

# The vision thing

So, you've got the location and the space sorted, now what? Managers from three leading design studios discuss what it takes to run a successful business.

By Mark Sinclair. Photography by Thomas Ball

**T**he business side of a creative studio should never be overlooked: it's what enables it to make work. But how exactly is it done? We spoke to Georgina Lee, managing director at This Is Real Art; Patricia Finegan, managing director at Spin; and Louise Ramsay, studio manager at A Practice For Everyday Life about the day-to-day running of a creative business.

To start off, can you tell me a bit about what managing a studio entails?

**LOUISE RAMSAY, APFEL:** I think the things we probably have in common are scheduling people's time, ensuring everyone knows what they're doing, keeping an eye on our budgets – both the studio budget and our electricity bills – as well as our client's budgets. I also do a lot of the production on the print side; dealing with printers, repro houses, checking proofs and getting quotes.

**PATRICIA FINEGAN, SPIN:** A large part of it is facilitating the easy working of the studio. It's less about 'management' but ensuring that the place is clean, warm and friendly and that the designers know what to do; making sure they have what they need in order to do that. That they understand the client's expectations, their budgets and the deadlines. Sometimes it means you have to be strict with how a project is delivered, or about the timelines that have to be met. You don't impose your own management on them, it's about allowing them to flourish.

**GEORGINA LEE, THIS IS REAL ART:** It's also managing that tension. In every project there's a tension between making the best creative work with great ideas and keeping the client happy. There's always that tension between what the client wants, what the creatives want, with getting enough money to help the business grow. It's a lot of juggling. Every day you can be doing a different role, depending what's thrown at you.

Do you have a role in organising the studio space itself?

**LR:** Yes, the physical environment is, in a lot of ways, really important. We recently moved, and it kept coming up how it felt to work there – that the walls were clean, the desks weren't too messy, that the lighting was right and the designers felt comfortable.

**GL:** I think that's key. Everybody works really hard and we spend a lot of time in the studio; you want it to feel as creative a place as possible. But it also has to have places to escape to, where you can be quiet.

What sorts of skills are important for the job?

**LR:** Being good with people is key. There's a lot of 'absorbing' that goes into it as well, as you're a kind of filter for everything. To then transfer pressure on in a good way, not let it feel too oppressive. The designers need to think clearly to come up with ideas.

**PF:** It's like operating a tightrope between the design facility and the client. One thing I've found that's very dangerous is that project managers become internal clients – it depresses a studio. It makes it feel like the designers have the client sitting next to them. It's easy to be bossy. But it's much more complicated than that.

**GL:** No matter how good your planning and your scheduling is – the trains never really run on time. It's having to work out how to re-jig things and having the ability to move out of the guidelines, too. Sometimes they're too restrictive, then there's no joy and you don't get great work. You need an element of tension and chaos.

**PF:** Fundamental to a client-designer relationship is that special artistic connection. The reason that clients come to us is they're looking to tap into something really unique. It's like working with an artist; you don't really want to work with the artist's manager, you want to feel that the artist is working with you. And you need to help that process as much as possible. There's my side of things which is budgets, timelines, scheduling, anything practical, and then there's the other side which is much more esoteric and emotive. Combining >



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This Is Real Art*

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*Patricia Finegan, founder and  
managing director, Spin*

*“In what other job can you walk into a  
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< those two things is what gives you a great job at the end of it.

What's important in generating a good atmosphere at work? How do you keep the studio happy, motivated or inspired?

**LR:** Chocolate biscuits.

**GL:** It's as simple as that.

**PF:** Yes, and communication. Designers often find it easier to work by themselves and it's a healthier, happier place if they're encouraged to talk to each other. That's why biscuits are such a success. We have tea at four o'clock every day – it's about keeping conversation going all the time.

Louise, you manage a smaller amount of people at APFEL. Do you still find you need to get them away from their desks?

**LR:** Wrench them away. The pub is a big help with that. But yes, we've just moved studios and one of the things we discussed is where we're going to sit and have lunch. We had a small space before and so wanted to have a nice big table, choose a good coffee machine and a fridge. We didn't have a space to get together before. It's important to remember you're a studio, not individual freelancers working in the same building.

**PF:** Yes, often I hear the balls rack up on the pool table at the most pressured times! Because that's exactly what you need to do. If the designers have a question they might need answered – this can free it up.

