

GET creatives

by A.J. Kandy

Like Danny Ocean in *Ocean's 11*, or Charlie Croker in *The Italian Job*—the originals, not the remakes, naturally—you'll have put together a team with the right talent to tackle big, ambitious jobs. It's not always as easy as it looks.

For companies that start small or as solo operations, it's hard to shake the instinct to personally oversee every aspect of production, or to be at ease with delegating work to colleagues. While it's romantic to think that pure genius and late hours will solve all problems, working solo for too long can be a road to creative and personal burnout.

If you're getting more work than you can handle, then you have a capacity issue. If you're missing opportunities due to lack of diverse skills—after all, we all can't be graphic designers and PHP/MySQL specialists—then maybe it's time to put together your own band of Merry Men - like Frank Sinatra did in the 1964 Rat Pack flick *Robin and the Seven Hoods*.

To follow the cinematic metaphor, every classic heist crew has its specialists: The explosives man, the safecracker, the hacker, the stealth operative, the disguise artists, the "muscle," the smooth operator, the pickpocket, the getaway driver, and of course, the "brains." From the *Dirty Dozen* to the *A-Team*, it has ever been so, and for good reason; specialization allows you to divide tasks for maximum efficiency, so that jobs are done in parallel, rather than serially. It allows you to get multiple concepts in the air, pick the right one and execute quickly—get in, get out, and nobody gets hurt, baby!



In the creative world, your crew can take many forms: a loose-knit association of freelancers, a small team of generalists, or, as outlined above, a well-run team of specialists. You'll have a copywriter, photographer, the Flash programmer, research assistants, graphic designers, Photoshop whizzes, scan-and-cleanup artists, server and network admins, font experts, prepress techs, film editors, traffic managers—and creative directors, of course.

Before rushing off to assemble your *Seven Samurai*, remember that hiring a creative team isn't the same as managing them, and that's where inexperienced leaders often fail to plan.

Linda Tischler, writing in *Fast Company*, noted some key elements to putting together and managing a great team:

- * Recruit a diverse group, but always with a certain shared philosophy in mind; that way, differences spark creativity, instead of fermenting dissent.

- * Allowing a high degree of self-management in terms of tasks and deadlines is another factor, because it's not a predictable assembly line.

- * This means the creative manager has to work harder on keeping teams motivated to reaching the finish line—often, there are many unfinished gems collecting dust because people

get bored and move on to something more challenging.

- * Keep the team's mind stimulated with ideas from outside their field, protect them from creativity-killers (clients, upper management).

- * Add liberal doses of fun!

I asked two prominent team leaders in the Montreal interactive and game design fields to fill me in on how they handle the day-to-day challenges of keeping a team together. Warren Wilansky is the co-founder and current owner of Plank Interactive, a pioneering Web design firm whose clients include the Canadian Broadcasting Corporation, Discreet Software and filmmaker Michael Moore, among many others. Marie-Jo Leroux is a producer with a major Montreal videogame production studio that develops titles for the PC as well as all major game consoles and handheld platforms, from existing and original character licenses.

Tell us a bit about your company and what they do.

Warren Wilansky: We almost exclusively build websites. We've occasionally done other digital projects such as presentations, CD-ROMs and television commercials, but overall we're very focused on producing the highest-quality websites possible.

Marie-Jo Leroux: Anyone with an original license (TV show, film, book, comic book etc) who wants to develop a game based on their intellectual property (IP) usually hires a game publisher to handle this. The game publisher handles marketing, localization and distribution of the game, but often outsources the actual development of the game to a third-party developer—That's me.

And tell us a bit about yourself and, more specifically, what you do.

WW: I graduated from Communication Studies at Concordia University in the mid-'90s and spent a few years freelancing as a designer and multimedia developer. After a short stint as a

project manager at HBE Software, I opened Plank with a couple of partners in late 1998. Eight years later, I'm now the sole owner of the company; my role has shifted over the years from being involved in all aspects of the business—from development to design to sweeping the floors! Nowadays, I try my best to stay out of my team's way while I focus on client management, project and business development, and keeping the office running as effectively as possible.

MJL: I'm a producer. The exact definition varies from one games company to another, but basically it's the person who oversees the entire development of the game. That means managing the development team as well as liaising with the client (publisher) and licensor.

Do you put together teams on a permanent basis, like an agency or corporate department with a "general pool" of workers, or do you use contractors and freelancers on a per-project basis?

MJL: We have a general pool of staff that are assigned to projects as needed. However, we do try to keep multi-disciplinary teams together from one project to the next. Sometimes there's a rush of work in a particular discipline; in such cases we may occasionally hire freelancers, but this isn't usually a long-term affair.

WW: Over the years we've had a mix of full-time and freelance staff. I've also brought in freelancers when a project needed it, such as a specific style or skill that we don't have in house (i.e. illustrators, post-production studios). I've tried to build a well-rounded, complete team that lets us manage the majority of our work in-house.

On any particular project, how many people do you directly oversee?

MJL: I directly oversee eight people, and most of them have teams that they in turn oversee.

