



## The Internal Comms Podcast – Season 12

### Episode 111 – *A creative leader's blueprint for brilliance*

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**Katie** 00:04

Hello and welcome to The Internal Comms Podcast with me, Katie Macaulay. I'm on a mission to improve the way organisations converse, connect and collaborate with their people. To help me in this endeavor, every fortnight, I ask a communications practitioner, consultant, author or academic to sit in my podcast hot seat, and together we tease out fresh ideas, new thinking and those tried and tested tactics to improve the way we communicate at work. Now, most of my guests step very willingly into the spotlight, but not today. Today's guest, well, let's just say he's far more comfortable behind the scenes. He is Joel O'Connor, Creative Director at AB, the quietly spoken, humble genius behind countless award winning campaigns, digital magazines and print publications for some of the best known organisations in the world.

**Katie** 01:18

Now, I've long wanted to offer you a rare glimpse into the mind of this senior creative leader, and this feels like the perfect moment. AB is currently celebrating its 60th anniversary, making it the world's first internal comms agency, founded by a true visionary, Anthony Buckley, back in 1964. Joel has been the creative driving force at AB for the last 13 years, a really pivotal era, I think, in internal comms, when the full capabilities of digital and particularly mobile technology have truly revolutionised how we can connect with employees.

**Katie** 02:06

Now, as I alluded to, Joel is far more comfortable letting his work do the talking, but today, he is stepping out of his comfort zone to share with us his reflections on creativity in a world where employees' time and attention are at a premium. We discuss how to ensure internal comms doesn't fade into what Joel calls 'the hum of the fridge', that unnoticed background noise that people simply tune out. Joel shares his secrets to crafting a killer brief, sharpening your creative edge, and how to get the very best from your brand and visual identity guidelines. He shares the story of the most emotional job interview he's ever conducted, and explains why the world of internal comms continues to spark his imagination after more than a decade. So without further ado, it is my great pleasure to bring you my very good friend and the creative genius that is Joel O'Connor. Joel, welcome to The Internal Comms Podcast.

**Joel** 03:23



Thanks for having me. I can't believe I'm here. Finally here. I've been waiting for some time.  
Katie.

**Katie** 03:27

I know, I'm excited to have this conversation. Let's start near the beginning. That's probably a good place to start. I feel there's a song in there somewhere. What did you want to be growing up? You obviously worked in a creative field as our creative director, was it always going to be something creative?

**Joel** 03:27

The simple answer is yes, I knew from a very young age that's what I wanted to do. My dad was an artist. He still is, brilliant artist, and I grew up with him just painting around the house. He didn't have a studio, so it was all just in the living room, watching that I wanted to follow in his footsteps and just paint and draw. It was also the only thing I was particularly good at. So I just enjoyed it. I just spent all my time drawing and making art as a kid, and I didn't leave school with much else other than a big folder full of art. But I went to art college, and then that got me on the track of graphic design, but I think it is down to my dad's artwork, and he was also a sign writer, so I think a lot of that—

**Katie** 04:27

Oh, I didn't know that!

**Joel** 04:28

A lot of that work, he'd use a lot of typography in his work. So that was obviously pushing me, without even knowing, into the graphic design space.

**Katie** 04:38

Excellent, and he was doing all of that way before desktop publishing.

**Joel** 04:42

Oh, yeah, it's all, it was all hand painted signs. If anyone knows Lark lane, Liverpool in the 80s, they'd see his work above the shops.

**Katie** 04:51

Wow. You have very neatly segued into my next question, because yeah, the eagle eared listeners will pick up on your accent. You are from Liverpool. I am wondering, is there anything about your background or Liverpool in particular that has influenced you and your work?