So there's actually a bit of psychology involved here, listening out for things that tell you how the studio is working?

**LR:** Yes. I think music is also a big part of it.

Perhaps someone will be having a tricky time with a project, or be frustrated by it, and then all of a sudden someone will play something loud or ridiculous and everybody comes out of their own space.

**GL:** Music is key. One of our questions when we get people in to interview is, 'Do you love David Bowie?' If you don't; sorry. We also play this fantastic recording of The Troggs where they have this argument in the studio and every so often, when there's deadlines, it's tense, we put that on and everyone stops what they're doing and starts laughing.

**PF:** Spotify has revolutionised our studio. Now people aren't judged solely by their iPod playlists.

You mentioned project deadlines, which of course fall into your remit. Can you tell us

about the systems you have in place here, what packages and programmes you use?

**LR:** We use one called Merlin. I use it to give myself an overview of everything if I have, say, 15 projects going on at the same time. I can see all the deadlines that way. It's easy for me to use but I would love to be a software designer and design something that is visually stimulating. As with the sides of your brain being different, I think creative people like to see something in a visual way. The last thing you want to do is give a designer an Excel spreadsheet to look at, as it just won't go in.

**GL:** We invested in something called Traffic about nine months ago which allows us to do all the planning and the scheduling, and even allows the designers to do timesheets, very simply! One thing that we all have to do on our side is work out if we're budgeting

### A little extra help: software systems that assist studio managers

Adnet offers a complete agency management package that can help with estimates, invoices and time sheets (and everything in between). Documents and layouts are also fully customisable. [adnetltd.co.uk](http://adnetltd.co.uk)

Co.efficient software manages a creative job through from estimates and scheduling, to purchase ordering, costs monitoring and invoicing. It also links to accounts packages such as Sage and QuickBooks. [coefficientsoftware.com](http://coefficientsoftware.com)

Paprika software provides a client management and accounting system for studios and is used by over 350 creative companies. They also offer a number of support services. [paprika-software.com](http://paprika-software.com)

Streamtime software brings together a job tracking and scheduling system and helps with quoting, invoicing and timesheets. It's nicely designed and even comes as an iPhone App. [previewstreamtime.com](http://previewstreamtime.com)

Traffic is Sohna Software's tool for creating business estimates and tracking invoices. It also comes with reporting software that works out profitability and cash flow. [sobnar.co.uk](http://sobnar.co.uk)





properly, if we're making money out of these jobs. Traffic allows us to work out whether we're budgeting for things correctly. It was a big thing to change to and it links in with our accountancy stuff now, too. I love my reports! I get very excited.

**PF:** I carry around cashflow forecasts!

So is there an inner geek in all of you?

**GL:** Absolutely.

**PF:** Yes, of course.

**GL:** I think that, actually, the business side of it is really creative. It's really exciting – you have to evolve and adapt as everything changes. The organisations that survive are the ones that are flexible, that move with the information they have in front of them.

**PF:** You have to be a flexible thinker. The one thing that's absolutely certain is change, things are going to keep changing day in, day out. You can't 'time-manage' all the projects, things are actually more holistic.

**GL:** You need to know the key dates – 'micro managing' from hour to hour can all be blown away in a second.

**PF:** What you were saying about it being an exciting creative job is true. What other job would mean that in the same day you can walk into London's biggest contemporary arts dealer and talk to them about a show, go over for a meeting at a broadcast channel, and then walk to see somebody that makes small pots? With all the characters you meet on the way, people skills come into play.

**LR:** Do you think that studio managers are always creative people? I always think of myself as being 'creative' but I'm obviously not a designer, I enjoy working in that environment. They know that I appreciate what they're doing. If you don't have that appreciation of creativity, then you won't necessarily have a good relationship with your designers because they're just going to see you as a pen pusher.

**GL:** Being creative doesn't mean you have to go to school and learn how to design. Our creative director, Paul Belford, has a PhD in biochemistry – he's a self taught creative. My background is in psychology; Kate, our other

partner is from the music industry. All of us at TIRA are encouraged to have ideas.

**PF:** For most designers, a lot of this practical stuff is actually really hard. I know designers who, if their wife asks them to pay the gas bill, they walk around with it for three months in their pocket, worrying about it. It becomes this little cloud that sits along with them. And if you combine a whole bunch of clouds, then it's not possible to design anything, you've lost all your space. Having us there gives them a massive opportunity to earn much more space in their day to design.

