

# **Adland's 'Brain Drain'**

An investigation into careers and talent management  
within UK advertising agencies

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## **Abstract**

This research investigates the loss of high performing executives from the advertising industry (Adland). The need for such a study started with the observation that many graduates from a key industry qualification were subsequently taking their knowledge and experience elsewhere, to the detriment of their advertising agency employers and the wider industry. In addition, a wider trend showed that the advertising agency sector is populated with a remarkably young demographic versus the general working population. This study's aim was therefore to investigate the career choices of advertising executives and the implications of these for talent management within Adland.

The overall aim was supported by a number of key objectives. These sought to gain an understanding of advertising careers by exploring executives' pre-entry expectations, the factors influencing movements between different agencies, and then the eventual move out of the industry.

The study adopted a qualitative grounded theory approach, given the absence of previously published academic work specific to advertising agencies. Primary data came from a series of seven semi-structured interviews with individuals who had left the industry to pursue their careers elsewhere. There were also two interviews with industry expert careers advisors which helped to validate the findings. Additional secondary data were also collected including industry reports, films, books and agency websites. These were used to provide context to the interviews and to enrich the findings and analysis.

The research found that expectations prior to working in advertising can often be left unfulfilled once people get their first job. The promise of excitement, glamour and creativity can be far removed from the more mundane reality of advertising work. Life in an agency can however provide inspiration and stimulation in the form of colleagues, learning, autonomy, variety and

leadership. The downside is that all these things can also have the opposite effect in their absence. The failure to meet expectations and the loss of these key aspects of work do lead to individuals leaving advertising. However, there are also more fundamental influences such as questioning the purpose and value of advertising and feeling a lack of professional pride and respect in one's work.

The study concludes that while talent management theory provides interesting models from an organisational perspective, they are largely redundant without deeper consideration of who this talent is, that is individuals with needs, expectations and values. The careers of these people are not there to be managed by organisations but to be understood from the perspective of their owners. In the context of advertising there are many specific issues with how people perceive their employment in the industry, and to what extent this is aligned with what they want from their work. Agencies would do well to recognise those traits that are best suited to advertising work, recruiting against these to ensure the future retention of appropriate talent in the industry.

# Contents

|  |     |
|--|-----|
| <b>1. Introduction</b>                         |     |
| 1.1 The personal context                       | 9   |
| 1.2 The industry context                       | 11  |
| <b>2. Literature review</b>                    |     |
| 2.1 Talent and talent management               | 17  |
| 2.2 Resources, talentship and careers          | 28  |
| 2.3 Careers                                    | 31  |
| 2.4 Talent and careers                         | 38  |
| 2.5 Generational values                        | 39  |
| 2.6 Summary discussion                         | 41  |
| <b>3. The natural history of this research</b> |     |
| 3.1 Introduction, aim and objectives           | 45  |
| 3.2 Philosophy and methodology                 | 46  |
| 3.3 Method                                     | 49  |
| 3.4 Analysis and further data collection       | 53  |
| <b>4. Findings &amp; analysis</b>              |     |
| 4.1 Introduction                               | 61  |
| 4.2 Pre-entry expectations                     | 62  |
| 4.3 The reality of advertising work            | 69  |
| 4.4 The best and worst of agency life          | 77  |
| 4.5 Professional pride and identity            | 88  |
| 4.6 Summary of findings                        | 98  |
| <b>5. Conclusions and recommendations</b>      |     |
| 5.1 Conclusions                                | 101 |
| 5.2 Recommendations                            | 108 |
| 5.3 Limitations and further research           | 111 |
| <b>References</b>                              | 115 |
| <b>Appendices</b>                              | 127 |



# **1. Introduction**



## 1.1 The personal context

60% of IPA Excellence Diploma graduates no longer work for their sponsor organisation, rising to 80% among those graduating before 2008.

(IPA, 2008a)

The focus of this study emerged while I was working at the Institute of Practitioners in Advertising (IPA), the trade body and professional institute for the UK advertising agency sector<sup>1</sup>. Through managing their top level professional qualification, the IPA Excellence Diploma (Diploma<sup>2</sup>), it became apparent that there was a problem with agencies retaining their delegates, either during or soon after their studies. Given the relatively high cost of £4,950 per delegate, there was a concern that enrolment numbers may be affected if agencies felt it was contributing to the loss of their people. The cost of the Diploma is also indirect as it lasts 15 months, thereby taking time and effort away from delegates' main agency work. Some of those gaining the qualification were also leaving the advertising industry (Adland<sup>3</sup>) altogether, a loss of talent in which a costly learning investment had been made. These were top performers who had undertaken efforts to develop themselves within the industry drive to increase the overall professionalism of the business.

I first examined whether the Diploma qualification was itself associated with higher than average levels of churn, as Simpson *et al* (2005) found with MBA graduates. This wasn't the case, but the issue of movement *within* and ultimately *out* of the industry still interested me. The skewed age profile of

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<sup>1</sup> 274 corporate members employing 19,077 people, accounting for 85% of UK advertising spend.

<sup>2</sup> For brevity the IPA Excellence Diploma will be referred to as the Diploma throughout this paper. It is a 15-month examined course taken by those with 4-8 years' agency experience.

<sup>3</sup> Adland is a common term used by those within the advertising industry to describe the collective of all agencies and those working for them.

Adland towards younger workers, and its consequences, seemed problematic and so the topic of talent management within advertising agencies was settled on. There was no published academic work on this topic within the specific context of advertising agencies and so an opportunity existed to undertake some original research. While reviewing the talent management literature a number of links emerged between this area of study and that of careers. The two fields overlap when considering how organisations can hold on to high performing staff, providing a direct link to my specific area of interest. This is discussed further in the literature review but first the issue under investigation needs a little more context.

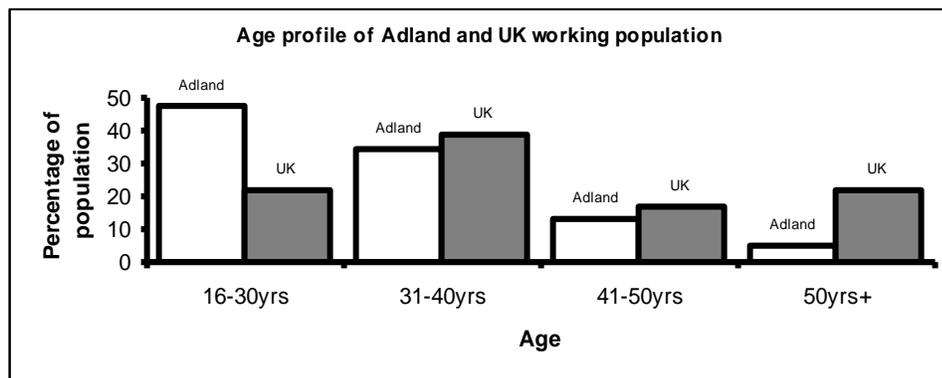
## 1.2 The industry context

The advertising business is a people business that needs to attract and retain the brightest and best talent to prosper.

*David Pattison, IPA President 2005-7 (IPA, 2006)*

### 1.2.1 Adland's 'brain drain'

Advertising agencies are notoriously competitive places for graduates to find work (Advertising Association, 2008a). Those landing their first jobs have usually invested considerable time and effort in doing so. One respondent in this research completed 17 agency application forms before securing a role. This determination to get in is then dramatically reversed as many leave to pursue employment elsewhere. Comparing *Social Trends* data (Office for National Statistics, 2008) with that of Adland (IPA, 2007a) reveals a stark contrast in relative age profiles. The mean age of the UK working population is 43.8 years, but in Adland it is just 33.4 years<sup>4</sup>. The following graph provides some detail.



**Figure 1** - Age profile of Adland and UK working population<sup>5</sup>

<sup>4</sup> Based on actual data covering the year 2006.

<sup>5</sup> Sources: Office for National Statistics, 2008 and IPA, 2007a.

These data would contrast even more if those aged 16-21 were removed, as most advertising executives are graduates and so few would be under 21 years old. However, they do show that the initial determination to get into Adland is then replaced by a desire to get out as executives approach their 30's and beyond. This is a retention issue on an industry scale which warrants investigation. The IPA undertook some research in 2006 which began to identify possible hypotheses for the existence of this trend and the impact it has on agencies and their clients:

For a range of reasons – burn-out, work/life balance, pressure on agency payrolls – agencies shed the over 40s relentlessly. This results in a massive loss of valuable experience and is a real cost to clients.

*Hamish Pringle, IPA Director General (IPA, 2006)*

The conclusions within this report were tentative at best, and one weakness was focussing on the views of those within the industry while failing to examine the experiences of those who had left. The issues of “*burn-out*” and “*work/life balance*” appear to be problematic for *individuals* rather than their agencies and so it could be suggested that agencies are *losing* rather than *shedding* their staff. However, the industry recognises that a problem exists and that something should be done about it. In the context of an ageing population (Office for National Statistics, 2008) this issue has even more relevance. With more people leaving the workforce than entering, an industry heavily reliant on younger staff will be affected sooner than those who employ an older age profile.

### **1.2.2 Industry churn**

This issue isn't confined to those leaving the industry altogether. There is also movement between agencies *within* Adland. Staff turnover, particularly in

knowledge sectors, is a more acute problem when staff have close client relationships and/or are lost to competitors (CIPD, 2008a). This combination is evident in Adland where client relationships are valuable and movement is often to other agencies. Turnover within UK advertising agencies is 18.2% (IPA, 2008b), slightly higher than the aggregated rate of labour turnover in the UK of 17.3% (CIPD, 2008c). Hadden (2003) estimated the direct and indirect costs of managing this industry churn in the region of £1.25m per year for large agencies. This represents over 3% of the mean gross profit of the top 20 agencies<sup>6</sup>, providing sound commercial reasons for understanding why people leave agencies and the industry.

### **1.2.3 Summary of issue**

There are therefore two strands to the same problem. First is that agencies face significant costs due to the rate of staff turnover *within* Adland. Second is that, following their determination to get into the business, many executives leave to pursue employment elsewhere. It is therefore worth investigating what research already exists that might be relevant to these challenges to see what can be learned and how this might inform the present study.

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<sup>6</sup> The mean gross profit of the top 20 agencies is £38m as reported in Merron (2007). These ranged between £14.7m and £101.6m.



## **2. Literature review**



## 2.1 Talent and talent management

In the unceasing quest to achieve a competitive edge, growing numbers of businesses around the world are turning to talent management...on the rationale that talented people need extra or different forms of interventions to ensure they join the organisation, stay for the appropriate time, and achieve their full potential.

*(Lubitsch et al, 2007: 5)*

This quote suggests that the emerging field of talent management will be a useful place to begin a review of the literature, given the focus on the retention of “*talented people*”. However, despite its recent popularity, the literature soon leads to questions over talent management’s apparent novelty and distinctness from other HR practices.

### 2.1.1 Against the vogue

The “*war for talent*”, coined by Michaels *et al* (2001), describes the situation organisations face due to environmental factors including changing demographics, globalisation, labour shortages and a shifting power base within the employment relationship (Boudreau & Ramstad, 2005; Lubitsh *et al*, 2007; Schoemaker & Jonker, 2005). The war is being fought for ever more scarce “*talent*”: capable and exceptional employees (Michaels *et al*, 2001). Talent management is then the tactics employed by organisations in fighting this war (Brittain, 2007; Lubitsh *et al*, 2007; McCauley & Wakefield, 2006). This need to manage talent was recently ranked as *the* critical challenge facing HR professionals across Europe (Berry, 2007), perhaps rallied by the calls to arms implied by these descriptions. However, it isn’t entirely clear what is meant by talent and if it can be managed.

Lewis & Heckman (2006) critique some of the more vogueish accounts of talent management describing them as simply a “*re-branding*” of traditional HR and workforce planning, or a less than strategic approach to performance management. They highlight the failure by its advocates to sufficiently ground talent management within empirical research and move forward from established bodies of work, thereby negating the concept of talent management as anything meaningful and new. For example, Cappelli (2008) suggests that talent management could borrow from developments in supply-chain management, broadly akin to conceptions of talent management as workforce planning. On the other hand Lubitsch *et al* (2007) and Michaels *et al* (2001) align talent management with the recruitment and retention of high performing staff, therefore not sufficiently distinct from the existing HR practice of performance management. There is some evidence that talent management is simply a fashionable term, existing in the category of “*trendy ideas versus more meaningful research paradigms*” (Bentley, 2008). In response to these concerns Lewis & Heckman (2006) propose a model of *strategic* talent management based on the work of Barney (1991) and Boudreau & Ramstad (2005).

### **2.1.2 The resource based view**

Barney’s (1991) resource based view of organisational strategy provides a useful build to Porter’s (1980, 1985) models. He argues that these models fail to account for differences between firms and the unique competitive advantages these can bring. It is a firm’s internal resources that enable it to pursue a strategy and, therefore, some strategies are only available to certain firms by virtue of their available resources. When these resources are valuable, rare,

imperfectly imitable and non substitutable<sup>7</sup> they provide the organisation in possession of them with the opportunity to create sustained competitive advantage by pursuing strategies dependant on these resources (Barney, 1991).

Barney (1991, 2001) fails to address the assumption implicit in his model that organisations would wish to pursue the same strategy. It is not inconceivable that firm A has the resources required to execute a cost strategy but elects to follow a quality route because it *perceives* this to be the most profitable in the long term (which may or may not be the case). In this situation, although firm B does not have valuable, rare, imperfectly imitable and non substitutable resources, it can gain sustained competitive advantage by pursuing a cost strategy because firm A has opted not to do so. Many sectors provide examples of firms pursuing different strategies<sup>8</sup>, although it isn't always apparent if other strategies are prevented by their internal resources.

Lewis & Heckman (2006) focus on human resources and how they bring sustained competitive advantage in themselves or in their ability to create other resources (teams, research, patents for example). This approach frames talent management in the context of unique and advantageous business strategies, and elevates it to more than a repackaging of HR. One example from earlier work by Prietula & Simon (1989) is employees described as “*experts*” who meet Barney’s requirements for resources. Considering employees, teams and wider cultural factors in this way allows organisations, *in theory*, to identify the unique human

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<sup>7</sup> Value in resources is derived from their ability to contribute to execution of strategy. Rarity of resources is where they are not possessed by large numbers of competitors or potential competitors. Imperfectly imitable resources are those which are either difficult or impossible for competitors to replicate. Non substitutable resources are those whose value cannot be mirrored by some other equally valuable resource (Barney, 1991).

<sup>8</sup> The retail sector would provide one example where Waitrose follow a quality based strategy versus ASDA’s price focussed approach. Both organisations gain sustained competitive advantage relative to each other but only in specific consumer segments.