WW: I have a team of nine people working at

Plank and I oversee all their work. Usually for large projects I'll have half the staff dedicated to it. It's pretty rare that we have everyone working only on one project, since we have multiple projects always in different states of production and completion.

What kinds of technical expertise do you need from your team to complete a project?

WW: Our team has now split into four main production areas, and we're really only setting that structure in place now, as opposed to the past when we were a smaller team of generalists. As the complexity of our projects and goals have grown, so has the need for deep skills; as a result we have a team of client managers, designers, Flash artists, front-end web integrators and back-end developers. We can now all work together through the stages of building "modern" websites.

MJL: There's a lot: on the design side, there's a creative director, game designers, level designers, and screenwriters. For production art assets, we have an art director, texture artists (characters and environments), lighting artists, 3D modellers, animators, visual effects artists, 2D artists (illustrators), and sound and music designers. From the coding side, we have game (action) programmers, game engine programmers, and technical directors to support them. In terms of overall management, there's a production manager and a QA coordinator.

For your work, is it easier to manage teams of specialized workers, or generalists with diverse skills? Is there an ideal mix of types?

WW: We all can cross over in our skills, but I'm trying to work on specialization. If people can focus on one set of skills, they become experts in their field, but for example, our designers also know the technical limitations of what they can create, our back-end coders work with the integrators to get the code right and all project managers have a background in design and production.

MJL: It's easier to have a mix of both, actually. The project is organized into teams of specialists, with selected jacks-of-all-trades whose explicit role it is to integrate the various disciplines together, and troubleshoot any problems that require a understanding of how the various disciplines interact.

Does your company have standardized procedures and workflow systems in place to help the team work together smoothly?

MJL: Yes, but they're only there as a guideline. There are "best practices" that producers can use to get a project started and organized, but no project is bound to operate according to these standards. We recognize that the organization of any project depends on the people that make up the project team; each person has their own strengths, weaknesses, habits and preferences. It would be less than efficient to try to shoehorn everyone into one standardized method.

WW: We've just instituted our first system, using Basecamp. It's been a really big help in centralizing all information, getting it out of multiple email inboxes and into a web-based repository that everyone can use. Right now it's helped us get to a new level of organization without losing the flexibility of a free-flowing work environment.

When something goes off-track (or completely wrong), do these systems help you recover or at least do a post-mortem to learn from the error?

MJL: I would say the systems emerge from the screwups rather than fix them, but their emergence does reduce the likelihood of repeating said screwups. So yes.

It's always a problem to be too small, but is it ever possible for a team to be too large to manage effectively?

MJL: I do think so. With a large team, communications become increasingly challenging, it's harder to change the overall

direction of a project (as is required by agile management) and to monitor and respond to fluctuations in morale.

WW: I think we're just around the sweet spot of the kind of company I want us to be. Maybe a couple more people here or there could help, but we're at a size where we can take on major projects and excel at them, and still take on smaller things that we may care deeply about. Sure, we aren't big enough to take on a major institution, but I think we're all happy with the type and quality of work our team can produce in a week, a month or a year.

How does budget affect the size and functioning of your team?

MJL: Budget and time dictates the size of my team; that in turn determines the scope of what I can deliver. The actual functioning of the team is not affected as much by budget, as the scope of the deliverable.

When interviewing candidates for a position, how do you balance technical expertise with "soft skills?" How do you appraise interpersonal skills, to begin with?

MJL: Soft skills are as important to me as technical know-how, if not more. I believe an intelligent person with fewer technical skills can learn them. A person of less resourcefulness or a reduced ability to learn, but with more experience, may have more technical know-how but will have more challenges adapting as the company and the industry evolves—and in my field, that's a serious issue.

WW: I think soft skills are a very important part of our success. I believe in serious team building and when bringing someone on our team they must "fit." My evaluation of someone's interpersonal skills before they're hired is to really pay close attention to how they communicate with me and the rest of the team. I believe that if they are talented, the skills will come out naturally, but it's harder to teach someone how to "play nice with others."

Have interpersonal conflicts ever been a problem with the team's functioning? How do you deal with them?

WW: It's rare that we have very serious interpersonal problems. People can get upset like they would in any normal situation, but I've tried to put together a team of like-minded people so that we have a similar vision of what we're trying to accomplish.

MJL: Certainly, but the industry tend to be made up of intelligent, sensitive people who love games. Thus, most of the conflicts stem from disagreements about how to reach our common goal, which is to make a game that is fun and that we are proud of. That's the beauty of our industry—that most of the people in it are in it for the love of games. So the disagreements we usually have—how do we make this the best game possible—are much easier to test and fix than a disagreement that would stem from divergent goals.

Any closing anecdotes or words of wisdom?

WW: Nothing ever takes 15 minutes; our work is judged on our client satisfaction, not our egos; and work must be fun!

About the Author:

AJ Kandy is the Creative Director for King Marketing, Advertising + Communications, which has offices in Montreal and Toronto.

Prior to joining KMA+C, AJ was in charge of in-house creative at Interstar Technologies, a leading telecom software company, and was Art Director at entertainment trade publisher EMG Media. He has also worked on projects for Power Corporation, Air Canada, Merck Frosst and BCE Teleglobe.

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