**Joel** 05:15

Yeah, I think so. I mean, Liverpool is a creative city. It's oozing with creativity. I think the fact that support has a lot of that, having that influx of inspiration from all over the world, has definitely informed its creative types over the years. But it's also a really passionate city. I think I see that more now since living in London. I've been in London for 20 odd years now, but when I go back, you really get a sense of that passion in the city. So I'd like to think some of that's rubbed off, and simply caring about what you do always helps, I think.

**Katie** 05:53

I used to have a friend, a Liverpoolian friend, who lived outside Liverpool in London, and used to say every time he went into Lime Street, he felt his shoulders drop slightly. He had that sense of peace and ease.

**Joel** 06:08

You know what? I think when I moved away from Liverpool, I think I had the opposite. I actually felt that when I got back to London. I felt the sort of relief of something or just the shoulder drop moment. Like I grew up in Liverpool, went to school in the late 80s, early 90s, very different place. It was a bit rough in places, so you kind of... to be yourself sometimes felt a little, ah, a little bit hot, you know, a bit hard at times. And then, think I came to London, I felt like I could be myself. But I don't even think that's, looking back on that, I don't think it's a Liverpool thing. I think it was just an age thing. You grow in into who you are, and you become more confident with age, I suppose.

**Katie** 06:49

I guess so. Probably a turning point for Liverpool, potentially, I think it became a city of culture 2007.

**Joel** 06:55

It was. So I was already in London at the time, but I saw the transformation. It was probably more visible to me than people that live there, because I didn't go back and see this transformation. The city was amazing to see. And I think Liverpool, it's got a real swag back to it now. And when I visit now, it's like it's it feels like it's buzzing again. It's a great place to be.

**Katie** 07:17

I was at university in Manchester, even though they're only about 40, 50, miles apart those two cities, there was a special kind of humor amongst absolutely, yeah, very sharp humor.

**Joel** 07:29

Yeah. I mean, that's it. Even when you're talking about growing up in a sort of rough city, even the insults you'd get would be quite witty and quite imaginative. You know, love it.

**Katie** 07:40

Okay, now, obviously you work in the field of internal comms. You've been working in this field now for what, way over 10 years. What's kept you interested and energised about designing communication for employees, given there are so many parameters and guard rails around that.

**Joel** 07:58

I think it's the change that's kept it interesting for me. I don't think that's just an AB thing. I think that's just the industry wide. I think we're constantly having to change how we communicate. Communication has to change and has to evolve with what's happening in the world. So that's always made it exciting for me and kept it entertaining. And I've seen a shift in IC over the last few years, more than ever, how organisations are using IC has massively changed, with new technology, new platforms, organisations are allowed to do a lot more and able to do a lot more in house. So the level that they expect an agency to perform at, the bar has risen. That's made it an exciting space to play in for a creative, they're no longer just coming to us for the sort of day to day comms and the quick posters or a magazine, they're after some real deep thinking of how to solve some pretty tricky problems at times.

**Katie** 07:59

Yes. Is it also true to say that sometimes the rules around it, whether that's corporate identity guidelines, the rounds of approvals, the fact that you've got a limited color palette, whatever it is, in some ways, does that have to spark greater creativity, because you've got less to play with, so the idea has to be bigger? Does that make any sense?

**Joel** 09:18

Yeah I think that's absolutely right. We have the privilege of knowing the audience to a higher degree than you would in the marketing or advertising world. They're all very customer focused, and that's their job to understand who their customers are, but we have all this rich data that we can use to inform our creative thinking. The limitations of the guide rails and the guidelines that we have to work in do cause problems at times. I understand the need for having strong visual identity guidelines to really deliver brand message, but we have to communicate so many different things internally, and we're using the same kit with the same set of tools to do that. So we might be communicating business transformation, a privatisation or celebrating diversity in the workplace or delivering values internally, and you've got to use the same guidelines. So I think having a bit more flexibility internally is good. So when clients have that vision and they know that their internal visual identity has to evolve, is always helpful, and they give you that freedom to play with it. Yes, it's really good.