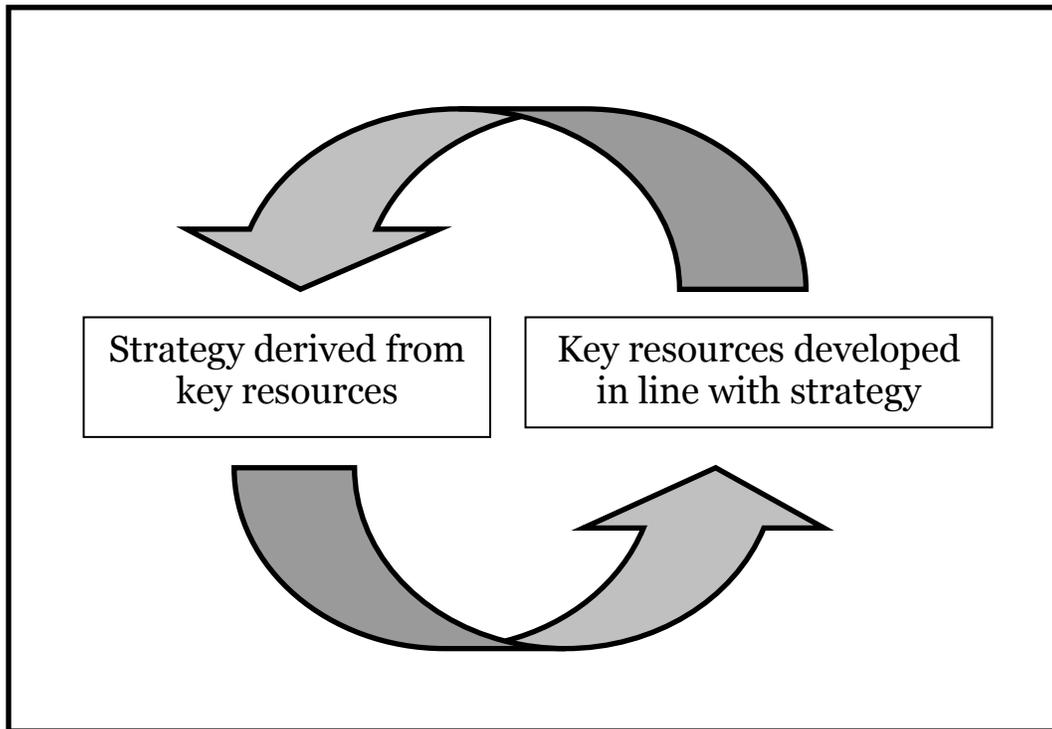
resources they possess and the strategies they enable. Once identified, these people become the organisation's 'talent resources'<sup>9</sup>, in other words those people who are valuable, rare, imperfectly imitable and non substitutable.

### **2.1.3 The resource based view and strategic human resource development**

Building on this resource based view, Garavan (2007) identifies strategic human resource development (SHRD) as contributing to "*firm-specific knowledge and skill when it is aligned with the strategic goals of the organisation*" (Garavan, 2007: 11). Whereas Barney (1991) derives strategy from the available resources, Garavan (2007) suggests that knowledge and skills are developed to execute identified strategy. There is therefore a debate over which has primacy, the resources or the strategy, and which informs the other. The reality is perhaps an ongoing cyclical relationship where strategy is identified that exploits specific resources and these resources are then developed to better execute the strategy and so on... (See figure 2).

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<sup>9</sup> Author's terminology.



**Figure 2** – Relationship between resource based view and strategic HRD  
 (based on Barney, 1991 and Garavan, 2007)

In the context of talent, Garavan’s approach would appear to be far more practical than that of Barney, as the resource based view assumes it is possible to identify resources of strategic importance. For example, classifying a supermarket’s superior distribution network as a resource may be relatively straight forward. However, doing so for *human* resources would require intimate knowledge of competitors’ and one’s own, in order to ascertain whether they meet the necessary criteria. Without this knowledge it becomes futile to start pursuing strategies given that these may, for example, be easily replicable. Barney’s (1991) model, while theoretically robust, faces the challenge of practical application in the context of human resources. Without resolving this problem it is difficult to see how organisations can make use of his theory. However, Lewis & Heckman (2006) propose that future studies adopt such a framework in order

to provide a more robust empirical grounding for the emerging discipline of talent management. Without doing so, they argue, talent management will continue in its failure to differentiate itself as it continues to rely on anecdote and hearsay as evidence.

#### **2.1.4 Talent management in advertising**

Within this debate over how talent and resources are identified and managed it is worth briefly reflecting on how this might relate to Adland. There is no academic work published on the subject of talent management within Adland, perhaps reflecting the relatively small size of the industry and the agencies within it<sup>10</sup>. It is therefore difficult to ascertain whether the models presented are being used. However, some work by the global headhunting firm Kendall Tarrant (2001) found that only two thirds of large agencies (over 250 employees) had a dedicated HR function, typically concerned with administrative duties, while only 18% had board level representation for HR. These figures compare unfavourably with those for the wider private sector where, among organisations of 1,000 employees or less, there is a mean ratio of HR staff to wider employees of 1:73<sup>11</sup> (DLA Piper, 2008). It is also worth noting that, in 2007, barely half the membership of the IPA met the required minimum standards for CPD<sup>12</sup>,

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<sup>10</sup> The industry employs 19,077 staff with the mean number per agency being 65.6 (IPA, 2008b). The mean fails to demonstrate the split between a small number of larger agencies of 250 or more employees and a large number of very small agencies of less than 25 employees.

<sup>11</sup> The ratio for private sector organisations over 1,000 employees is 1:110 and, for small and large organisations in the public sector, 1:68 and 1:88 respectively (DLA Piper, 2008).

<sup>12</sup> The CPD scheme operated by the IPA is focussed at a corporate rather than an individual level, in contrast to most other professional bodies. Accreditation is awarded to agencies that are able to demonstrate: linkages between business plans and training plans; inductions provided to all new employees; at least annual performance reviews and development planning; 16 hours of learning activity per staff member per year.

although this figure has seen year on year increases since 2004. So, although things have improved (Budd, 2007), Adland still lacks sophistication in its approach to HR and people management. Two industry experts interviewed as part of this study raised this very issue directly:

Advertising is way behind the rest of the world...unsophisticated in its people management...slow to change...generally speaking it has a very low quality of HR.

*Industry Expert (1)*

Given this current status of HR within the industry it is unlikely that advanced theoretical models such as the resource based view are moving the talent management debate forward in Adland. It seems that Adland might best approach talent management by focussing on the recruitment and retention of high performers, as advocated by Lubitsch *et al* (2007) and Michaels *et al* (2001). It is these high performers which can be most closely approximated to being resources within Adland. They are also likely to hold key client relationships of great importance to their agency employers.

### **2.1.5 High performers in Adland**

The identification of high performers in Adland is evident within the selection of people to attend industry training. Average training spend in advertising agencies is £492 per person per year (IPA, 2007b), almost double that of the wider private sector at £273 (CIPD, 2007). This is consistent with Garavan's (2007) observation that innovative firms tend to invest more in this area. However these investments aren't evenly distributed, with only 'high performers' or 'future stars' attending. For example, the Diploma, at £4,950, represents a tenfold increase in investment in one person. Selection for such a course such is

likely to be based on some assessment of ‘talent’ rather than being a remedial intervention to address a performance issue. A corollary is that agencies making such investments must also be hoping to retain these individuals.

### **2.1.6 Talentship and decision science**

The second influence on Lewis & Heckman’s (2006) model of strategic talent management is Boudreau & Ramstad’s (2005) decision science of “*talentship*”. This derives from the differences noted between the professional practice of a discipline and the “*decision science*” that follows from this. The two core distinctions provided along these lines are between accounting (professional practice) and finance (decision science) on one hand and, on the other, sales and marketing. Where the professional practice is a necessary precursor to the decision science, it is the decision science which facilitates effective decision making inside and outside of the specialist department. The decision science can be taught and therefore employed by all managers, not just functional specialists (*ibid*).

Boudreau & Ramstad (2005) consider three core markets that organisations operate in: financial; customer/product; talent. Where finance and marketing provide decision science models for the first two, HR hasn’t moved beyond professional practice to develop its own decision science for talent. Doing so, they argue, would provide the discipline with the strategic role it craves and also allow this decision science to permeate through organisations, supporting and structuring managers’ decisions about talent (just as finance and marketing have enabled managers to take strategic decisions in *their* realms). HR is at an “*inflection point*”, beginning to develop a decision science which they label “*talentship*” (*ibid*).

The model proposed by Boudreau & Ramstad (2005) enables an evaluation of talent investment decisions along three “*anchor points*”. These are questions to be asked about investments in pools of talent (pools can be defined by job functions or cross functional attributes such as ‘client facing’ or ‘managers’). First is “*impact*”, the extent to which strategic success is influenced by “*improving the quality or availability of a particular talent pool*”. Second is “*effectiveness*”, to what extent an investment will “*affect the capacity and actions of employees in talent pools*”. Last is “*efficiency*”, how much “*HR program and process activity*” investments can deliver (*ibid*: 22-23). Therefore, an investment should be made if it will effectively and efficiently deliver quality and improvement to a talent pool that will have a strategic impact.

### **2.1.7 Problems with talent investment decisions**

As with Barney’s (1991) resource based view, the practical application of Boudreau & Ramstad’s (2005) theoretical model is less than straightforward. It depends on the ability of HR and managers to identify talent pools where impact can be achieved and then make investment decisions about the effectiveness and efficiency of HR initiatives that could contribute. However, *in theory*, the benefit is HR activity focussed on areas of strategic importance, where impact can be achieved.

This notion of talent investments is grounded in a very functionalist approach to the management of human resources. It relies on the assumption that there are clear causal relationships between HR activity and performance improvements. However, isolating and verifying such relationships, if they exist at all, may require more resources than the implementation of the investments themselves. Investments in learning and development would be one example where an evaluation challenge exists. Taking a functionalist approach would suggest

looking only for financial or performance measures resulting from the investments, whereas learning and development can serve other less explicit purposes. An area such as management development can be considered in terms of reinforcing cultural values, exerting disciplinary control over employees or promoting and maintaining the identity of managers within an organisation (Mabey & Finch-Lees 2008). These alternative ways of perceiving management development activity would fail to fit within this model of “*talentship*” and the functional approach it takes.

### **2.1.8 Talentship in Adland**

Considering talent investments at an industry level it is worth looking again at the learning and development provided for Adland by the IPA. The most high profile is the IPA 7 Stages programme, a series of residential courses focussed on core craft skills for those at differing levels of experience<sup>13</sup>. These are relatively expensive courses and not all executives will be enrolled. The question is assessing these investments against the concept of talentship. Although many IPA courses develop skills in advertising strategy and client servicing, they also operate beyond this functional level, signifying individuals considered to be the brightest and the best. Given their exclusivity, agency budget holders must make decisions about who will and won't be attending these courses. These courses therefore serve a symbolic as well as educational function, identifying the most valued individuals within agencies. This symbolic role would be challenging to evaluate within a functionalist framework.

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<sup>13</sup> The IPA 7 Stages are loosely conceived around the notion of the seven stages of man. They seek to offer development for advertising executives at key stages from graduate trainee through to managing director. They are not mandatory and it is rare to find someone who has been on each stage, typically people will do two or three across a number of years within Adland.

In recent years the IPA has also developed a series of professional qualifications. These involve more extended periods of study (up to 15 months) and require delegates to invest significant portions of their own time and effort. These qualifications *also* serve a purpose beyond what is learned. They are part of an effort to confer a level of professionalism on the work of advertising executives with a long-term aim of gaining greater respect and remuneration from clients. This may arise both from the learning undertaken but also the “*badging*” (Bell *et al*, 2002) that the qualifications provide for those who have completed them. There would be a significant challenge involved in isolating the effect of the qualifications on respect and remuneration and, at an agency level, this effect may not be realised until long after the initial investments were made. It may be that investments in these qualifications also serve a primarily symbolic function akin to that described for the 7 Stages courses.

## **2.2 Resources, talentship and careers**

Talent management is about influencing the movement of targeted individuals or groups that you need to retain and develop for current and/or future business success.

*(Mercer, 2007: 5)*

### **2.2.1 Linking talent and careers**

At a theoretical level a talent resource<sup>14</sup> might be identified within Barney's (1991) model. This may be an individual, team or department. A strategic decision is then taken to invest in HRD for this resource (Boudreau & Ramstad, 2005). This not only increases the capability of the resource to execute strategy but also adds to its strategic value to the organisation. There are some clear implications that emerge when considering the management of such 'talent resources' within organisations.

The cost of losing a strategically important talent resource is huge, especially if lost to a competitor. A direct cost also results through the loss of strategic HRD investments. Therefore any attempt to implement strategic talent management, as described, requires a parallel focus on the employment paths, or careers, of these talent resources in order to retain them and their contribution to organisational strategy. Managing talent in this sense is essentially concerned with managing careers and ensuring that these remain within the organisation or industry rather than elsewhere. This conclusion arises from the purely

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<sup>14</sup> From the earlier discussion a 'talent resource', as defined by the author, is any individual or group of individuals within an organisation who meet Barney's (1991) criteria for organisational resources. That is they are valuable, rare, imperfectly imitable and non substitutable.

theoretical premises within the earlier discussion and therefore needs further development in the specific context of talent management in Adland.

### **2.2.2 Reframing in the context of Adland**

It has been suggested that identifying talent resources is far from straight forward, especially in Adland. It was also noted that talent investments fail to account for other meanings that can be ascribed to learning and development (Mabey & Finch-Lees, 2008), in particular industry courses for which key individuals are ‘cherry picked’ to take part. However, the link between talent management and careers still holds relevance and the argument can be reframed in the context of Adland.

Within the industry there are individuals who, according to their agencies, are high performers, perhaps with strong client relationships. These evaluations of performance may vary in validity and robustness but they form part of the existing approach to talent management in Adland. This talent is therefore important to agencies and Adland in general. Subsequently, investments are made in recognising and developing this talent in order to improve its capability. Here is a set of people recognised as the best in the industry receiving a disproportionate share of agency learning and development investments. Therefore agencies, and the industry, should be focussing on the careers of this important set of advertising practitioners in order to retain them and their contributions. The costs of losing them to competitors, or from the industry completely, are both direct, in terms of the investments made, and indirect, in terms of the experience, knowledge and client relationships that they have (CIPD 2008a, c; Hadden, 2003).

Supporting this conclusion it is worth noting that the top reasons people leave organisations are directly linked to what might be described as career factors<sup>15</sup>. Organisations therefore need to develop strategies to avert these issues by focussing on the careers of their talent and how they can be understood and developed. Research into careers will now be reviewed to see if this might offer some insights into this challenge.

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<sup>15</sup> The four key reasons for employee turnover in the CIPD (2008c) report are Change of career (55%), Promotion outside the organisation (45%), Level of pay (41%) and Lack of development or career opportunities (33%). Clearly, given the figures quoted, these reasons often exist in conjunction, such as Promotion outside the organisation alongside Level of pay.

## 2.3 Careers

When my children grow up I don't want them to have a job, I want them to have a career.

*Tony Blair*<sup>16</sup>

The concept of career has evolved significantly since Wilensky's (1961) notion of advancement through increasingly prestigious levels of employment. Debates now exist concerning the location of careers (organisationally versus individually situated), their underlying drivers and the manner in which individuals and society construct them. Cohen & El-Sawad (2006) argue that these debates originate from the backgrounds of those involved in careers research and their approach to the subject, be that sociological, psychological or otherwise. These differing approaches fundamentally affect the ways in which careers are researched, described and theorised.

### 2.3.1 Protean careers

A recent trend within the careers literature is the emergence of “*protean careers*” (Hall, 1996) or “*post entrepreneurial careers*” (Kanter, 1989). Despite the varying terminology these models emphasise the move towards greater individualisation of careers. A protean career is:

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<sup>16</sup> This quote appears in Cohen & El-Sawad (2006: 278) with the full citation from that book given as “*Prime Minister Tony Blair on a visit to the Sheffield Job Centre, Sheffield Star, 5 February 1998, p.1. Cited in Mallon, 1998, p.48*”. Mallon (1998) is listed in the full references of this paper.

A career that is driven by the person, not the organization, and that will be reinvented by the person from time to time, as the person and the environment change.

