

# TRIPITAKKA

A TRIPITAKKA REPORT

## The Talent Pipeline Myth

*The unmeasured cost of abandoning creative training*

BY JM WU · MAY 2026

# The Argument in Brief

## OVERVIEW

The advertising and marketing industry has experienced a fundamental shift over the past decade. Creatives have moved from holding companies to independents. Independent agencies have either scaled or remained scrappy. Marketing departments have built in-house creative capability. The logic is sound: cost decreases, speed increases, control improves, and dependency on large organisations diminishes.

What has not been named is what was dismantled in the process.

There was a moment, spanning roughly from the mid-nineteen-nineties through the early twenty-tens, when the largest holding companies understood that systematic training and development was a strategic asset. Ogilvy APAC committed one percent of revenue, not profit, revenue, to training and development across the region. By around 2014 to 2015, that commitment had been abandoned.

This report examines the infrastructure that has collapsed, the consequences that are now visible, and the questions that decision-makers must face about whether this collapse was intentional strategy or accidental drift.

## PART ONE

# The Union Question

Advertising is the only major creative industry without a union.

In film and television, SAG-AFTRA enforces standards. Actors have minimum rates, pension contributions, apprenticeship structures, and protection against arbitrary dismissal. The Writers Guild enforces similar protections for screenwriters. Negotiated minimums, residuals, development pathways.

In music, unions protect musicians. In theatre, Equity protects performers. In design, there are collective bodies and standards bodies with real enforcement power.

Advertising has nothing equivalent.

D&AD exists. It is a respected membership organisation. But it is not a union. It cannot enforce standards. It cannot require apprenticeships. It cannot protect rates or ensure talent development. It can advocate. It cannot mandate.

*Without that structural protection, advertising built its own system. For nearly fifty years, that system worked.*

This distinction matters because unions don't just represent workers. They protect the infrastructure of the profession itself. They ensure that training isn't left to market forces. They ensure that junior roles exist, that mentorship is systematic, that the craft is passed on deliberately rather than by accident.

## PART TWO

# The Talent Pipeline Myth

The advertising industry operated on an unspoken assumption: talent would always be available. Junior creatives would emerge from portfolio schools. Agencies would develop them. The pipeline would sustain itself.

This was never written down. It was just believed.

That belief, the talent pipeline myth, allowed the industry to make decisions it might otherwise have questioned. It allowed agencies to stop investing in training. It allowed holding companies to treat junior development as a cost centre rather than a strategic asset. It allowed the moment of dismantling to happen without acknowledgement that something was being lost.

The myth was powerful because it was partially true. For decades, the pipeline did sustain itself. The Ogilvy School produced creatives. Portfolio schools fed the system. Agencies hired juniors, developed them, and promoted them. Some left to start their own agencies. The cycle continued.

*What looked like a natural system was actually a deliberately maintained one.*

The myth obscured a harder truth. The pipeline only worked because people were systematically investing in it. Once that investment stopped, the myth collapsed.

## What That Investment Looked Like

I spent six years at Ogilvy, from 2004 to 2009, based in Hong Kong. The training infrastructure was real then. Systematic, resourced, and considered a competitive advantage. Senior creatives mentored juniors. There were structures for development. The craft was being passed on deliberately.

A senior talent leader who remained at Ogilvy APAC through the mid-twenty-tens told me that the organisation had committed one percent of revenue, not profit, revenue, to training and development. This commitment ran from the mid-nineties through the early twenty-tens. It was a strategic choice. Ogilvy believed that developing the next generation of creatives was a holding company responsibility.

I then spent six years at WPP as Head of Talent Acquisition across APAC, based in Shanghai. My role was executive search. Recruiting senior creative and strategic talent across the region. That WPP had a dedicated senior executive search function at the regional level was itself a signal of the value placed on talent investment. The infrastructure existed to find, attract, and place top talent. The ecosystem that developed that talent upstream was still functioning.

Later, from 2014 to 2017, I led talent across McCann Worldgroup's entire region, based in Singapore. I had a senior training and development leader reporting directly to me. Her role was to design and deliver training and development programmes across the entire region. That role existed because McCann, at that time, considered talent development a strategic function requiring senior leadership.