**Katie** 10:26

Yeah, that makes perfect sense.

**Katie** 10:30

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**Katie** 12:01

Let's talk about the creative brief, or the brief that you get from clients. I'm guessing that lots of listeners have to write that brief, or at least input into a creative brief, a project brief. What does a good brief look like?

**Joel** 12:15

I think the main thing is to not look at a creative brief as a an A4 piece of paper with some boxes on that you need to fill in, right? I think you've got to think of it as, this is the brief. This is the kickoff, the starting point to the project. So think way beyond just what you're putting onto that page, think about how you're delivering it. Think about the space you're delivering it in, the location the time you're delivering it. You know, don't expect to deliver a brief last thing on Friday evening or off the back of a heavy course that's related to something totally different. Think about when you're going to be engaging in that conversation and make it an inspirational session. Let that set the tone of what you're expecting. I think the brief itself has to have all the important stuff, the mandatories and the objectives and deadlines, all that sort of stuff. And you need to be able to refer back to that. But it also it has to be seen as a starting point of the project.

**Katie** 13:21

So were you suggesting there that actually people could be bit more ambitious or aspirational with what they put in a brief? Would that be fair?

**Joel** 13:29

Yeah, the brief definitely isn't there to solve the problem. I think the brief should be a bit of a problem. You don't want it to be. Here's the brief and here's the answer, and just go away and deliver it. You want the brief to set creative minds off in all different directions, get them buzzing with ideas. And it needs that right amount of information, but definitely being more imaginative of how you deliver that brief is going to get you so much further faster.

**Katie** 13:58

So if there's an inherent challenge or contradiction that you're worried about as you're writing the brief. Make that explicit, because that inherent contradiction or problem is the thing that you can hook your creative teeth into, is that fair?

**Joel** 14:15

Yeah, absolutely. I think you can co create the brief, yes, but you don't have to. It doesn't have to be something that you have to go away and struggle with alone. You can work as a team. You can work with the creatives on the brief if you need to. So I think it really is important to get, to get the brief right, and not to overlook that if, if the brief's not right, the work is going to struggle to be right.

**Katie** 14:40

I suppose if the brief's not there or not right, you can't judge the quality of the work either, because you don't know what you're judging it against if the outcome, at least, isn't written down somewhere, the desired outcome. So yes.

**Katie** 14:56

We've touched on visual identity guidelines. There's a lot more to creating a brand than just visual identity guidelines. You will have had many, many brand guidelines given to you over the years before you start a project. What does a fantastic brand or visual identity's guidelines look like? Ones that just get your imagination flying and equally, what does the opposite look like when you see somebody think, Oh, my goodness me, we are going to struggle here. Talk to me about those two extremes.

**Joel** 15:25

A good one has something ownable and it has something unique, but it also it has a freedom to play in. It gives the designers and the creatives something to springboard from. It's not too locked down. And I think that's a real problem with one that doesn't work. It's too descriptive. Everything's set in stone, and it doesn't allow any freedom. So you're at risk of just creating wallpaper and creating visuals that people just don't see any longer. It's like the hum of the fridge that you stop hearing after a while you just don't notice it.



**Katie** 16:02

It's like that health and safety officer that said to me, I've turned all my posters upside down around this factory floor, and it took everyone about two weeks to notice because they'd stop looking at them. So I've got a little bit of a cheeky question for you. How would you advise an IC manager to have a conversation, say, with their Head of Brand to convince them that there needs to be a little more leniency, or creativity, a bit more license to operate for their creative agencies? What's the argument for saying we need to break these guidelines? Because I do understand. I have been that person in house that's been what's called the logo cop that has to think 'our brand is valued. It's important, so we've got to lock it down.' Talk to me about the arguments that I might have to say, No, we need a little bit more creative license and a bit more leniency.