(Hall, 1996: 8)

This shifting of careers outside of organisational contexts has been driven by requirements for greater labour flexibility and the subsequent erosion of so called 'jobs for life' (Hall, 1996; Kanter, 1989; Viney & Adamson, 1997). The career boundaries, or "*containing socials structures*" (Braude, 1975, in Currie *et al*, 2006), which organisations once provided have been gradually removed, making individuals increasingly responsible for their own careers. This has led to the emergence of the concept of "*employability*", where individuals need to be self-sufficient within the job market, continually investing in their own development, thus maintaining their value to existing and future employers (Clarke & Patrickson, 2008; Viney & Adamson, 1997). Hall (1996) emphasises "*self awareness*" and "*personal responsibility*" as individual traits required for protean careers. Added to this is the capability of meta-learning, or "*learning how to learn*", enabling individuals to develop themselves, increasing their employability and chances of success (*ibid*). Some authors have attempted to evaluate the impact these factors have on career satisfaction, for example identifying "*proactive personality*" as a key trait (Barnett & Bradley, 2007).

### **2.3.2 A critical perspective**

More critical authors examine these features of careers from a Foucauldian perspective, suggesting that the construct of 'career' is a mechanic which promotes the exertion of self-discipline in order to meet organisational requirements. McKinlay (2002) considered hierarchical organisationally-bounded careers in the context of a Scottish bank in the early 1900's. He

observed that the promise of careers within the bank provided a systematic way of regulating and controlling the behaviour of a dispersed workforce running local branches. Grey (1994) broadens the scope and looks at the occupationally-bounded careers of accountants, concluding that these consist of a similar ongoing regulation of behaviour while also emphasising the encroachment of career into personal life. These analyses are concerned with organisations and occupations respectively. Fournier then approaches the issue in more general terms by considering careers as ongoing personal projects, designed to ensure that individuals manage their own development so that they “*turn both themselves and their organizations into winners*” (1998: 56). Perhaps the self-disciplinary behaviours observed have moved beyond organisational and occupational boundaries to operating at a higher societal level.

These critical analyses suggest that individuals must constantly maintain their value to the organisation, while the organisation only demonstrates commitment insofar as this value is being realised. What is presented as something empowering to the individual could be seen as quite the opposite. Within the previous discussion on talent management it is questionable whether delegating *all* responsibility for careers is beneficial to organisations. O’Donnell *et al* argue that the “*pervasiveness of employability as a concept in career development benefits the interests of capital*” (2006: 8), whereas, in the case of talent, there could be benefits to developing careers within organisational boundaries, rather than allowing them to become increasingly transient in nature.

### **2.3.3 Careers and the individual**

This discussion has so far considered careers within the context of employment and this is broadly consistent with the definition of Greenhaus *et al*, “*the pattern of work-related experiences that span the course of a person’s life*” (2000: 9).

Scally & Hopson (1999) would broaden “*work-related experience*” to include voluntary, learning and other experiences beyond paid work. However, even this broader definition only recognises what can be described as the “*external career*”, those components “*which are publicly accessible and defined external to the person*” (Hay & Hodgkinson, 2006: 109). The discussion about protean careers and the dismantling of organisational boundaries only exists within the context of these visible and observable components of careers. It is also the external elements which have underpinned many definitions of ‘successful’ careers, attempting to equate these with measures of salary, promotions and other forms of advancement through organisations (Hay & Hodgkinson, 2006; McDonald & Hite, 2008). Goffman observed that there is more to careers than these externally accessible features, describing the notion of “*two-sidedness*” (1961: 127):

One side is linked to the internal matters held dearly and closely, such as image of self and felt identity; the other side concerns official position, jural position and style of life and is part of a publicly accessible institutional complex.

(Goffman, 1961: 127)

This observation implies that it isn’t possible to describe any career as categorically successful or otherwise, because to do so would fail to account for the perspective of the person in question (*ibid*). It is through considering the individual in more detail that a better understanding can be reached about careers and the ways in which they are perceived and valued at a personal level.

### **2.3.4 Internal careers**

Hay & Hodgkinson define the internal career as “*a person’s subjective idea about work and life, and his or her role within it*” (2006: 110). This notion originated through the work of Edgar Schein and, in his more recent work, he re-examines his eight “*career anchors*” within the context of the emerging protean landscape. These anchors are the “*self-concept...that holds their internal career together*” (Schein, 1996: 80) and are considered to be relatively stable over time. They are the abilities, values and motives which ultimately govern individual decision making when faced with choices about one’s life, including one’s career. Understanding these anchors and their influence over career choices may offer one way of developing strategies for managing talent within organisations as focus can be directed towards the fundamental internal drivers. However, it is worth noting that Schein’s work was biased towards highly educated men and, as a result, his results concerning the relative numbers of people aligned with each anchor may not be generally applicable (Cohen & El-Sawad, 2006). What it does allow is consideration of the totality of careers by adding understanding of internal factors to those existing outside of individuals and therefore the diverse influences that drive career decisions. This can be described as a “*holistic perspective*” (*ibid*: 288).

### **2.3.5 The holistic perspective**

Adopting a more holistic perspective requires careful examination of how the internal aspects of careers interact with organisations. Arnold & Davey (1994) and CIPD (2006) report the importance of long-term career prospects among graduates but the meanings ascribed to ‘career prospects’ will vary from one graduate to the next. If organisationally bounded careers are not on offer then a balancing act is required between fulfilling this need among potential recruits

while being wary of “*selling*” too much or being “*overly optimistic*” (Greenhaus *et al*, 2000: 160). This frames the issue in the context of the psychological contract and the ways in which career expectations are fostered and managed by organisations (Herriot, 1992). One approach is to focus on the learning and development that people will receive and the transferable skills that will result from this. However, this presents a dilemma for employers as “*increasing their marketability creates the danger that they will leave*” (Viney & Adamson, 1997: 185). There is a paradox evident here considering that learning and development investments are one of the top interventions taken by organisations to address staff turnover (CIPD, 2008c).

One way of organisations better coping with the new career landscape is developing understanding of the notion of “*psychological success*”:

The ultimate goal of the career is psychological success, the feeling of pride and personal accomplishment that comes from achieving one’s most important goals in life, be they achievement, family happiness, inner peace or something else.

(Hall, 1996: 8)

This suggests that the things people seek from careers and what they ultimately gain satisfaction and feelings of success from are “*individualistic, multi-dimensional and dynamic*” (McDonald & Hite, 2008: 101). Values and motives develop as a result of schooling, the influences of friends and family and also exposure to employment contexts (Malach-Pines & Yafe-Yanai, 2001; Schein, 2004). The ways that psychological success can be achieved will vary to the same extent “*as there are unique human needs*” (Hall, 1996: 8). However, organisations ignore at their peril those personally important things that drive people in the careers, the things that are close to their heart. Where careers once defined a route to the boardroom they are now defined by individuals and the things they hold dear. Failure to understand this could result in employers

losing out on two counts, first the loss of long-term commitment from employees due to the erosion of organisationally bounded careers and, second, the loss of talent through ignorance of their values, needs and motives.

## 2.4 Talent and careers

The fundamental question underlying talent management is who is responsible for career management; the individual or the organisation.

*(Lubitsh et al, 2007: 22)*

This brings together the two strands of literature reviewed so far. In the context of talented individuals within organisations, especially where HRD investments have been made, it is imperative that attention is given to the careers of those individuals concerned. Failure to do so runs the risk of losing talent to competitors and other industries. This ‘brain drain’ is costly and perhaps unnecessary if organisations can work to better understand their talent and the ways in which they view and value their careers. Perhaps the question isn’t *who* is responsible but *how* mutual understanding and responsibility can be fostered for both organisational and individual benefit.

Influencing movement and containing it within organisations is only possible through better understanding the values, needs and motives of key talent. Gaining such understanding may begin to answer the view that “*HRD needs a new and invigorated approach to career development*” (Hite & McDonald, 2008: 4). The protean landscape requires individually tailored career development to, “*be more responsive to diverse individual...needs*” (*ibid*: 4). How this understanding of individual needs is reached is difficult to ascertain. It may be through investigating individual “*anchors*” (Schein, 1996), or it might be possible to develop other diagnostics to foster the types of understanding required. What isn’t clear is exactly what knowledge is required and whether this might vary across industries and professions.

## 2.5 Generational values

McDonald & Hite (2008) suggest that careers researchers might investigate how changing values across generations affect perceptions of careers. There is a growing literature attempting to demonstrate how wider social influences result in differing values, how the times in which people grow up in shape their outlook on life and work (Raines, 2003). The labelling of generations is far from precise but this body of work observes that those born in the last 30 years now constitute a significant portion of the workforce and suggests that this presents organisations with new and challenging management problems (CIPD, 2008b; Eisner, 2005; Loughlin & Barling, 2001; Raines, 2003; Yeaton, 2008). These challenges result from the differences between the 'Baby Boomers' and 'Generation X' that preceded this group and what have been labelled 'Generation Y' and the 'Millennials'. Eisner (2005) asserts that some of the key shifts occurring relate to increased valuing of home and family, less importance attached to making money and a greater social consciousness among those from Generation Y.

There are clearly implications for employers if these characteristics become more prevalent. One example would be the decreasing appeal of employment relationships based on the exchange of high salaries in return for long hours. Another would be the need for organisations to examine the social impact of their activities in order to better meet the expectations of their existing and future employees. This second example also presents a challenge for organisations in terms of managing customer or consumer relationships as Generation Y increases in economic power and influence.

Ascribing attributes to entire generations is clearly problematic as this fails to account for the variety and diversity that exists within such broad cross-sections of society. It is also clear that this labelling is directed at predominantly western

societies and so whether similar observations would apply in other parts of the world is not known. However, these authors note that the changes happening are trends rather than universally applicable statements and so have some utility for organisations employing significant numbers of staff from this generation. This is particularly relevant to Adland given the age demographic described earlier. With nearly half the industry under the age of 30 it would seem that if there is evidence of shifting values and changing characteristics it may be found in Adland.

## 2.6 Summary discussion

So far there has been an examination of the issue faced by agencies in Adland in retaining industry talent beyond the age of 30. This was framed in a strategic and commercial context by highlighting the direct and indirect costs of losing pivotal talent and the benefits of retaining it. Although it was acknowledged that existing talent management practices within Adland are less than sophisticated, it was suggested that knowledge of high performers can be inferred through their selection for high cost industry training and qualifications.

Having gained a perspective on *who* is considered to be industry talent, there was an examination of *how* their retention might be facilitated by agencies. It was concluded that agencies must take an interest in the careers of this group to ensure a lengthy stay within the industry. However, the research into careers suggests that these are more than just a sequence of job roles. Instead they are a complex interaction of internal and external factors, and are highly personal in nature. In fact, any conception of career that fails to account for individual values, needs and motives fails to reach any useful understanding. Only by gaining insights into these personal aspects of careers can organisations hope to influence the directions in which individuals decide to go and attempt to offer organisationally-bounded careers for this key talent.

Within Adland, in light of the skewed age profile, it is questionable whether organisationally-bounded careers, or 'jobs for life', ever existed in the first place. There are occasional references to people remaining within the industry until retirement (Campaign, 2008a) but one of the problems this research is aiming to examine is why advertising executives choose to shift their careers outside of the boundaries of Adland and the agencies within it. It may be that Adland has been experiencing protean careers for some time and might therefore offer a

useful place to understand how and why individuals choose to shift the boundaries within which their careers exist.

This focus on the individuality of careers might also benefit from understanding wider social trends that may impact on individual values. Perhaps, given the age profile of Adland, there might also be evidence of the traits of 'Generation Y' within the careers of advertising executives.

### **3. The natural history of this research**



### **3.1 Introduction, aim and objectives**

Silverman proposes a “*Natural History Chapter*” (2005: 305) for qualitative researchers to describe their research methodology. Doing so provides space to explore the twists and turns of the research experience by presenting it as a journey throughout which decisions have been taken and problems have been encountered. This study wasn’t free from problems and didn’t proceed in a linear fashion and so this approach (*ibid*) seems appropriate.

It is first worth considering what this research set out to achieve. The aim emerged directly from the observations made about executives moving within and eventually out of Adland and was situated in the context of externally observable career choices. Specific objectives then provided some key dimensions through which these choices would be investigated. Meeting these objectives would develop understanding of advertising careers and the implications of these for talent management within the industry. The aim and objectives were:

#### **Aim**

To investigate the career choices of advertising executives and the implications of these for talent management within Adland.

#### **Objectives**

1. To understand the career expectations of individuals joining Adland.
2. To understand the factors leading to individuals moving from one agency to another within Adland.
3. To understand the factors that lead people to leave Adland and pursue careers elsewhere.

## 3.2 Philosophy and methodology

We don't see things as they are, we see them as we are.

*Anaïs Nin*<sup>17</sup>

### 3.2.1 Philosophical orientation

The research problem of this study was established with support from many positivist sources, large scale surveys such as *Social Trends* and the *IPA Census*. These gave context to the problem and why it warranted investigation. However, they didn't provide insights into how individuals view careers and make decisions as a result, something fundamental to the aim of this research. The challenge of gaining such insights through positivist means rests in the assumption that studies of human phenomena can proceed in the same way as the natural sciences, through objective measurement and hypothesis testing. However, people are profoundly different in nature from protons, plants and planets. People interpret their experiences of the world, make judgements and hold values which these other physical entities do not. Trying to understand people and their actions therefore requires a different type of investigation, one that accepts the complexities of human actions and how these are interpreted.

The careers literature itself adopts positivist<sup>18</sup> and phenomenological<sup>19</sup> positions, highlighting differences in how researchers treat the topic. Some view careers

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<sup>17</sup> Unfortunately I have only come across this quote in other texts and so do not have the full original reference for it. It is from one of the seven volumes of *The Diary of Anaïs Nin* published by Harcourt Publishers Ltd.

<sup>18</sup> For example, Arnold & Davey, 1994; Barnett & Bradley, 2007; De Vos *et al*, 2008; Guthrie *et al*, 1998; Herriot, 1992; Kanter, 1989.

<sup>19</sup> For example, Currie *et al*, 2006; Hay & Hodgkinson, 2006; McDonald & Hite, 2008; Viney & Adamson, 1997.

and career success as quantifiable through objective measures, whereas others believe that careers are highly subjective in nature and only experienced by, and knowable to, individuals. The latter position was adopted within this research as it sought to understand the personal factors influencing advertising executives' career decisions. Taking this position facilitated understanding of the individual constructions of careers, shedding light onto the central issue of why people eventually move away from Adland. While the research proceeded along these lines it didn't ignore evidence from positivist sources, instead incorporating this as secondary data within the phenomenological format of the study.

### **3.2.2 Methodology**

Given the lack of prior research into careers and talent management in Adland, this study needed to develop new knowledge. The grounded theory approach of Glaser & Strauss (1967) was selected as this is "*commonly used to generate theory where little is already known*" (Goulding, 2002: 42). This study is therefore an attempt to build knowledge of advertising careers from empirical foundations given the lack of existing research in this area. It has done this through seeking out relevant data and using this to develop the findings and subsequent conclusions.

Grounded theory was an appealing approach for this research, although it wasn't applied in its purest form. While the research didn't set out to test pre-determined hypotheses it nonetheless found evidence relevant to some of the theoretical models encountered in the existing literature. Rather than ignore this evidence and its relevance, opportunities were taken to develop existing theory, often within the specific context of Adland. For example, discovering the existence of protean careers in Adland was both relevant to existing theory but also led to conclusions of interest in the context of advertising agencies. There

are other examples such as this where the present study supported or challenged existing theory. However, new knowledge was also developed about particular aspects of careers in advertising and how these are constructed and influenced. This is where the data drives the theory as suggested by Glaser & Strauss (1967).

A limitation of the approach is that the knowledge obtained through this research is mainly substantive (Glaser & Straus, 1967), specific to the advertising industry, and cannot be assumed to hold relevance beyond this. However, formal grounded theory is usually developed once some substantive theory is in place (*ibid*). The present study is then an initial step towards achieving formal grounded theory but, in itself, only reaches the substantive stage.