How do you communicate things like deadlines with your teams? Do you email, or walk around and arrange meetings?

**PF:** We have a Monday morning planning meeting where we work out what's happening that week – key dates and deadlines – but that's never enough. So we tend to schedule in specific meetings throughout the week on particular briefs. You sit down and have a chat; it's much more productive than emailing.

**LR:** It's important that people in the studio understand what each other is doing too.

**GL:** We meet Monday morning and look through the schedules. But then you can get a phone call and it can all change. That's the hard part.

**PF:** That's where flexibility comes in, or you can say to a client that they're being unreasonable.

**GL:** A really good lesson for all of us is to say, 'No'. Saying 'No' is really liberating but is actually really hard to do. We've turned down projects because of deadlines and it's always a difficult moment. When you're starting a business you just want stuff to come through – but it's very easy to be mediocre and with all of us, our reputations are based on doing really great work.

**PF:** You're right, it's about having an open a dialogue with your clients as you do with your designers. Clients are not ogres – you can say 'we would like to do this, but the time isn't right for us to give you what we think you need'. We're not instructing the clients, we're telling it as it is and that's an important part of our job too.

What would you say was most important to get on top of, if you're running a studio? And what's the biggest mistake people make?

**LR:** Not communicating, that can be the biggest problem. If you stop that with your designers or your clients, then that's disastrous. You have to know what everyone is doing. Keep your client updated. Nothing annoys more than a surprise.

**GL:** Often people focus on the moment, not

## WORKLIFE

Readers' workspaces #5/5



Ben Stone, The Visual Works, Stanton Lacy, Shropshire, [visualworks.co.uk](http://visualworks.co.uk)

Our studios are over two open-plan floors with a mezzanine. Our entrance hall opens right up to the second storey oak timbered ceiling – clients love it. Sounds good? It has its downsides: the

nearest post office and sarnie shop are about two miles away – nearest town about four. There are no motorcycle couriers, clients get lost, we have to travel big distances to bring in work

and we don't earn the money we would in a city. But if we were in a different environment we'd have different influences, a different pace and produce different work.

the future. How can we develop new business and new ideas? When you're busy the last think you want to think about is six months down the line but it's so important. In a short space of time the client you're working with may have moved on. So think about the long term as well as the projects you're working on.

**PF:** It's what I mentioned before, when the project managers become the internal client; they become bossy. They forget what their role is and dictate terms to designers. It's a lose-lose situation but it can happen often. When you're under pressure, you need to keep your head ensuring you don't communicate that pressure to the design team.

What drives you mad about working with designers?

**GL:** They always want more time and more from the budget!

**LR:** Sometimes not understanding that the

client has a position as well, to see it from their side, that they need to see the job done.

**PF:** Not reading the brief, that's always a good one. It's fundamental. It's about putting their agendas to one side and answering the problems that the client has. From the off.

**LR:** Sometimes the client has their own knowledge of a particular area that the designers don't, so you definitely get knowledge off each other that way.

What attracted you to the job? Is there something about being in an occupation where you can appreciate creative work?

**LR:** I've got a print background, in print production. I love beautiful print so to work with people who design beautiful things and then to get to produce them is a real joy. That's the thing I really enjoy about where I work; I love the work they do and they have a great sensitivity to ➤

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## LPA Futures

All the photographs in this feature were taken by Thomas Ball. Earlier this year, Ball was chosen to be one of five young photographers taking part in the LPA Futures scheme, which is organised by the Lisa Pritchard Agency.

LPA Futures helps young photographers to make the transition to a professional career by offering them two years' worth of representation. The other four photographers on the current scheme are Sam Irons, Laura Pannack, Ben Roberts and Jon Tonks.

For more, see [lisapritchard.com](http://lisapritchard.com)

◀ materials and production processes.

**PF:** It's a privilege working with talented people, that can't be underestimated.

**GL:** It's like being a kid in a sweet shop; they make magic. From that small conversation with a client – weeks, months later you get this great piece of work.

In the current economic climate, does cost cutting and watching expenditure fall down to you? Has that changed with the pressures of recent months?

**LR:** There's two sides to this – there's cutting back studio costs and then cutting costs incurred in the job that will impact on what the client has to spend on the design side, in producing whatever it is you're making. So if you're printing a book you might raise questions about where it's going to be printed – whether to print in China rather than in Europe, for example. You need to constantly think about making cutbacks on the client's behalf.