**Joel** 16:53

It's the variation of messages that we're having to deliver internally and all the sensitivities that go with that. So being too locked down with it and using that same brand that you're using to advertise a product in the external world just doesn't always work for some of that internal messaging that we're trying to deliver.

**Katie** 17:14

Yes, there's a nuance and a sophistication to so many of our messages.

**Joel** 17:18

I think just being brave enough to strip back some of the components and not forcing every part of the visual identity across everything you do, to be able to flex in places and just to have that ability to sit back and let the message be the hero of the piece at times, and not just brand overload or visual identity overload.

**Katie** 17:42

I just love that answer, because so often I've seen the photography shoot and the pictures have been amazing. I want one of those to be the full bleed, but the guidelines don't allow for a full bleed picture, for example. Or the guidelines say the logo has to appear in the right hand bottom corner, or we've got to have whatever we've got to have on the page. That detracts from the power of the message. So for me, what you're saying is, wouldn't it be wonderful if the message could be the hero rather than the brand nomenclature? If that's a very posh work, Katie, but you know what I mean?

**Joel** 18:19

Yeah, yeah, absolutely. But I think sometimes it is down to the owner of those visual identity guidelines not wanting to take a risk. If an organisation or a business goes through a



rebrand and they release new visual identity guidelines, that should be the starting point. It shouldn't be that's what we're going to look like for the next 10 years. It should be here's where we are now, and knock yourselves out and go mad with it. And I know that's going to annoy some of the brand police out there, but I think giving creators that flexibility and freedom to play with it will get better results long term.

**Katie** 18:56

What you're suggesting is that these guidelines should be living, breathing, evolving documents. That they're not cast in stone, that actually you're allowed to stretch them, play with them, and they become stronger as a result of that.

**Joel** 19:13

They have to, because everything else is evolving around them otherwise you're just going to be left behind. And that's back to creating wallpaper again, creating the messages that people think they've seen already.

**Katie** 19:26

And isn't it also true, and you touched on this earlier, but our communication is competing for attention alongside everything else in an employee's working day. We scroll through, apparently, 90 meters of mobile content a day. That's the height of the Statue of Liberty. We're competing with that.

**Joel** 19:47

I mean, we're competing with, if you're talking social media, you're competing with a \$5 billion algorithm that knows you better than you know yourself. So comparing that to a really lockdown posters that's, yeah, ticking all of the visual identity guidelines, but it's not reaching the audience half the time. It's not going to take them away from their kind of social behavior they have on the phone and content that is really talking to them.

**Katie** 20:17

And is it your observation, it's certainly mine, that the bigger, bolder creative or editorial decision, the more likely that content is to engage? So the more we take a risk, the more engagement we like lead together.

**Joel** 20:33

Absolutely. I mean, we're used to that in our external lives as well. You pick something up because it's got a enticing headline, or it's a juicy story of some kind. I think we need to be doing that internally for sure.

**Katie** 20:47



So let's take this down another level and to a more sort of personal viewpoint. Can you walk us through your creative process? What does it look like?

**Joel** 20:58

I really need to spend time understanding what the ask is, right? And I really need to understand the problem before I can get into any kind of creative thinking over it. If I have a creative brief at AB, I spend ages just reading over it and thinking about it until things start to form. And I think I am, I definitely think more visual. So when I can start to see pictures appear, or forming a visual of what the problem is, I start getting the flutters of excitement about what the solution might be. That's when I think I need to pull myself away and walk away from it. Have a little bit of separation before I get into the big juicy ideas.