## 3.3 Method

### 3.3.1 Research subjects

The graduates from the Diploma qualification were selected as the focus of this research for a number of reasons. First was that they represented people rated highly by their agencies, as evidenced by their investment in the qualification. Subsequently, they are people that their agencies wouldn't want to lose. Second was that this group were at the age when the exodus from the industry begins, approaching and in their early 30's. Finally was that I had relationships with them through my work at the IPA and access to contact details for those who had left Adland. This gave me privileged access to a group of individuals that could offer insights into their reasons for leaving the industry.

The main limitation of using the graduates from the Diploma was the job functions they represent, namely Account Handling and Account Planning. These roles combined represent only 29% of all those employed in the industry, although Account Handling is the largest single job function within agencies (IPA, 2008b). However, these are key agency roles with significant client contact as opposed to support functions. Those in Account Handling are responsible for client services and project management, while those in the Planning function are involved in research and strategy development. These are both distinct from the Creative function which is where the creation of ideas takes place<sup>20</sup>. The decision to focus on these roles was primarily taken for

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<sup>20</sup> IPA (2009) offer the following brief definitions of each of these roles: **Account Handling** - the fulcrum role between the client and everyone on the advertising agency team, providing coordination, market knowledge and leadership; **Account Planning** - the detective work that uses analysis and consumer research, together with the client's brief, to provide the key strategic insight which lies behind the advertising idea; **Creative** - the creation of advertising ideas, expressed in words and imagery, that will effectively communicate the required messages.

practical access reasons but also because of the similarities in terms of career paths. Those in Creative roles operate very differently, always working with a creative partner and so career paths tend to exist in pairs. The resulting findings are therefore not representative of the entire industry but do relate to two key groups within it. My eventual respondents were two former Account Directors, four former Planners and one respondent who had made the transition from Account Handling to Planning before leaving the industry. There was therefore a greater focus on Planning than intended but this was a result of those who volunteered their time rather than bias in my selections.

### **3.3.2 The evolving context**

The initial intent was to undertake a comparative study, contrasting the experiences of those who had left the industry with those who had remained, in order to elicit factors leading to these differing actions. A case study approach (Hartley, 2004) was planned to allow deep exploration of a small number of cases from multiple perspectives: the individuals themselves; their line managers; HR departments; senior management. Access to those beyond the individuals was possible due to my impartial role at the IPA where my research was positioned as beneficial to the industry. However, shortly before collecting the data, I moved from the IPA to one of its member agencies, placing me as a competitor in relation to other members and severely limiting my access.

Following my move out of the IPA I restructured the research to focus solely on the individuals who had left the industry, a group no longer working for competitors of my new company and to whom I still had access via my existing relationships. This was justified because it is these individuals who have followed alternative paths and represent the core interest of this study into the careers of advertising executives. Within this group most had also made moves

from one agency to another prior to leaving Adland and so they still allowed this aspect of career choices to be explored. The change of focus required a revision of the research aims and objectives but, ultimately, led to a more focussed piece of work than the previous comparative approach might have done.

### **3.3.3 Research format**

The research began with a series of semi-structured interviews among this core group of respondents. These explored their stories and the ways in which they described their careers and career decisions. The interviews took a broadly similar form with a discussion of their journey from post-16 education to their move into Adland, any moves between agencies, before finally investigating their eventual move out of the industry (an example interview schedule can be seen in appendix A). Following this loose structure and focussing on crucial points within their careers meant that the respondents were able to reflect on their experiences in some detail. Each key event such as a job move was treated as a critical incident in order “*to gain an understanding of the incident from the perspective of the individual*” (Chell, 2004: 48). This focused the discussion and ensured appropriate data were collected. Although this structure was based around observable *external* career features, it crucially provided rich insights into the *internal* careers of the respondents.

Of the 35 Diploma graduates there were ten who had left the industry. I was able to secure seven interviews, each lasting roughly an hour. Suddaby suggests that, in the context of grounded theory, “*the quality of contact between researcher and empirical site and the quality of the research produced have a direct relationship*” (2006: 640). My existing relationships with each person meant there were no barriers in terms of establishing rapport and I found their trust in me led to candid discussions of their experiences. I benefited greatly

from closeness to the subjects, as advocated by Alvesson & Deetz (2000) and Easterby-Smith *et al* (2002).

In all cases I assured full confidentiality and requested permission to tape record the interviews, making it clear that the recording could be stopped at any time. None took up this offer. The recordings were transcribed, allowing me to listen carefully during the interviews and follow up on themes emerging from what I was being told. Brief field notes were also taken, allowing discussion areas to develop within the interview setting. To an extent I was beginning the coding process within the interviews themselves, simultaneously collecting and analysing data as dictated by the tenets of grounded theory (Glaser & Strauss, 1967).

## **3.4 Analysis and further data collection**

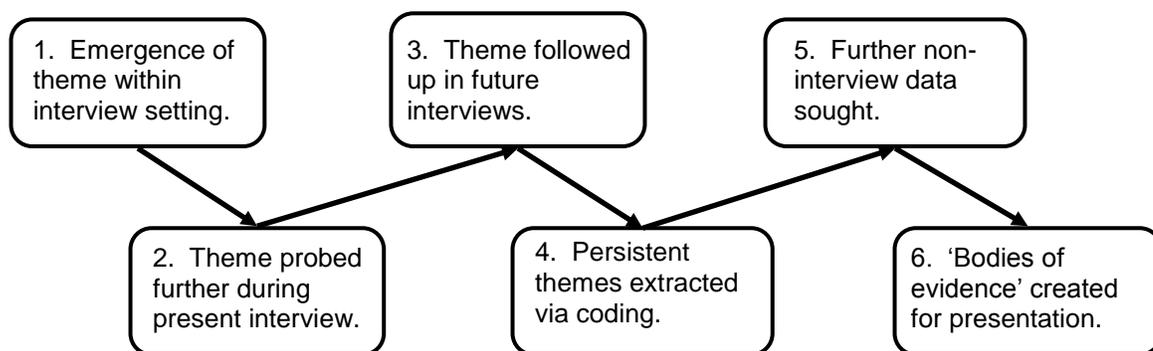
### **3.4.1 Initial analysis**

Following each interview the recording and transcript were reviewed and initial codes were applied to the data. This process of “*open coding*” (Strauss & Corbin, 1998) identified themes which could be followed up in future interviews. An example of a theme from an early interview which went on to feature in many others was the ‘futility of advertising work’. Whenever this subject came out in subsequent interviews it was probed in more depth, much like Glaser & Strauss’ (1967) notion of “*theoretical sampling*”. This enriched the data available for analysis of this and other themes. Another technique employed was developing the theme within the interview setting by stating that it was something that had come up in earlier interviews, legitimising its further exploration. This is a method described by Alvesson & Deetz as “*drilling*” (2000: 197).

The identification of themes for pursuit in future interviews felt, at the time, like an objective and controlled process. Having reflected on this further it is clear that the themes that emerged from the earlier interviews gained a preferential position in the research process. This was as a result of my increased sensitivity to them and my tendency to probe further when similar comments came from later respondents. The fact that most or all respondents were found to discuss many of the selected themes may partially result from my predisposition to explore them. Their selection in the earlier stages may also have resulted, to some extent, because those data were personally of interest to me and therefore my role as researcher was having an influence on future data collection. Despite this, as discussed later, steps were taken to validate findings via other sources.

### 3.4.2 Additional data collection

Another form of “*theoretical sampling*” (Glaser & Strauss, 1967) was sourcing secondary data relating to themes emerging from the interviews. This is consistent with Suddaby’s claim that “*grounded theory studies rarely have interviews as their sole form of data collection*” (2006: 635). How this was done can be explored through the example of perceptions of advertising work before joining the industry, a theme that emerged through a number of interviews. To help situate this data the research moved into sourcing portrayals of advertising in mainstream media such as film, television and literature, while also examining agency careers websites and careers literature produced by the industry. The selection of these additional sources was often informed by respondents’ comments. For example, one respondent remarked that he “*thought it was going to be like that film, What Women Want*” which led me to source and watch a number of films featuring advertising executives. Doing so allowed the interview data to be placed within a wider context, thereby “*eliciting information on the social situation under examination*” (Suddaby, 2006: 635). The additional data helped to make sense of the respondents’ experiences, while also developing an understanding of the role played by popular and industry portrayals of advertising work. This process of identifying themes and following them up was not linear in nature and the following figure attempts to visualise the process in the context of a single theme as described above.



**Figure 3** – *The emergence and investigation of a theme*

### **3.4.3 Returning to the literature**

While new secondary data were sourced in response to emerging themes there were also opportunities to revisit and reappraise literature which had been used in developing my understanding prior to the research. With access to data of my own, they now offered ways of interpreting my findings that I hadn't anticipated at the outset. I found my data sometimes supporting previous research and sometimes challenging it but, most importantly, existing alongside what had gone before.

In this respect the research process deviated slightly from traditional grounded theory as the prior literature was used to help make sense of the newly sourced data. In many cases theory from earlier work was discovered to hold relevance in ways that weren't necessarily expected and, as a result, the conclusions convey a mixture of general support for existing theory with the addition of substantive theory specific to advertising agencies.

### **3.4.4 Validating the findings**

As the research progressed I was encouraged by the interest in my work from both professional and personal contacts. I discussed my findings with friends, colleagues, fellow students, my supervisor and anyone who would listen. The subject of advertising evokes interest beyond the industry itself and the opportunity to discuss the subject outside the confines of Adland was valued. These conversations helped me to articulate and refine my own thinking, allowing me to talk things through, clarify my findings and respond to criticisms. As a result I felt more confident in what I was writing because there had been some process of validation from others and my discussions with them.

Further validation came from two scheduled interviews with industry experts, individuals with extensive experience of coaching agency executives through career changes, often when making moves away from the industry. These interviews explored and tested my findings and, in many cases, verified the discoveries which I was making. They also provided space for reflection and reconsideration of themes which had been misinterpreted. An example of this was a conclusion drawn from interview data that feeling advertising work was meaningless equated to a desire to contribute more to society. One of the expert interviews prompted a re-examination of the pertinent data, revealing that those wishing to contribute to society formed only a subset of those who felt their work in advertising was meaningless. These expert interviews therefore acted as a sounding board for the emerging findings and provided a mechanism through which to test them.

### **3.4.5 Eliciting categories of analysis**

The data analysis data began with the data collection, continuing up to and including the publication of the study. The initial open coding of the transcripts allowed many themes to be identified and these were noted in pencil in the margins (appendix B gives a full list). These themes were then compared across transcripts to elicit broader categories that were relevant to all or most of the respondents but also to the research objectives. These categories then required the transcripts to be re-examined with coloured marks made in the margins to signify data relevant to each category. These data were then grouped, first by respondent, and then by category in order to develop mind maps for each person (appendix C gives an example).

The mind maps were compared to ensure that the categories were relevant to the supporting data and to help focus some of the categories which were quite broad

in scope. As a result of this process some categories were collapsed into each other. One example was a link observed between the two categories of ‘needing purpose’ and ‘wanting respect’ in one’s work. These previously distinct categories were then considered as an aggregate in the final analysis. This process resulted in five core categories of analysis which were important to the research objectives and which had been discussed by all or most respondents in the interviews. This helped to ensure the findings were representative of consistencies across respondents as opposed to more idiosyncratic observations. The final categories are described in the following table.

| Category          | Description  |
|-------------------|--|
| Perceptions       | Advertising executives’ perceptions and expectations of the industry prior to joining it.                      |
| Creativity        | Discussion of individual creativity and involvement in the creative process.                                   |
| Agency positive   | Themes clustered around the things that people liked about advertising and working for an agency.              |
| Agency negative   | Themes clustered around the things that people <i>didn’t</i> like about advertising and working for an agency. |
| Purpose & Respect | Discussion of the extent to which advertising work is meaningful and well respected.                           |

**Figure 4** – Categories of analysis and descriptions



## **4. Findings and analysis**



## **4.1 Introduction**

Reflecting the interview format the findings and analysis are presented in a chronological fashion. This attempts to convey the respondents' journey from their entry into Adland and their time within it, to their eventual exit out of the industry. The categories of analysis are reflected in this presentation as they are also representative of this journey.

The findings first examine people's expectations before they joined the industry and these are pulled entirely from data that fell under the 'Perceptions' category. Following this is a discussion of whether these expectations were met with some particular attention given to the need for creativity in work. This part utilises data from both the 'Perceptions' and 'Creativity' categories.

The 'Agency positive' and 'Agency negative' categories are combined to give an overview of the best and worst of agency life. This gives some insight into what people value but also some reasons why people leave agencies and the industry.

Finally is a look at some further reasons why people leave the industry altogether which draws mainly on the 'Purpose & Respect' category.

The discussion associated with each area of analysis relates directly to the three main objectives of the research (see p.45), ensuring that each is addressed at some length, thereby contributing to the overall research aim.

### **NB. Quotes and references**

Respondents' comments in the text are given in italics in quotation marks. Quotes from secondary sources are referenced accordingly. Longer respondent quotes are attributed to each respondent via their previous job function and a number, for example Planner (1).

## 4.2 Pre-entry expectations

The application process pretends that you will have a creative role, but the fact is that account managers will never be creatives nor seriously be considered to be able to offer creative advice.

*Advertising executive (Kendall Tarrant, 2003: 16)*

Finding out about advertising work and forming a point of view on what it entails is the starting point for any career within the industry. The formation of these expectations is therefore explored before relating this to the actual experiences of the respondents. The ways in which the respondents found themselves attracted to Adland and what they expected from the industry sets the scene for its subsequent failure to meet these expectations and their resulting disillusionment.

### 4.2.1 Common perceptions of advertising

A common theme emerged among respondents when discussing perceptions of advertising work, one unlikely to surprise the layman. Typically the life of an advertising executive, before becoming one, was seen as: “*glamorous*”; “*cool*”; “*fun*”; “*exciting*”; “*dynamic*”; “*sexy*”; “*sparky*”; “*creative*”. These impressions are understandable in the context of how the industry is portrayed in the wider popular media. Mainstream films including *Bounce* (Roos, 2001), *What Women Want* (Meyers, 2000) and *How to Get Ahead in Advertising* (Robinson, 1989) present a clichéd and stereotyped view of an industry full of brainstorming, long lunches and money making. Television offers similarly clichéd accounts including, most recently, *Mad Men* (Taylor, 2007), a popular drama set on Madison Avenue, New York, in the 1960’s. Sex, booze and charisma are

abundant in these depictions and they are supported by literary forms as well (for example: Beaumont, 2000; Della Femina, 1971; Scott, 2003). The focus is typically on the role of ‘creatives<sup>21</sup>’, suggesting that the entire industry consists of this job role. The reality is that ‘creatives’ make up only 13.3% of the industry (IPA, 2008b), with most people employed in Account Management and other functions. These points of reference offer some insight into the way that Adland is viewed by those who are distant from it.

Kendall Tarrant (2003) found that these narrow perceptions of the nature of agency work were prevalent among those aspiring to advertising careers, many concurring with the belief that all jobs in advertising involve “*the writing of ads*”. In their report, a careers advisor noted that, “*people think you sit around all day coming up with ideas for TV and poster ads*” (ibid: 7). These slightly shallow popular impressions could be attractive to those who seek a fun, glamorous and creative occupation. In fact, more graduates are currently applying for careers in media, which includes advertising, than any other sector (High Fliers Research, 2008).

