while keeping creative decision-making distributed.
- Prioritise psychological safety via regular, constructive critique and mentorship.
- Use formative control systems — prototypes and staged sign-offs — to reduce client uncertainty without imposing prescriptive creative constraints.
- Allocate dedicated exploratory time to sustain innovation and guard against burnout through workload monitoring.

For clients:

- Engage in early co-creation to align expectations.
- Respect the studio’s processes by allowing staged review rather than micro-managing creative choices.

7. Conclusion and Recommendations

This study examined how management principles are applied and adapted in graphic design and multimedia firms. Classical functions—planning, organising, leading, and controlling—remain relevant but are enacted through adaptive mechanisms that support creativity. The Adaptive Management-for-Creativity (AMC) model synthesises these practices into a usable framework for managers.

Recommendations:

- **Implement Iterative Planning:** Use vision-led, short-cycle planning to allow creative exploration while meeting client deadlines.
- **Adopt Projectized Structures:** Configure teams by project with flexible role definitions to harness cross-disciplinary skills.
- **Develop Relational Leadership:** Train managers in coaching and feedback facilitation; institutionalise constructive critique rituals.
- **Use Formative Controls:** Replace punitive audits with continuous feedback and staged deliverables to ensure quality and client alignment.
- **Negotiate Boundaries Proactively:** Use workshops, prototypes, and explicit sign-offs to manage client expectations.
- **Protect Creative Time:** Institutionalise “sandbox” hours to sustain innovation and staff development.

Limitations and Future Research:

The study's regional focus and small sample size limit transferability. Future research could apply the AMC model quantitatively across diverse geographies, investigate long-term outcomes (e.g., firm performance, employee retention), and explore digital tooling's role (e.g., collaboration platforms) in enabling adaptive management.

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