**GL:** And rather than thinking about the traditional ways of printing something, can you do it cost effectively but also in a more interesting way? I defy any organisation who's looked through their budgets to not see a few times where they've wasted money.

**PF:** I agree. The current climate has affected everybody but I think in the design community you have to be careful not to cut your nose off to spite your face; sometimes you have to spend more to get what you need. I learned this very early on: Tony [Brook] wanted an A3 printer, we went for the cheaper A4 one and in a few months it was redundant. So, yes, we have to be careful but also our working practices are important to us – I don't believe that we're a profligate

***“It's crazy not to take on an accountant or a bookkeeper. Listen to them, make your own decisions, but never ignore them”***

industry. We don't 'do lunches', we're fairly low maintenance anyway. Savings are made, but I don't think there are too many savings that can be made.

**GL:** Doing it to the detriment of the job isn't good. If the quality of the end result is affected then it just doesn't pay off. Every job is an investment into the relationship with that client. It's not a bad thing to do, to look through the figures.

**LR:** Cashflow is key – keep an eye on it as that's your forecast.

**PF:** Yes, you can post a loss many years on the trot, but you only run out of cash once. After that you're finished, you can't pay suppliers, or salaries. Cash is a cornerstone of the industry.

So accountants come in useful here? Their advice is important?

**GL:** Lionel, our accountant, is great. “Turn-over is vanity, profit is sanity,” he says and it's absolutely true. People get seduced by the turnover but it's the money you have in the bank that lets you think about the next six months, your salaries and expenditure. But I like doing that.

**LR:** The organisational side is the fun bit!

**GL:** I would always err on the pessimistic side financially. That really big client that's going to come up, might not, or they might come later on. There are nice surprises too!

**LR:** I think that's why accountants are good; they have to be the cautious one. Ours comes in once a month and sits with us for half a day. We always consult him.

**PF:** It's crazy not to take on an accountant or a bookkeeper. Listen to them, make your own decisions, but never ignore them.

**GL:** Find one you're comfortable with and who is interested in your business. Ours is like a surrogate father. He's excited about what we do.

**PF:** We have a full-time bookkeeper who works two days a week in the office. He chases all the invoices. Our relationships are too valuable for me to start hounding people.

Invoicing can be a thorny issue – how does it affect a relationship with a client?

**GL:** We have Patricia who I could not do without, she does all my reports. You're right, chasing invoices is crucial, as is invoicing immediately. We do 50% of any project up front, then depending on how big the project is we'll do stages. You need money in the bank. Projects can go on later and if you're waiting sometimes 45, 60 days, it's a nightmare.

**PF:** Yes in certain industries like broadcast 50% up front is usual; in print I think that's more unconventional. And always four or five stages of payment – as soon as one is done you invoice for it. Make sure the client has received the invoice as it can be stuck somewhere or not authorised. Money is not a dirty subject yet it's often considered to be.

I think it's refreshing to discuss finance as your clients aren't trying to push you out of business. So if you say you need to be paid quickly, fine, like we do with our own suppliers. You don't push their invoice, it's just not in your interest. Just admit you need to be paid. It's having confidence in the fact that you're doing something that's worth paying for. I think the most frustrating thing about our industry is that we value our work, but we don't value it enough in the monetary sense. If we had more respect for the value of it then that wouldn't happen.

**LR:** As an SM you see how much goes into something, what happened along the way.

**GL:** Yes. We like to talk those processes through with the client; to show them that process is a big part of a job.

So, what's the best thing about the job?

**PF:** The unpredictability of it, the environment in which I work and the people I've been able to meet. And all the spreadsheets I could possibly imagine! I just love them.

**GL:** I do as well. It's sad but true. There's always something new going on. Just being in a creative environment is exciting. You can be stressed, it can be nerve-wracking, but it's never ever boring.

**LR:** We talked earlier about the psychology of managing people and I enjoy that supportive role, that you facilitate things. It's a lovely thing to see everybody working away and know that you helped to make that possible. Also, it's great to come in everyday and see beautiful things around you. ■

*Thanks to This Is Real Art for the use of their studio space. See [thisisrealart.com](http://thisisrealart.com); [spin.co.uk](http://spin.co.uk); and [apracticeforeverydaylife.com](http://apracticeforeverydaylife.com)*