#### **4.2.2 Industry portrayals**

The next step for those who have an interest in the business is to learn more about it and the work available. The respondents in this research typically entered Adland in the late 1990’s and early 2000’s. Although it was difficult to obtain promotional careers materials from this time, an array of contemporary content was reviewed including individual agency careers websites, industry publications and personal accounts from new entrants. The aim of this was to

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<sup>21</sup> ‘Creatives’ are broadly those responsible for conceiving of the ideas which lead to advertising campaigns, typical job titles being Copywriter, Art Director and Creative Director.

develop a sense of how the industry portrays itself, aside from the more populist depictions described above.

At an industry level glamour, fun and creative work remain strong themes, although these are often tempered with references to intellectual rigour and accountability. A careers guide produced by the industry trade magazine *Campaign* offers graduates an insight into what they can expect. On the one hand “*there are plenty of parties, sometimes the Champagne flows and the business knows how to have fun*” while this takes place within “*an incredibly thorough, exciting and disciplined profession*”. This dichotomy between the fun and serious sides of the business continues with, “*sure it’s a glamorous profession, but one that is now very firmly rooted in accountability...tough but fun, intellectual but creative, glitzy but effective*” (Beale, 2007: 3). Another industry publication offers thoughts from new recruits on why people should join the industry including, “*the Ferrari-driving, Champagne-sipping heyday of the 80’s might be behind us, but advertising is a more exciting industry now than ever before*” (Agravat *et al*, 2005). More sober accounts are also offered (Advertising Association, 2008a; IPA, 2005a), although, with reference to the requirement for numeracy among new entrants, the IPA state that this is, “*not just to add up your expenses!*” (*ibid*: 6), albeit tongue in cheek.

### **4.2.3 Agency portrayals**

At an agency level there are some large companies who don’t provide any careers information whatsoever on their websites<sup>22</sup>. This leaves understanding advertising work to chance, or perhaps allows the stereotyped portrayals to assume dominance. Another explanation would be the nepotism within agencies

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<sup>22</sup> Of those in *Campaign*’s top ten agencies by billings (Campaign, 2008b), three had no careers or recruitment pages on their websites.

whereby many entering the industry have done so through existing contacts among friends and family (Pringle *et al*, 2007). For those agencies that do give information the promise is of *“lively, stimulating and thought-provoking”* work (Publicis, 2008), often with an emphasis on the *“fun”* that can be had (AMV BBDO, 2008; M&C Saatchi, 2008; McCann Erickson, 2008). The imagery on the sites adds to the notion of agencies as fun, informal and relaxed workplaces.

Further examination of these sites suggests that new recruits will immediately be in the thick of the creative process, *“involved in every step...from the moment the client talks you through their business problem to the moment you see the finished ad on TV, in press, up on a billboard or online”* (AMV BBDO, 2008). They can expect to be stimulated in many ways as the *“job will challenge you intellectually and creatively”* (M&C Saatchi, 2008), and become *“the focal point of the agency's relationship with the client, working to meet their business agenda with an effective creative solution”* (JWT, 2008). In addition, graduate trainees can expect exposure to senior staff (AMV BBDO, 2008; BBH, 2008; M&C Saatchi, 2008; Publicis, 2008) and are assured that they *“won't be making the tea”* (JWT, 2008), perhaps, metaphorically, implying mundane or tedious work. Among the respondents within this research only one specifically cited promotional materials as a reason for wanting to join the industry, although they were attracted to the specific brochure because it was bright red versus other less colourful publications in her University careers office. Again, this could be suggestive of more colourful and creative work available within advertising agencies.

One respondent cited the talking up of careers in the industry as a necessary part of attracting people:

Advertising, being a communications industry, is very good at marketing itself as glamorous and dynamic and I guess it needs to be...it has to present a kind of slightly over inflated image of itself in order to compete

[with law firms, accountants and management consultants]...and, in a way, if you're taken in by it, then you kind of admire the industry more for managing to seduce you.

*Account director (1)*

As someone who also made reference to their “*love affair with advertising*”, the notion of being seduced romanticises the process of being drawn in by the slightly inflated promises of an industry and a career within it.

#### **4.2.4 The respondents' expectations**

Among the respondents there was an almost unanimous desire to follow a creative line of work. The commonly cited alternatives of law, finance and management consultancy were offered up as career paths that would have been boring and dry compared to what was initially felt to be the fun and creative world of advertising. Some were even tempted by the more stereotypical images of the industry:

It all seemed very glamorous and all the agencies were in the centre of London and there were these things called ‘creatives’ and they were people who worked in big glass offices and did brilliant adverts for Levi's and Audi and Coca-Cola and things that people talked about and it felt like that was a really good thing to get in to.

*Planner (2)*

While this is an extreme example, other respondents talked of wanting to work somewhere that would allow them to combine creativity with, *inter alia*, project management, business, psychology and science. Although it is difficult to pinpoint exactly where their impressions of working in advertising came from,

the portrayals by mainstream media and the industry itself appear to have some consistency with their experiences and expectations.

Something else that emerged through the interviews was the influence of agency job application forms. Versus those of other industries, these were felt to suggest more interesting and creative work, asking questions such as, “*how would you coerce someone back from a cliff?*” and “*what is your favourite advert and why?*” Similar examples can also be found on contemporary application forms, including, “*Write a newspaper headline that best describes you*” (BBH, 2008) and “*Which of the 7 deadly sins is the worst?*” (M&C Saatchi, 2008). These would seem to suggest that some degree of creativity is required in order to work in advertising and that this trait is sought and utilised by agencies. One respondent made specific reference to the application forms recalling that, “*it was proper lateral thinking and it just sounded really interesting*”.

#### **4.2.5 A different perspective**

These perceptions of the industry before joining weren't unanimous. Two respondents didn't hold them at all. One possible explanation for this is the paths that they took before joining, both having undertaken some form of advertising-related further education. Although this isn't a definitive explanation, one did comment that their studies gave a solid understanding of the industry and the roles within it, “*what was really good about it was it gave you a sense of all of the departments*”. This contrasts vividly with the “*big glass offices*” description offered above.

With the exception of art colleges<sup>23</sup>, there has, historically, been a less than encouraging relationship between agencies and universities offering degrees in advertising. Such degrees are not held in high regard by the industry (Gifford & Maggard, 1975) with more recent studies highlighting a mismatch between the learning within these courses and the requirements of agencies (Scott & Frontczak, 1996). While there is some evidence from the USA to suggest that advertising degrees can influence career success, at least external success measured by salary over time (Hunt *et al*, 1987), it is difficult to assess their validity in the UK. One influence this side of the Atlantic is that advertising degrees are usually offered by former polytechnics, whereas agencies tend to want to recruit from Russell Group<sup>24</sup> universities. A prejudice may well exist, despite the two respondents in this research appearing to have gained a more grounded understanding of the industry and the work within it from their prior studies. It is worth noting that all the respondents in this research came from traditional well-established universities, including many Russell Group institutions<sup>25</sup>. However, the contrast between those having very academic backgrounds and those experiencing some form of advertising education could prove invaluable when moving on to consider the respondents' actual experiences of working in the industry.

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<sup>23</sup> Art colleges typically provide the main recruitment base for the creative departments of advertising agencies, whereas non-creative roles are usually filled with graduates with more traditional academic backgrounds such as the arts and sciences.

<sup>24</sup> The 20 Russell Group Universities are: University of Birmingham; University of Bristol; University of Cambridge; Cardiff University; University of Edinburgh; University of Glasgow; Imperial College London; King's College London; University of Leeds; University of Liverpool; London School of Economics & Political Science; University of Manchester; Newcastle University; University of Nottingham; Queen's University Belfast; University of Oxford; University of Sheffield; University of Southampton; University College London; University of Warwick (Russell Group, 2008)

<sup>25</sup> The further education institutions attended by the respondents in this research were Bath, Bristol, Dublin, Durham, Edinburgh, Liverpool and Oxford.

## 4.3 The reality of advertising work

The interview data and that from secondary sources have described advertising as an industry that attracts applicants with its reputation for fun, glamour and creativity. This establishes expectations among those joining agencies and the extent to which these are met is now examined. The respondents' experiences form the core of this analysis as they describe what they found once they joined the industry. This analysis is grouped around two core themes. First is the general observation that advertising work is less exciting than was expected. Second is something more specific to the advertising industry, that is a frustrated desire to be creative in one's work. These two themes emerged in nearly all the interviews, hence their selection over other less frequently occurring issues.

### 4.3.1 Banality & disillusionment

The popular images and portrayals of Adland were often distant from reality and the respondents were explicit in their reflections: *"It's less glamorous and exciting than you imagine it will be"*; *"The appearance of advertising is much much greater than the reality; the reality very much more banal"*; *"After a while you realise the gloss wears off"*. What the respondents found was far more mundane than what they had expected, one speaking of *"the day to day drudgery"*, another saying that *"the day to day grind is very ordinary"*. This contrast was brought into stark relief with the following reflection:

I thought that every day was going to be about brainstorming sessions and stuff like that, whereas as an account handler the reality is dealing with some really tricky client problems and then having no budget and no time.

*Account director (1)*

Perhaps Adland is guilty of presenting a “*slightly over inflated image of itself*” and suffers when the expectations this establishes aren’t met. One respondent felt that this was necessary for agencies and the industry “*because of what it can’t offer*”. The context of this comment was a comparison of Adland with other highly paid professions such as law and accountancy<sup>26</sup>. The thinking here is that Adland attracts applicants through a promise of exciting and creative work, given its inability to compete on compensation and remuneration. One of the industry experts offered some support to this:

It [advertising] has to become more and more business-like as a business. But that is not what attracted a lot of these people in. They made decisions *not* to go into the City because it was all about money and hard edged, and they have chosen advertising. And it’s those very bright ones who have chosen advertising, *because* it gave them options that the City didn’t, that have become disillusioned.

*Industry expert (1)*

Returning to Greenhaus *et al*, the problem appears to be rooted in “*selling*” too much and being “*overly optimistic*” (2000: 160). However, it may be that Adland isn’t entirely to blame. It could be argued that many of these impressions are propagated through channels outside the control of the industry such as films, television shows and books. These are where the most stereotypical images prevail and the biggest contrast exists with the real world of advertising (Salzman, 2007). Despite this possible counter it would seem there is more that agencies could do to present a more realistic account of advertising work for those interested in joining the business.

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<sup>26</sup> The hourly and daily rates for Lawyers and Accountants in top five firms are more than double those of executives from the top five advertising agencies (IPA, 2002).

### **4.3.2 Creativity**

One of the notable causes of disillusionment arose from respondents' desire to follow a creative career path. This aspect of advertising work was brought up in one form or other by all respondents and so it is worthy of more detailed discussion. Within this area there were two distinct strands of thought. On one hand some respondents expressed a wish to utilise their own creativity whereas on the other was a desire to be close to the creative process, helping to guide and influence it. In some cases both strands were evident.

### **4.3.3 Respondents' own creativity**

Exploring the creativity of the respondents themselves it is worth noting their own diverse creative interests including writing, drama, comedy, music and film. References to these included: *"I love writing stuff"*; *"I want to work somewhere where you can make your own ideas"*; *"I wanted to do writing and more creative stuff"*; *"I regret not doing music...I wanted to write musicals for a living"*. Those seeking outlets for this creativity were frustrated working outside the 'creative' department leading to, *"a growing sense of me not being the type of creative guy I wanted to be"*. Efforts to express individual creativity could also be prohibited in some way, *"I was straying into creative territory and you're not allowed to do that"*. There is evidence of a separation between 'creative' and 'non-creative' staff within agencies, either explicitly via designated departments or culturally via processes and management attitudes.

This frustrated creativity is understandable in the context of how agencies promote themselves as employers. Creative urges are being thwarted by an industry which some respondents felt would encourage them. Added to this is the fact that creativity in advertising only exists to serve client needs,

predominantly businesses. One respondent when pushed on why he had felt that advertising was distinct from ‘business’ answered, “*just that small saving grace of creativity*”. This assumes that business and creativity are mutually exclusive endeavours, something which is clearly debatable. However, the advertising industry for these people did not provide sufficient satisfaction in terms of their own creativity, ultimately leading to feelings of frustration.

#### **4.3.4 Proximity to the creative process**

Despite these feelings of having their own creativity quashed, creative work is fundamental to the development of advertising. The respondents in this study weren’t directly responsible for this creativity, leading to the frustrations described. Their primary responsibility in these ‘non-creative’ roles is facilitating and fostering creativity, within the agency, on behalf of clients. This involvement with creativity and the creative process is the next area where frustrations can arise. Within this problem are two issues, distance from the creative process and failure to push accounts<sup>27</sup> creatively. In the case of the latter it appears that there are some accounts within the industry where the creation of advertising is a formulaic process, and this is sustained to preserve client income. As one respondent observed:

A lot of the accounts weren’t pushed creatively...just do what you need to do to bring in the cash rather than seeing it as an opportunity, which is really frustrating... [there was] such an opportunity for doing something brilliant creatively and totally breaking the mould, but no way was that ever going to happen because there was too much cash flowing in every week.

*Planner (1)*

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<sup>27</sup> An account in advertising is the name given to a client with which the agency has a working relationship. For example, advertising practitioners will talk of working on the Nike account.

This again relates to the tension between advertising as a creative enterprise and its fundamental role as a business, serving predominantly business interests. The financial pressure of retaining these accounts leads to a conservatism and lack of creative ambition within the agency. Agency management enforce this to the frustration to those wanting to push the creative work into more daring realms. However, it is possible to offset work on one of these “cash cow” accounts by also working on one with more creative scope:

You knew there were going to be accounts where it was going to be virtually impossible to get a creative way...[so], if you're going to do something like that then you want the creative opportunity as well.

*Planner (4)*

These accounts with greater creative freedom could also cause frustration in terms of how close respondents were to the creative process. Comparing experiences at different agencies one respondent expressed his preference for one because, “*you talk with creatives and you can be really sure that you are inputting into the work itself*”. There was even a ‘geographical’ manifestation of this in that, “*you can sit next to creatives*” rather than the creative department being in another part of the office. Whereas this offers a contrast between experiences at different agencies, another respondent observed a change during his time at one agency:

I had a good relationship with the creative teams and so being quite heavily involved in the creativity and helping them come to ideas and that sort of thing was something I really enjoyed. So being able to think of things and it being taken on by other people. So basically to see your part in the process and see you are adding something.

*Planner (4)*

The need to feel involved in the creative process comes across from both these respondents, something found to be important in other research<sup>28</sup> (IPA, 2005b). Part of the latter's frustration came about because his contribution to the creative work was being eroded by new agency processes:

Increasingly it was becoming the case that the creative department was the only department that was allowed to be creative...you are cut out of the creative development side of things.

*Planner (4)*

This meant losing an enjoyable part of the job:

That makes your job just theory. That meant all I was doing was sketching out hypothetical situations in the brief and it never involved anything tangible. There is nothing you can do and you just become a thinker and doing nothing to manifest that. That was really frustrating for me.

*Planner (4)*

The previous satisfaction of his own creative needs was taken away, leaving him with a partially empty role. This influenced his eventual move out of advertising but into a related sector. Talking of what attracted him to his current employer, a Public Relations (PR) agency, he recalls:

The fact there wasn't a separate creative department – everyone in the building was in charge of being creative and that was just part and parcel of your role. So the fact I wouldn't have to do the baton passing, I would be totally involved with it, was hugely appealing.

*Planner (4)*

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<sup>28</sup> "Creativity/creative thinking/the creative process" was ranked third in the list of things that young executives most enjoy about working in advertising (IPA, 2005b: 12).