By around 2014 to 2015, precisely when I was arriving at McCann, the systematic investment in training and development was being dismantled across the industry. The timing is not coincidental. It coincides with a period of cost pressure, holding company restructuring, and the beginning of the shift toward in-house creative capability.

Similar commitments existed elsewhere. Saatchi and Saatchi had training programmes. BBDO had structured ECD roles focused on development. Wieden and Kennedy built talent systematically. These were not outliers. They were the baseline.

*What happened to them?*

## Why The System Broke

The system broke for three interconnected reasons.

**First, cost pressure.** By the early twenty-tens, holding companies were under financial pressure. Training and development, with no direct revenue attribution, became a discretionary expense. The first instinct in a cost squeeze is to cut the things that don't show immediate ROI. Training and development got cut.

**Second, the shift toward in-house creative capability.** As marketing departments built internal creative teams, the holding companies' role changed. They were no longer the only place where creatives could be trained. Brands were hiring directly. The incentive to invest in systematic training at an agency level weakened.

**Third, and most critically, without a union to anchor the responsibility, there was no pressure to maintain the infrastructure.** A union would have negotiated training requirements, apprenticeship pathways, development standards. Advertising had no such guardrails. The moment it became convenient to stop investing, the investment stopped.

The absence of a union meant the absence of resistance. Training infrastructure, once dismantled, had no institutional defence.

## The Current Landscape

The consequences are now visible across multiple dimensions.

### **PORTFOLIO SCHOOLS HAVE CONTRACTED**

Miami Ad School, Watford, Creative Circus. The institutions that used to feed the pipeline with trained junior creatives have all shrunk significantly or repositioned. They are shadows of their former scale. The systematic intake of junior talent into the industry has declined accordingly.

### **AGENCY PROGRAMMES HAVE DISAPPEARED OR BECOME HOLLOW**

The Ogilvy School, Saatchi Mavericks, the WPP Fellowship (which paused in 2019 and has not been restarted in its original form), BBDO's ECD development programmes. These were the main mechanisms for systematic creative training. They are largely gone, or replaced by leaner programmes like WPP's NextGen Leaders and Creative Tech Apprenticeship that operate at a fraction of the scale.

What remains is thin. Omnicom University still exists. WPP Maestro still runs. But these programmes are focused on leadership and capability development for senior managers, not on developing junior creative craft. The WPP School of Marketing and Communications in Shanghai, launched with great intention in 2011, still exists on paper within the Shanghai Art and Design Academy, but has been effectively quiet since 2015. Nominally present, functionally absent.

Cannes Lions, once positioned as the annual gathering place where creatives could learn from each other and celebrate the craft, was acquired by Informa plc in October 2024 following Ascential's break-up. It is now corporate-owned and optimised for revenue generation, not craft development.

### **JUNIOR HIRING HAS COLLAPSED**

Data from the Bureau of Labor Statistics and recruitment tracking firms show that junior advertising and creative roles dropped seven percent year-on-year between 2024 and 2025. Entry-level positions are at their lowest levels since 2020. The apprentice system, the informal mechanism by which creatives used to move from junior to mid-level to senior, is broken.

Early-career workers in advertising-adjacent fields are experiencing a relative thirteen percent decline in employment compared to peers in less AI-exposed fields, according to Stanford's Digital Economies Lab. The pipeline is not just contracting. It is actively closing.

### **THE CRAFT IS BEING COMMODITISED**

Meanwhile, technology companies are moving aggressively into creative production. Canva allows non-designers to create marketing materials. WPP Open offers AI-driven creative tooling. Google and Netter are positioning generative AI as a creative capability. These are not neutral tools. They are explicitly designed to make creative work producible without creatives. The industry is passively allowing its core skill set to be commoditised because it is cheaper in the short term than investing in people.

## PART SIX

# The Indies (And What They Prove)

Against this backdrop, independent creative agencies have emerged and, in some cases, thrived. They are often cited as proof that the system works. That talented people will find a way, that the market will provide.