### **4.3.5 Creativity summary**

The creativity in advertising attracts people versus other sectors such as finance, law and management consultancy (IPA, 2005b). Some want to utilise their own creativity while others want to be an integral part of the creative process. However, expectations can be left unfulfilled on both counts. One source of frustration is the desire to see one's input into the end product, rather than just the preparatory and surrounding work. That is, to see a piece of advertising with your input visible rather than lurking behind the scenes. Perhaps the expectation that this would be the case is an area in which agencies are letting people down. In a scathing comment, one respondent felt the industry was misguided in considering itself to be creative, "*Advertising has the temerity to call itself a creative industry, it's really just the same as all the others*". There is frustration here arising from what one of the industry experts described as the "*difficulty of juggling the business reality with the creativity that they want*".

### **4.3.6 A limitation**

A limitation of the present study is that the respondents were all previously based at large agencies where creativity can be considered the preserve of the creative department rather than the responsibility of the whole agency. Many respondents made reference to their own experiences and those of friends who had found smaller agencies more accepting of creativity among all staff rather than a discrete set of 'creatives':

We were quite small at that point. We were all in one building together, the creatives and the account people and the planners and production and everything and it was an amazing atmosphere.

*Account director (2)*

Support for this thinking also came from the industry experts:

You see a lot more creativity in small agencies...where everyone is in one room that is where you get the really good creative thinking.

*Industry expert (1)*

There is clearly some importance attached to the proximity to the creative process, alongside suggestions that this proximity can actually improve the ultimate creative product being developed by agencies.

## **4.4 The best and worst of agency life**

The previous two sections have shown how expectations of the industry can be detached from reality. However, the respondents in this study each spent at least four years working at agencies and their accounts offer insights into what they did and didn't like about this time. This section examines and dramatises these features of agency life, highlighting the dominant interview themes.

The experiences discussed here are those which are representative of the group overall rather than the idiosyncrasies of particular individuals. What came through strongly in the interviews was the ability for characteristics of a given type to simultaneously act as both positive and negative influences on the value and enjoyment derived from agency work. For example, the senior people in an agency can have both a positive and negative impact on the experiences of those working there, suggesting their importance to the respondents. These features of agency life impact upon those working in Adland and are not distinct from each other, often existing in intimate relationships. For example, opportunities for learning can be increased by access to experienced practitioners.

### **4.4.1 The creation of an agency**

The features under examination have been separated into two clusters, those that relate to positive and negative experiences, as described by the respondents. Using the features that were consistently described in positive terms it has been possible to create what might be considered as *the perfect agency*. This is a fictitious construction which is being utilised within this analysis to dramatisise those aspects of agency life which the respondents enjoyed and valued. It is based on all of their experiences. A similar process was undertaken with the negative experiences, this time creating what might be considered as *the worst*

*agency in the world*. In order to build this dramatisation further, it is suggested that these two fictitious agencies are in fact the same company. This single agency went from its promising start as *the perfect agency* to its eventual demise and change into *the worst agency in the world*.

The creation of this fictitious agency is not intended to represent any one respondent's real experiences. It is simply a construct through which the key and often universally present themes can be explored through the words of the respondents themselves. It allows the extremities of the continua on which these features exist to be pulled apart and amplified while grounding this in the actual descriptions given by the respondents. The supporting quotes are drawn from across all the respondents but they have been used as though they are reflections on a collective experience at the same agency, one which started as *the perfect agency*.

#### **4.4.2 The perfect agency**

The perfect agency was a 'fun' place to be, an area where portrayals of the industry appear to be grounded in reality. This fun came from the social aspects of the agency as opposed to the work itself. "*I had a blast!*" recalled one former employee, adding that "*the social life was immense and intense*". Another supported this, remembering that "*it was a really fun place, complete party land*". The fun came about because of the people who worked there and these former colleagues evoke similarly fond memories: "*I loved the people*"; "*I miss the people*"; "*there were some really interesting, exciting, charismatic people*". Ultimately advertising is a client facing industry and so it might be expected that personable and charismatic people are recruited. The link between the people and positive working experiences was observed directly:

People were incredibly important and, ultimately, if you like the people you work with that would be a good working experience.

*Planner (2)*

However it wasn't just the colleagues and having fun with them that brought value. The ability of others to inspire and provide learning opportunities were also appreciated, especially when these people were more experienced:

I guess what kept me at [the agency] for so long was that there were a very large number of fantastic people that I learned from. So the planning department was really eclectic. It was born of people that had been in [the agency] for a long time but also people that had worked in management consultancies...creatives that had become planners, clients that moved into the planning side, research background. So there was a whole wealth of really senior planners that you were able to learn from.

*Planner (4)*

Having these people around provided stimulation and diverse learning opportunities. Their experience was valued, presenting something of a vicious circle in the context of this research. These people who provide the inspiration and stimulation are those that *have* stuck around beyond their 30's, and yet, if there were just a few more of them, even more might be encouraged to do so. As it is they are a rarity and so their impact is limited by their number. This impact is, however, significant:

That is the difference between having a good day and a bad day, having someone you look up to who sparks you – it's so important.

*Account director (2)*

These people not only inspired but exposure to them "*balances your day to day*", offering something different to the "*drudgery*" and "*banality*" that can

otherwise creep into work. One forum where this exposure happened frequently was pitching for new business. In these situations some of the promises of the industry *were* met as “*it’s exciting and every idea is valid*”, but added to this is working with the most senior people in the agency and “*in 20 minutes of talking I’ve learned so many interesting things*”. Learning is important and pitching accelerates the process:

- New business can be stimulating because you get into a whole new industry and you suss out that industry and that is quite interesting.

*Account director (2)*

- In a week’s time I’m going to know a lot about a subject I know nothing about right now.

*Account director (1)*

Learning didn’t just happen in pitch situations but was something that the agency offered on an ongoing basis, ensuring that “*the learning curve was enormous*”. By providing this learning curve the agency ensured that its people were always moving themselves forward and gaining the ability to take on increasingly challenging assignments:

- I guess it was the constant ability to learn new stuff and build up the remit of what I was able to do is what kept me interested and engaged there.

*Planner (4)*

This learning ensured that people were always given variety in their work, ensuring that “*there was always a different problem to solve*”, and moving from project to project, or even role to role:

The reason I stayed so long was partly because I had been doing three different jobs while I was there, so it's not like I had the same role in the same place for six years.

*Planner (1)*

The variety and learning was aided by the high levels of autonomy and freedom granted to those at the agency, “*it was superb to be free*”. One recalls being happiest when “*involved in something you can run yourself*”. The value of “*headroom*” and being “*given more free reign to think and move*” was something offered in abundance from the outset:

I was the first graduate planner at [the agency] so I had all this rogue time by myself, no-one was putting any pressure on me, I could pick and choose what I wanted to work on.

*Planner (3)*

These features of agency life created an inspiring and stimulating work environment with space and autonomy, opportunities to learn and time spent with the most experienced people in the business. This was all made possible by the people at the agency who were a fun, diverse and interesting bunch. Ultimately this was driven by the senior team at the agency who had a huge influence on this culture:

I can see why people get well paid at the top when they are good, it does change everything culturally in an organisation.

*Account director (2)*

This culture meant that the agency was hugely successful:

It was something that was budding and going somewhere...we were winning new business every week...[there was] really really good work going out and getting lots of awards...I loved it.

*Account director (2)*

However, this situation didn't last. The agency changed and all the things that once made it *the perfect agency* turned about and before long it became *the worst agency in the world*.

#### **4.4.3 The worst agency in the world**

The people began to lose their sense of fun, making the agency a less enjoyable place to be. They became "*incredibly arrogant and [taking] advertising very seriously*" rather than the previously playful approach. Once a degree of mutual respect existed among colleagues, now there were "*closed minds, very superficial people...a lot of bravado, and posturing, and politics, and not a lot of substance*". The senior people who had previously provided sources of inspiration began to be replaced with others who failed to meet these criteria:

- I felt a lot of the planners coming in didn't have any of the basic planning skills and so I had been used to working with a lot of planning directors that were brilliant at their jobs and to see a lot coming in that I thought were charlatans.

*Planner (4)*

- There's people above you you can see not doing as good a job as you are.

*Planner (5)*

It may be that these perceptions of those in more senior roles had evolved as people became more senior themselves. Perhaps they felt undermined by outsiders filling positions which they felt ready to take on. These perceptions led to feeling that the senior people were not providing the stimulation and learning that their predecessors once did. At the same time the process of pitching for new business became more draining than inspiring:

There were people who always got put on pitch after pitch so were literally a dribbling heap on the floor.

*Planner (1)*

Even the existing clients of the agency were stifling the growth of those working on them, many reaching "*a point where there's no more challenges*".

- There wasn't anywhere to carry on growing, I knew my clients inside out, I'd done it really, there was nowhere else to go then.

*Planner (5)*

- I just ended up doing the same thing after a while each month and so it was time to move on just to keep learning.

*Account director (2)*

Where before there had been variety in the work there were now feelings of boredom among the staff, resulting from the repetition in their work and having the "*same old arguments and discussions*":

You do know the job and you have kind of done it before and it doesn't get much different than this. Okay its different strategies, different clients, different challenges but at the end of the day you are doing the same kind of loop.

*Planner (5)*

The demands of clients and management meant that *"there wasn't much free time"*. This had previously provided much valued space but now *"you don't have time to think about stuff, you just have to do it"*. The agency was under a lot of strain and this was serving neither its people nor its clients:

If you've got a client who is under the belief that you're 100% on their account and another client who's under the belief that you're 100% on *their* account it ends up in this sort of ongoing world of trickery and deceit.

*Account director (1)*

The combination of all these factors led to troubled times for the agency: *"The company started falling apart...the whole thing started to collapse."* The success record in new business took a turn for the worse as they *"weren't ever winning any pitches"* and then these problems spilled over into existing business as *"it haemorrhaged accounts"*. The agency *"was slowing down a bit"* and one effect was *"people leaving a sinking ship"*. The agency was *"thrashing around and it wasn't working and nobody wants to be part of that"*. Ultimately what was happening was plain for all to see:

You see this agency slowly going under the waves and trying to be the same agency it was and failing dramatically.

*Planner (2)*

*The perfect agency* had become *the worst agency in the world* and its people voted with their feet. It's unclear what led to its demise but some believe that changes in the top management played a part:

The management team changed quite a lot in those years and so, from where [the chief executive] left, the top level management team was never in place.

*Planner (4)*

#### **4.4.4 Discussion and further evidence**

The change from *the perfect agency* to *the worst agency in the world* pulled together many of the common themes that emerged through the interviews, presenting these as a collective experience of working at the same fictitious agency. Despite the slightly facetious nature of this exercise, it does help to highlight some important factors that influence executives' experiences of working in advertising agencies. It shows how volatile these can be, with the conflicting and contradicting accounts from 'before' and 'after' sometimes coming from the same respondent. The very things that initially provided stimulation can later offer precisely the opposite, leading to dissatisfaction and wanting to leave. Learning, autonomy, variety and leadership all emerge as crucial among this group, lending some support to the talent management strategies proposed by Michaels *et al* (2001).

It is also worth considering secondary data uncovered through the research in order to demonstrate further support for these findings. An IPA survey of executives of six or less years' experience asked what they most enjoyed about working in the industry:

1. Colleagues
2. Variety
3. Creativity / creative thinking / the creative process
4. Socialising
5. Atmosphere / working environment

*(IPA, 2005b: 12)*

This survey employed quantitative methods and was therefore required to pre-determine the available responses of those surveyed. However, there is consistency between these responses and the findings within this section and the preceding discussion around creativity and proximity to the creative process. Baxter also references the social aspects of advertising work, citing “*a strong pub culture*”, but adding that this comes with a pressure to be involved as “*non-participation suggests a lack of commitment*” (1990: 26). The importance of people, especially those at more senior levels, was also highlighted:

It's a people business: the assets of the company go up and down in the lift each day. Communication, persuasion, motivation, and management skills are vital.

*(Baxter, 1990: 26)*

Although extensive data is not available, these two industry reports lend support to the elements identified as contributing to *the perfect agency* in the previous section. The IPA survey also asked which things were least enjoyed:

1. Long hours culture
2. Low pay / low pay at junior levels

3. Pressure / stress at work / unrealistic workloads
4. Demanding clients
5. False people / arrogance / lack of integrity

(IPA, 2005b: 13)

Although pay didn't feature strongly in the interviews, it is interesting to see it appearing in the IPA report. This may derive from the slightly more junior profile within the IPA work where salaries can be an issue. However, the themes of stress and the nature of colleagues are both supportive of this study's findings, Baxter observing that "*late evening and week-end working is the norm*" (1990: 25). In addition, Klein found evidence of "*frustration with going over 'the same old debates'*" (2000a: 55), adding support to the increasing repetition and lack of variety identified by the respondents in this study. She also notes that the issues around finding balance between life inside and outside of work is something relatively new when compared to Baxter's (1990) work of ten years earlier. This may be supportive of some of the supposed characteristics of Generation Y and will be discussed in more detail in the next section.

#### **4.4.5 Summary**

This section has identified the features of agency life which can inspire, motivate and interest industry talent. It has also shown that these very features can have an entirely opposite effect. However, there may be some higher level issues, beyond the nature of the work and agency life, which also present challenges. These provide the focus of the next section.

## 4.5 Professional pride and identity

If people are proud of their organisation they are likely to stay longer, work harder and act as ambassadors for their organisation and its products and services.

*(Interbrand, 2008)*

This result, based on a survey of a cross-section of British employees, seems an apt place to open a discussion of how the respondents felt about their work and identity as advertising executives. The statement still seems to hold relevance if the word ‘organisation’ is replaced with ‘industry’ or ‘profession’ and it is this revised form which has been adopted.

### 4.5.1 The “Dark Art”

Some respondents exhibited a clear lack of pride, in some cases feelings of shame and embarrassment, about working in advertising: *“I would try to put a spin on what I do”*. One described a typical conversation with people about working on the McDonald’s account:

I always approached it apologetically. I say ‘I used to work in advertising’. [They’d say] ‘What on?’ [I’d answer] ‘McDonald’s’. I am the devil incarnate!

*Planner (1)*

Another talked about a young man she met while volunteering abroad, *“who was really quite stressed by the fact I worked in advertising. He found me really evil”*. These references to “evil” and the “devil” are consistent with the popular discourse of advertising as “Dark Art” (for example: Archer, 2001; Brooker,

2008; Ramchandani, 2005; Scott, 2008). This is perhaps best understood in the context of influential books such as *The Hidden Persuaders* (Packard, 1957) and, more recently, *No Logo* (Klein, 2000) which have popularised an image of advertising as manipulative, culturally corrosive and principally concerned with exploiting people's emotions for the purposes of sustaining consumption. Pollay (1986) offers a detailed inquiry into "*unintended consequences of advertising*", quoting within this a UNESCO report:

Regarded as a form of communication, it (advertising) has been criticized for playing on emotions, simplifying real human situations into stereotypes, exploiting anxieties, and employing techniques of intensive persuasion that amount to manipulation.

*(MacBride, 1980: 154)*

These arguments might offer some explanation for Advertising Executives appearing seventh from bottom of a *Today Program* list of the UK's most respected professions (BBC, 2002). The issue may be one of trust as alongside advertising executives in the list are MPs, Estate Agents and Car Dealers. Salzman (2007) discovered similar results in the USA and, as one respondent, in the present study observed, "*you are seen [as], well, lowest of the low*". This position of advertising in the public psyche is something which isn't lost on the industry itself. In his inaugural speech as IPA President, Moray MacLennan acknowledged that:

It is essential that we face up to the issue of public sentiment regarding what we do. People increasingly dislike the phenomena that is advertising. This is something we really shouldn't ignore.

*(MacLennan, 2007)*

It would appear that advertising suffers from an image problem resulting from how it goes about its business of persuasion and selling. This in turn creates a

stigma which affects the identities of those working within the industry. If one is identified as a participant in the “*Dark Art*” of advertising, it is understandable that this identity could lead to negative feelings towards one’s position within the industry. As the IPA noted:

This is clearly an area that the industry needs to address, in order that the personnel within it feel that they are undertaking a job that is perceived to be worthwhile and, more importantly, one in which they wish to remain.

*(IPA, 2005b: 17)*

#### **4.5.2 “Futile” Work**

Building further on the identity of advertising executives, the respondents also felt a lack of purpose working in advertising, a sense of the “*futility*” of the endeavour. Coupled with long hours and stress an imbalance is felt between the input and eventual output, there isn’t sufficient satisfaction with the end product to justify the effort required to produce it. In discussing these issues the respondents frequently cited specific products as exemplars of their frustrations:

- I had a massive crisis because I was getting quite stressed and working my guts out to get people to buy sweet corn with a picture of a giant<sup>29</sup> on it which costs 20p more. It’s not going to change the world and what’s the bloody point?

*Planner (1)*

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<sup>29</sup> This is a direct reference to Green Giant sweet corn.

- If Pot Noodle suddenly disappeared from our shelves the next day nobody would care! It's a completely redundant product nowadays and yet I am putting my effort and energy into trying to make it good for people.

*Planner (2)*

Another respondent summed this up succinctly, resenting the fact that he was, “*selling stuff you think is shit*”. As with the earlier comments, there is a lack of respect, verging on disdain, for the actual products they are being paid to advertise. Selling is perceived as the entire *raison d’etre* of their work, whereas they seek other personally more meaningful activities to engage their time and energy. This emphasis on selling is perhaps an oversimplification of the ends which advertising can serve (Advertising Association, 2008a; Butterfield, 2003). However, it is perhaps grounded in the notion that advertising should ultimately contribute to companies’ business performance in some way, however indirect that may be (Bartle, 1999; Butterfield, 2003). Although the respondents were not overtly against corporations in the manner of Klein (2000b) and her polemic *No Logo*, they did question the value of their work, what it contributes and to what extent it fulfils them. This sense of the futility of advertising can impact on identity, from their own perspective and that of those around them:

- What you have actually contributed? If you look back on your life’s work what have you done? It’s embarrassing and you have just sold a lot of shampoo.

*Account director (2)*

- I didn’t want people to think all I was doing was flogging more Flora Margarine or velvet toilet tissue...I care about what I was doing and what I felt about it and whatever other people felt about it.

*Planner (2)*

These reflections on the purpose of work and wanting to do more are not unique to advertising (Smedley, 2008). Common Purpose<sup>30</sup> make reference to a “*quarter life crisis*” in people between the ages of 25 and 35, “*a time when they evaluate what they’re doing and what they want from life*” (2004: 2). The comments above provide some supporting evidence to this phenomenon, reinforcing the findings that “*people want careers that add purpose to their lives*” (*ibid*: 2).

In the initial analysis of the data a conclusion was drawn which equated the need for purpose with a desire to give something back to society. However, following one of the industry expert interviews, this was reviewed in light of the comment that, “*I think a lot of people have that questioning of ‘how important is this?’ but most of them don’t have that quest to help society*”. Although two respondents quite clearly did have a desire to help society, this wasn’t universal. There are therefore two strands to the theme of purpose, one related to the desire to give something back to society, the other concerning the ultimate meaninglessness of advertising. These are explored in turn.

### **4.5.3 Purpose within work**

One way of reconciling the need to give something back to society is to find advertising clients from charity, government and not-for-profit sectors. Some respondents had done this and found greater satisfaction as a result. However, one observed that “*there’s not enough government stuff to go around*”. These types of accounts<sup>31</sup> represent only 4.3% of all advertising expenditure in the UK

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<sup>30</sup> Common Purpose is a leadership development charity ([www.commonpurpose.org.uk](http://www.commonpurpose.org.uk)).

<sup>31</sup> These are the advertising accounts for Government (local and national), Social and Political Organisations, Charities, Societies & Institutions and the Education sector (Advertising Association, 2008b).

(Advertising Association, 2008b) and so the reality is that any employment in advertising is likely to involve a significantly higher proportion of work for profit-making enterprises than otherwise. This is just the way it is, despite one respondent justifying the amorality of advertising saying, “*advertising doesn’t have any values in itself...I don’t really have any ethical issues about it*”, mirroring Ogilvy’s contention that “*advertising is only evil when it advertises evil things*” (1983: 207). Pollay (1986) would dispute this on the grounds that in order to understand advertising’s influence it is necessary to consider the aggregate of all activity as opposed to the impact of individual advertisements or campaigns. However, in the context of feeling pride in one’s work, the question becomes one of alignment between individual values and those of client companies. For example, one respondent enjoyed working on a campaign for Dove soap because it sought to challenge stereotypical portrayals of beauty and “*thinking [about] what effect what you put out on the world has on the world*”.

#### **4.5.4 Purpose outside of work**

One respondent described how the all consuming nature of agency work meant that finding purpose through activities outside advertising just wasn’t possible:

If it’s going to become your whole life then you start to question whether it’s a bit futile. But if it’s balanced then that doesn’t matter quite as much.

*Account director (2)*

This begins to move into issues of work-life balance, something also highlighted in two recent industry surveys (IPA, 2005b; Klein, 2000a). The “*futility*” and “*insignificance*” of advertising work is exacerbated by its all-consuming nature, leading to greater questioning than if purpose and meaning could be found elsewhere. The respondents all have significant non-advertising interests

including the creative activities discussed earlier, wanting to travel, start a business and more. The lack of time outside of work meant these interests remained either partially or completely neglected. One respondent felt that even simple activities such as attending an evening class were not possible because of the inability to commit due to work pressures. Another felt she had found the solution in a part time role but soon realised that this wasn't workable due to the demands of the job. Ultimately this nullifies the fact that *"there are loads of other things you want to do in your life as well"*.

The net result is that the respondents were spending significant proportions of their lives at work, making this a key component of their identity. The views of those around them towards advertising and their feelings about the futility of it all meant that questions had to be asked about what they were doing with their lives and careers. In discussing work-life balance, one of the industry experts asserted that this should always be phrased *"life-work balance...because people's lives matter more to them than their work"*.

The lack of balance between life inside and outside of work can also take its toll on personal relationships. The observation that *"people's lives matter more"* coupled with the sociable nature of advertising executives means that damage to friendships and family relationships are going to be serious:

I remember working on one pitch, I'd done nothing but work for a month. I hadn't seen any of my friends for a month and I bumped into two of them at the tube one morning and just burst into tears. I was like fuck I haven't seen any of my friends for four weeks, this is ridiculous.

*Planner (1)*

The impact of the work on this executive's personal life is explicit. If this takes place within the context of questioning the value and meaning of advertising then it isn't surprising that many seek alternative directions for their working

lives, perhaps doing things that they feel *do* provide purpose or which aren't all consuming, thereby allowing space for other interests and relationships.

#### **4.5.5 An alternative perspective**

Two respondents made no mention of purpose and meaning. These were the same two that had held more grounded expectations of working in the industry, perhaps as a result of having some industry-relevant education prior to their first job. Further, although no longer working for advertising agencies, they are now in the related sectors of PR and Brand Consultancy. They left the industry not to find purpose but to regain creativity in their work and widen their remit beyond just advertising. For them, the scope of advertising work was limiting and they wanted to do more than just make advertisements:

I was starting to feel restricted by the solution to every problem having to be an ad.

*Planner (4)*

I had got slightly more interested in the bigger picture than the advertising...I was slightly compromised now and again by saying I had to write a brief for advertising when I didn't necessarily think they [the client] should do any advertising.

*Planner (5)*

Both make reference to pressure from their agencies to recommend advertising to their clients when other, perhaps better, solutions were available. This taps into a wider debate within Adland about how agencies diversify what they offer beyond traditional TV and print advertising. The respondent who went to the Brand Consultancy wanted to work at a more strategic level which wasn't

possible in an agency whose core competency was advertising. The respondent who left to work in PR wanted greater proximity to and influence over the creative process, but also a need to be “*totally open to the solution to a [client] problem*”. In discussing the contrast between advertising and PR he suggests that, in PR, “*our core isn’t about coming up with this one thing. We can go into way more different areas [than advertising]*”.

To an extent these needs to move beyond just advertising relate back to the earlier themes of boredom and lack of variety. Perhaps advertising is itself limiting in this respect and, as one respondent commented, has “*a shelf life*”.

#### **4.5.6 Professional credibility**

Socially I was dissatisfied with working in advertising...I wanted to be part of something that had a bit more prestige.

*Planner (2)*

This comment gets to the heart of advertising’s lack of respect as a ‘profession’. The same respondent also remarked that you are “*not massively well respected as a profession. You are not really looked up to that much*”. Versus other professional services, another suggested that advertising was seen as the “*slightly woolly end of the spectrum*”, adding that “*to be terribly honest, it is!*” Further references included “*double art on Friday*” and “*the namby-pamby world of artsy advertising*”. The industry and its work are portrayed as “*frivolous*”, not worthy of being taken seriously as a profession. Describing one of the reasons she wanted to move out of the industry one respondent remarked:

I got to a stage where, for my career development, I need to go and do something a bit more grown up...[advertising has the] kind of people who get wheeled in, who make things look pretty and do some stuff and then it doesn't necessarily add to the bottom line.

*Planner (5)*

Added to the ultimate futility of advertising work is the effect that this and wider societal perceptions have on the identities of those occupied in Adland. The industry doesn't hold the respect and prestige that other professions can offer to their practitioners. This is problematic for those within Adland as they attempt to locate themselves and their identities and the value that these give them.

In the context of MBAs and their role for those in management, Barach & Peiperl observe that *"People need recognition and respect, and professionalism provides both to those who are active in a recognized field"* (2000: 70). Advertising has yet to establish itself as a *"recognized field"* and this has an impact on executives within Adland. The industry efforts to professionalise, via qualifications such as the Diploma, have yet to make an impact as these issues of recognition and respect are still felt by these new advertising 'professionals'. Establishing a profession is clearly a slow process and, assuming that it is possible in the first place, Adland will need to consider how it handles this period of transition.

## **4.6 Summary of findings**

Before moving onto the conclusions and recommendations it is worth briefly reflecting on the initial objectives of this study and the extent to which these have been met within the findings and analysis.

### **Objective 1**

*To understand the career expectations of individuals joining Adland.*

This was covered in some depth with popular and industry portrayals of advertising work shown to have an influence on the expectations of those joining agencies. However, these can often lead to disappointment when the reality of the work isn't as fun, exciting and creative as they were led to believe.

### **Objective 2**

*To understand the factors leading to individuals moving from one agency to another within Adland.*

Many interrelated influences are present here including colleagues, learning, autonomy, variety and leadership. These can work positively to provide an inspiring and valued working environment but can also have a negative impact, turning people off an agency or the industry altogether.

### **Objective 3**

*To understand the factors that lead people to leave Adland and pursue careers elsewhere.*

Some of the reasons people leave agencies are also the reasons why they leave the industry. Failure to meet their pre-entry expectations is also an influence. However, there are some more fundamental issues that affect the decision to leave Adland resulting from the perceived futility of the work, the lack of public regard and respect for advertising and the all-consuming nature of agency life.

## **5. Conclusions and recommendations**



## **5.1 Conclusions**

This research has met its core objectives of gaining an understanding of why people join advertising agencies, what influences their movement within the industry and then what causes them to leave and pursue employment elsewhere. These findings have been discussed in some depth and it is now time to offer some concluding remarks and tentative recommendations as to what Adland and the agencies within it should do as a result. There is also some reflection on the limitations of the research and suggestions for future studies in this area.

### **5.1.1 Protean careers**

The frequency of movement among agencies and out of the industry lends support to the existence of protean careers (Hall, 1996) among advertising executives. This behaviour suggests that lasting employment with one organisation isn't expected and that they are confident in their own value and employability (Clarke & Patrickson, 2008; Viney & Adamson, 1997). The confidence to drive one's own career may derive from the typical pools utilised in advertising recruitment: top performers from top universities. Having fought off competition from other high-achieving graduates they have a strong sense of their own worth to existing and future employers. Added to this value, among the respondents in this research, is their completion of the Diploma, the IPA's top qualification. There is also evidence that advertising agencies offer many informal learning opportunities, further increasing the value of their people. This creates a group confident in its ability to change employer and which is more than capable of doing so, adding to evidence of a changing power dynamic in the employment relationship (Lubitsh *et al*, 2007; Schoemaker & Jonker, 2005) which, in turn, is driving interest in talent management.

### **5.1.2 Influencing the movement of talent**

The study found a complex set of factors affecting executives' vocational decision making including repetitive work, lack of creative opportunity, stagnation of learning and feeling that advertising wasn't fulfilling some need for purpose in work and life. While none of these was dominant, they combine to drive the decision to leave agency life. These combinations provide a construction of what different individuals want from work, which may or may not match what they are getting. The ideal situation arises when significant overlap exists between what the individual wants and what the agency is providing. The problems occur when this overlap becomes more tenuous, leading to disillusionment and dissatisfaction for the individual and, for the agency, the loss of talent. It can be concluded that establishing congruence between individual and organisational needs is a pre-requisite of any attempt to influence the movement of talent within organisational or occupational boundaries.

This conclusion suggests that the talent management literature has, to date, given too much emphasis to the organisational perspective. The very terminology employed implies that talent is a resource that can be identified, classified and managed by organisations. Lewis & Heckman (2006) offered Barney's (1991) resource based view as a model on which organisations can strategically approach their talent management processes, cementing this conception of talent as some homogenous entity rather than a diverse assortment of individuals, with their associated expectations, needs and values. What this research has found is that identifying talent is only the beginning. The more complicated next stage is understanding who this talent is and what they want from organisations and their employment relationships. Only an intimate knowledge of this type will allow any progress for organisations wishing to motivate and retain their best people, especially in the protean career landscape.

### **5.1.3 The nature and structure of work**

While the Lewis & Heckman (2006) work focuses primarily on how talent is identified and developed from an organisational point of view, other authors do suggest how work can be structured to meet the abilities and needs of high performing staff (Michaels *et al*, 2001). The need to provide learning, autonomy, stretch assignments and leadership (*ibid*) is consistent with the findings in this research. This is perhaps unsurprising given the sample of academically interested and high achieving individuals. What is perhaps distinct in this study's findings, in relation to the advertising industry, are some of the issues around the unfulfilled needs for creativity and purpose in one's work. It is unclear to what extent these hold relevance beyond advertising, although the trends suggested within the literature on Generation Y (Eisner, 2005, for example) would indicate that the question of purpose is one which will become more important over time.

Related to the issue of finding purpose in work is how it can be attained outside of work. In other words, the ability for other interests or relationships to provide a sense of purpose if this is absent from the working day. The need for greater "*life-work*" balance is not new to the advertising industry (IPA, 2005b; Klein, 2000a), but the findings of this study would suggest that little has been done by agencies to address the issue. Again, if the trends within Generation Y hold true, then this challenge will only increase in importance.

Within the "*life-work*" balance debate are also a number of issues relating to stress and burnout. Casserley & Megginson (2008) note that high performers can be more susceptible to stress and burnout because they perceive greater pressure to perform. There was some evidence for this in the present study as the respondents were stretched by working on existing accounts while also being required to contribute time and effort to pitching for new business. Gilbreath

(2008) sees such factors as contributing to the “*psychosocial environment*” of workplaces and that this can affect the “*career-conduciveness*” of organisations. In other words, organisations are more likely to retain careers within their boundaries if they provide a working environment that is conducive to this happening. This suggests that there may be ways that agencies can better structure their work and working environment in order to increase their “*career-conduciveness*” (*ibid*) and, therefore, the probability of people wishing to stay.