The indies that are succeeding are worth examining.

### UNITED STATES

#### **Greg Hahn — Mischief**

Hahn was Creative Vice Chairman of BBDO Worldwide and Chief Creative Officer of BBDO New York before founding Mischief in 2020, in the middle of a pandemic. Mischief is now Ad Age A-List number one agency. Exceptional talent, built in a holding company system, who left to start his own thing.

### HONG KONG / ASIA

#### **Alvin Lim — Good People Basically**

Lim is a founder and creative chairman with a track record built through holding company experience, now running an independent creative label that is gaining recognition across Asia.

### GLOBAL

#### **David Droga — Droga5 / Accenture Song**

Droga built his reputation as an ECD at Saatchi and Saatchi Singapore, then founded Droga5, which became one of the most awarded agencies in the world. Droga5 was acquired by Accenture in 2019. Droga served as CEO of Accenture Song from 2021 until September 2025, when he stepped down to become Vice Chair of Accenture, with Ndidi Oteh succeeding him as CEO. His trajectory shows a different model. Indie founded, scaled, then absorbed by a non-traditional player. Tech and consulting, not a holding company.

### AUSTRALIA

#### **Micah Walker — Bear Meets Eagle on Fire**

Walker spent five years as a creative director at Wieden and Kennedy Portland before launching Bear Meets Eagle on Fire in 2019. The agency is now award-winning and in-demand.

### AUSTRALIA, SCALING GLOBALLY

#### **Aden Hepburn — Akcelo**

Hepburn was co-CEO of VMLY&R before launching Akcelo in 2020 with fellow VMLY&R executives. Akcelo is scaling globally and winning major brand accounts.

These examples are real. These agencies are doing good work. These founders are talented.

*But they are exceptions, not a pipeline.*

Every single one of them was trained, developed, and built credibility inside a holding company or established agency system. They did not emerge from nowhere. They emerged from the system that is now collapsing. They are proof of what the system produced when it was working. Not proof that the system is no longer needed.

Crucially, none of them are building systematic junior training into their indie models at the scale that was once standard. That is partly because indie economics don't allow for it. It is also because the belief in the importance of systematic training has itself eroded. The myth of the self-generating talent pipeline has become the operating assumption.

## The Question

This is unsustainable.

In five years, the industry will not have a pipeline. The junior creatives who would have been trained a decade ago are not entering the profession. The mid-level creatives who would be developing juniors now do not exist. The senior creatives who should be mentoring the next generation are spread thin across independent agencies, in-house teams, and tech companies.

But there is a more interesting question underneath this one. Where is creative talent actually being developed now?

The answer is not in advertising. It is in the creator economy. Young creatives are building portfolios on YouTube, TikTok, Instagram. They are learning craft through direct audience feedback. They are building personal brands, monetising their own work, and developing followings without needing a traditional agency structure. The creator economy is where skill development is actually happening. It is where young people are choosing to build careers.

This represents both a loss and an opportunity.

The loss is advertising's. The industry dismantled its own training infrastructure without noticing that talent development was migrating elsewhere.

The opportunity belongs to creators. For the first time, a generation of creative talent is building skills and credibility outside of institutional structures entirely. They have leverage. They have audience. They have alternatives. And unlike advertising creatives before them, they have the chance to build collective structures, guilds, standards bodies, professional organisations, from the ground up, before they are absorbed or commoditised.

*Advertising's mistake was building training inside institutions that could dismantle it whenever cost pressure hit. The creator economy has a different path available.*

Build the collective structure first. Make it non-negotiable. Make it the condition of entry, not something negotiated afterwards.

The question for advertising decision-makers is whether they are actually okay with losing creative talent to a parallel economy, or whether they simply have not thought about it clearly.

The question for creators is whether they will learn from advertising's mistakes, or repeat them.

---

# TRIPITAKKA

EXECUTIVE SEARCH · LEADERSHIP ADVISORY

Tripitakka Pte Ltd · Singapore

[tripitakka.com](http://tripitakka.com) · [jeanmichel.wu@tripitakka.com](mailto:jeanmichel.wu@tripitakka.com)