#### **5.1.4 Individual needs and “*anchors*”**

People choose advertising work in the belief that it will be fun, creative, exciting, and glamorous. The reality is then something far more prosaic, leaving a disconnection between what individuals want and what they get from agency life. Schein (1996) would contend that these expectations in individuals arise from stable career “*anchors*” and that failing to meet them sets up an ongoing problem as the anchor and the nature of agency work both remain fixed. This research might offer support to an alternative view that anchors can change over time in the same way that individuals change. Those that were seeking fun, excitement and glamour in their early 20’s may be looking for entirely different things in their life and work as they enter their 30’s. The prospect of working in advertising might be attractive to those emerging from universities but may hold less appeal for those with mortgages and seeking to start families.

Perhaps advertising does have “*a shelf life*”, that after doing it for a while, it ceases to provide the variety, challenge and learning that it once did. This leads to boredom and seeking these important and valued features of work elsewhere. This seems to have played some part in the movements of all the respondents, including those who left to join related industries following frustration over the limitations imposed by advertising agency work. In general, it seems that there

is much scope for agencies to fail to meet early and evolving expectations of work and that this creates a lack of congruence between individual and organisational needs, ultimately resulting in the loss of key industry talent.

### **5.1.5 The influence of friends, family and the wider public**

A key finding in the specific context of advertising agencies is the contrasting sets of public perceptions and how they impact on career choices. While the stereotypical Champagne-swilling, Ferrari-driving Adman provides one imprint on the public psyche, there are other ways that advertising and the people who work in it are perceived. These range from being seen as slightly flaky to bigger ethical questions about their involvement in advertising. Those entering the industry are attracted by the first of these, while either remaining ignorant or neglecting to recognise the latter. However, once assuming the role and identity of an advertising executive, it seems that the more negative associations can gain prominence while the previously idealised portrayal becomes increasingly distant. The influence of friends and family appears to have some sway here as they struggle with the frequent question, *'so, what do you do?'*

The negative images of advertising executives as manipulative and coercive were not, however, universally influential. The two respondents who left to join related industries made no mention of these issues and seemed quite comfortable with their roles in this respect. The impact of friends, family and the wider public may not affect everyone in the same way and it could be that some individuals hold values which are better suited to advertising work than others. It isn't clear whether these values emerge over time or whether it might be possible for agencies to assess them among job applicants prior to filling entry-level vacancies. This returns to the question of whether Schein's (1996) anchors are stable over time or changing.

### **5.1.6 Inappropriate recruitment**

A common thread through many of these conclusions and something that is striking within this research is that agencies may be guilty of attracting and recruiting the wrong types of people in the first place. The whole problem of people leaving the industry could simply be a reflection of those that join it to begin with. The disillusionment resulting from not finding what they were looking for, the eventual boredom they experienced and the feeling that their work was meaningless could all result from the types of people that agencies recruit. While it might be possible to develop all sorts of systems to help retain industry talent, these efforts will ultimately be in vain if the people who join the industry are fundamentally unsuited or averse to the work of advertising. This almost comes full circle back to the aspect of talent management which wasn't reviewed in this study, that of recruiting high performers. While agencies appear to be recruiting *academically* high performers, they aren't necessarily recruiting those who will become and, more importantly, *remain* high performers *in advertising*.

### **5.1.7 Summary of conclusions**

This research set out to “*investigate the career choices of advertising executives and the implications of these for talent management within Adland*”. What it has found is that career choices are affected by a multitude of individual and societal influences, many of particular relevance to advertising. These career choices are driven by what people want from their work, the identities they wish to hold and the ways that friends, family and the wider public regard their occupation. To discuss talent management without reference to the individuals (or talent) that is to be managed fails to recognise the importance of these people and their expectations, needs and values. It is to account solely for the

externally observable components of careers while ignoring the more fundamental internal factors which influence people and their vocational decision making. This research has used the framework of observable career paths to explore the internal drivers of these careers and the people who own them. Advertising agencies wishing to retain talent through organisationally-bounded career paths must recognise that they can only increase the probability of doing so, as it is the individuals who will ultimately decide whether they stay or go. This study therefore offers some recommendations for agencies wishing to increase their odds in this respect.

## **5.2 Recommendations**

### **5.2.1 Careers information**

Agencies must better communicate the nature of advertising work. This can be done via industry bodies such as the IPA but must also involve improvements at the level of individual agencies. Simple steps such as maintaining careers and job seekers pages on websites would be a low cost way of helping people gain an understanding of what jobs in advertising actually involve. Such pages could include testimonials from existing staff to provide a sense of ‘the good, the bad and the ugly’, thereby presenting a balanced view to prospective applicants.

### **5.2.2 Work experience**

Agencies might consider providing a more consistent and structured approach to work experience within the industry, not just offering this to friends and family of existing management and clients. Some steps are being taken by the IPA in this area with the introduction of its *Summer Schools*<sup>32</sup> programme, but more could happen to make work experience more widely accessible. For example, the IPA could provide agencies with a template format for offering work experience in order share knowledge and best practice among its members.

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<sup>32</sup> The format for these is that a group of agencies each sponsor an eight-week placement for a student while the IPA facilitates a series of lectures in order to provide a sense of group among those on the programme who would otherwise have no contact with anyone outside their sponsor agency.

### **5.2.3 Entry level recruitment**

If, as suggested, there *are* individuals whose values are better suited to advertising work then agencies would do well to recruit against these in some way. Further research would be needed to identify these values but this could be done by speaking to those who have remained in the industry for a long time.

The industry should also reconsider the need for recruiting top performing graduates. While this has remained as the traditional recruitment pool for entry level positions it may be that those with advertising related degrees or even those without degrees could offer alternative sources. Projects such as the IPA's Diagonal Thinking<sup>33</sup> (Pringle *et al*, 2007) suggest that there are relatively unchanging thought processes that are common among those that enjoy long careers in advertising and so these could be recruited against at any level, not just graduates. There are also many examples of former 'back office' staff going on to run their own agencies (Campaign, 2008a) offering further support to the view that it isn't just graduates who can go the distance in advertising.

### **5.2.4 Understanding people**

Agencies need to better understand the people that work with them. Regular appraisals with outcomes that are implemented would be one way of doing this, helping to avert boredom arising from working for too long on one account and allowing future pitches and learning opportunities to be identified. Although it has been recommended many times previously there is also a need for agencies

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<sup>33</sup> The Diagonal Thinking hypothesis suggests that those most suited to advertising's combination of creativity and business exhibit a special ability to operate and oscillate between linear (logical) and lateral (creative) thought processes. More information and a self-assessment tool can be found at [www.diagonalthinking.co.uk](http://www.diagonalthinking.co.uk).

to adopt a more progressive approach to flexible working. Doing so could allow executives to maintain interests and relationships outside of work, helping to avoid advertising work becoming all consuming. Providing space in which to find purpose and meaning outside of work could also help address the perceived lack of these within advertising.

### **5.2.5 Professionalism and ethics**

The industry should continue with efforts to professionalise. Although this is a long term strategy, it is crucial that, in time, advertising executives can work within a credible industry that is respected by clients and the wider public. While promoting CPD and professional qualifications are moves in the right direction, agencies may also need to address some of the ethical challenges associated with advertising work in order to take a more active position within debates such as those cited by Pollay (1986). Engaging in these issues could help to demonstrate leadership rather than what some have found to be a case of “*moral myopia*” within the industry (Drumwright & Murphy, 2004).

### **5.2.6 Reappraising agency structures**

The industry might also explore different structural models for agencies. Some of the issues around creativity and proximity to the process relate to agency size and there may be an optimum form which contributes to better creative work *and* provides greater satisfaction for those in ‘non-creative’ roles. Greiner (1972) suggests that creativity is the preserve of smaller, younger, organisations while one agency network in the Far East sets up a new company each time a certain size is reached in order to preserve *its* creativity (Kendall, 2008). This is an area where research into smaller agencies would be valuable.

## **5.3 Limitations and further research**

The conclusions of this study have largely been situated within existing theoretical models while attempting to adapt these for the knowledge discovered in the specific context of advertising agencies. Some additional conclusions have also offered up new substantive theory about this industry and the people within it. It may be some time before anyone takes an academic interest in this topic again but it is nonetheless worth highlighting some ways in which the current study could be extended to further build upon its findings and contribute to formal grounded theory in the future.

### **5.3.1 Extending the industry scope**

This research was limited to some extent by those that volunteered their time to be interviewed. These were mainly former planners from large agencies and so it doesn't necessarily follow that their accounts are representative of the wider industry. It would therefore be useful to extend the present study to see if the findings apply across other job functions, in particular creative and account handling, although the latter was partially covered by this research. It would also be good to research smaller agencies for any differences among their people.

### **5.3.2 Extending the time scale**

If it were possible from a resource perspective then a longitudinal study would be useful. This could be based on the graduate intake from a given year and would provide an ongoing account of their time in the industry. One limitation of this research was that it required respondents to look back on their time in advertising rather than gaining direct accounts of how they felt at the time of

each critical event. Taking a longitudinal approach would, for example, allow expectations of the industry to be captured while they are still expectations, and moves between agencies could be discussed while they are happening rather than relying on memories after the event. Such research would probably need annual interviews as standard with ad hoc meetings scheduled around key events such as moves between and out of agencies.

### **5.3.3 Focus on the ‘stayers’**

While this study concentrated on a group of individuals who had taken the decision to leave the industry it would be helpful to talk to others who have been in the business for much longer. This might reveal traits that contrast with those found among the respondents in this study and which might hold value for agency recruitment efforts. For example, perhaps those who have spent many years in the business either don't have a desire to be creative in their work or have found ways of fulfilling this need elsewhere. Alternatively, there may be a particular set of values suited to the work of advertising and that these can be shown to be relatively stable over time. It would therefore be a beneficial extension of the present study to pick up some of its key themes and explore them among people who have opted to remain within the industry. An extension of this type would be fairly straight forward to conduct as it would rely on those still in the industry at senior levels with whom the IPA has strong relationships.

### **5.3.4 Understand existing talent management**

This study relied on some assumptions which guided the identification of agency talent from outside the agencies themselves, the perhaps crude measure of selection for industry training courses. It would be helpful to go back to one of

the original intentions of the research and talk to agency HR and senior management about how they actually go about the process of talent management, perhaps offering some of this study's findings as discussion points. Doing so would help to better ground the research by adding knowledge of what actually happens in agency talent management processes to the ways that this is experienced by those considered to be industry talent.

### **5.3.5 Testing the theory**

The findings of this research offer many possible routes for further enquiry, some of which have been identified. They begin to provide a framework through which future investigations into this subject can proceed and some ideas about where relevant and interesting data might be found. This study has provided an initial attempt to ground some theory through academic enquiry but these findings clearly need additional data before more concrete conclusions can be drawn.



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# Appendices



## **Appendix A - Sample interview schedule**

### **Introduction from researcher to cover:**

- Brief background on research interest: advertising executives leaving the industry.
- Outline of interview protocol including confidentiality, who would be reading the report and notification of recording being made.
- Outline of the broad structure of the interview: linear discussion of the career to date and key moments within it.
- Opportunity to ask any questions or seek clarity if required.

### **Main body of interview to cover:**

- Ice breaker, what they wanted to be when they were younger for example.
- A-level subjects (or equivalent) studied, subject and location of degree, year of graduation and whether a GAP year taken.
- Exploration of how and why they got into advertising: What attracted them, how determined were they, what alternatives did they consider?
- Discussion of their first job in advertising: What they liked/disliked, was it what they expected, what led them to leave?

- Discussion of any further jobs in advertising: Why did they move there, how was the process of moving initiated, what attracted them, what led to them leaving?
- Discussion of move out of advertising: Why did they want to move, how did it happen, how was it initiated, what was pushing them away, what were they attracted by outside, what have they been doing since they left?

**Summary discussion to cover:**

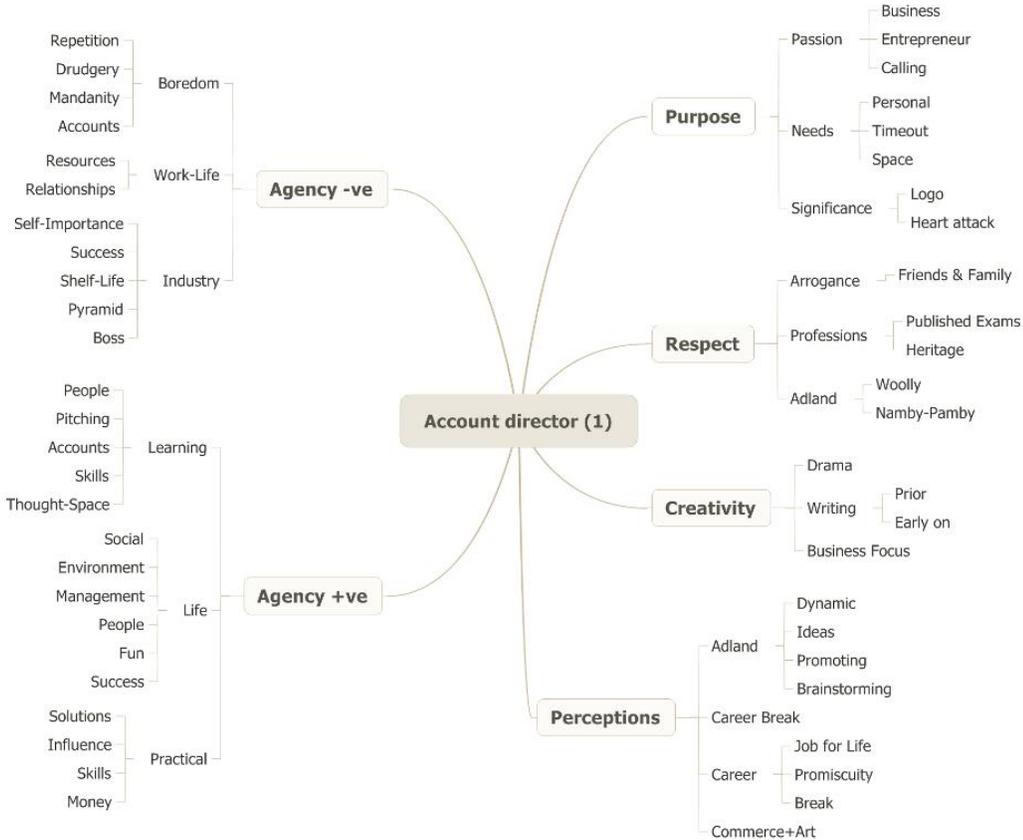
- Any other comments on any of the discussion so far.
- Details of next steps in the research process including timings for completion.
- Thanks.

## Appendix B - Open codes, full list

|                |                   |              |            |
|----------------|-------------------|--------------|------------|
| Accounts       | Entrepreneur      | Peers        | Security   |
| Ambition       | Ethics            | People       | Solutions  |
| Autonomy       | Friends & Family  | Perceptions  | Space      |
| Boredom        | Fun               | Pitching     | Stagnation |
| Career         | Headhunters       | Politics     | Stress     |
| Challenge      | Holding Companies | Professions  | Structure  |
| Clients        | Industry          | Progression  | Success    |
| Communications | Learning          | Promiscuity  | Valued     |
| Competitive    | Luck              | Protean      | Variety    |
| Confidence     | Management        | Purpose      | Wastage    |
| Contribution   | Money             | Recognition  | Work-Life  |
| Creativity     | Mundanity         | Reputation   | Youth      |
| Culture        | Nurture           | Respect      |            |
| Determination  | Part-Time         | Restrictions |            |
| Disillusion    | Passion           | Safety       |            |



# Appendix C - Individual 'mind map' showing themes within categories, Account director (1)



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