**Joel** 21:46

But before I start, I need to get into the right frame of mind. There's no point in starting to be creative when you're in a knock about something, or tired or fed up about something, so get yourself into the right frame of mind. Do whatever that is to get you there, whether it's listening to a piece of music or going for a run or a jog, or, yeah, doing some yoga, or whatever it is, get yourself into a good frame of mind. And that works really well for me to then just to let the idea start flowing. But I think the other one is to make sure that you give yourself time to do that, there's no point in trying to solve a big creative problem if my email's pecking away at me and my Teams is popping away, I need to have some really undisturbed time to allow myself to go deep into thought. I think I really like to start with just a traditional way back to my childhood, talking about drawing, just pen on paper and start doodling things down, stick the problem right in the center of the page, and just let things kind of unfold from there. I don't want to suddenly jump onto the internet and start looking at things that might take me off into a different path. I want to do some of my own thinking first. And, you know, sometimes you don't get anywhere with it, and you need to then look for some inspiration. But I think if I stick to just going pen and paper, first of all, I always, it gets me moving a bit better I think.

**Katie** 23:20

My observation, working with you, when we've been sort of together, working on a problem, is that there is almost a point where I can't give you too much information, because I'm just saying, Well, this is what we're trying to solve. This is the problem. This is the audience. This is the ideal outcome. This is the background and history to the organisation. This is what we know about the audience, and I literally just keep downloading, downloading, downloading, and then I see a point at which you look at me, I've got it. That's it. You've given me something I needed, and that light switches on, and then you just let that marinate.

**Joel** 23:57

I'm waiting for something to stick. Throwing information at me, I think there's, yeah, it's just waiting for that something to connect. I'm, by all means, not digesting all of that. I'm waiting for something that I can relate to, or, I can, I can kind of put a visual to my mind. I think, okay, that's it. And it might not be the answer, but it's the answer for that moment that I can go away and play with. And that's why you can go into that kind of creative exploration stage where it might turn out to be something totally different. You might have been led there by just having a happy accident, putting something on a page, of finding an image, of seeing something in the type, or reading something into a copy line that you haven't thought about before. So it is, I think, that the information overload thing I think is great for everyone. I think it's good to have that filtering. Sometimes we have that think of having a strategist, say, on a job where it's for them to take all that information and to make some of those really hard decisions about what they're going to take forward and what they're going to share with the creatives, and to not give them everything, to be saying you focus on this bit, I think that can work really well, and it just depends on the creative as well, or the designer or the writer or whoever you're working with.

**Katie** 25:22

I was going to ask you about strategy, because when we're lucky enough to have the time and the budget for a really senior strategist, they provide, I guess, the way I describe it, and I don't know if you agree, but they take the data behind the brief and they turn it into an insight. You often say that that's the single minded proposition that you so often need. That's what a great creative strategist does. Is that right?

**Joel** 25:53

Yeah, I like... Abi Terry, our Client Services Director, talks about a strategist. A good strategist closes doors. If we're talking about a designer, it gives them something quite single minded to focus on. It allows them to get carried away on that one single thought, which might turn into something totally different. I think that's a really powerful way to come up with ideas.

**Katie** 26:18

When you're trying to do lots of different things or share lots of different messages or appeal to three audiences at once. That's when it becomes dog's breakfast, which doesn't sound like a very technical term, but that's the problem. Whereas, if you're single minded, you can hone and focus and get it really right and on point.

**Joel** 26:40

And it will snowball from that single mind of thought. You know, it's a starting point still, but it's something that you can get, you know, imaginative around.

**Katie** 26:54

Do you have daily or weekly habits or routines to hone your creativity? You've talked about allowing for the moment to come to you, not forcing it, so, ensuring that you're in the right state of mind. But do you have other practices or other habits that keep your kind of creative muscles working or in good order?

**Joel** 27:19

I try to do things where I'm stepping out my comfort zone, doing new things, going to new places, new things is really, is really good for that.

**Katie** 27:27

One thing I do know about you is that you are an avid skateboarder. Yeah. Does that have anything to do with your creativity?

**Joel** 27:34

It does. That's the thing I do. Actually, if I want to clear my head, it's almost as I've got older, it's like a meditation to me. You can't think of anything else, apart from just staying on, otherwise you'll just fall on your head. So I try to do that as often as I can. And that does take me out my comfort zone, but it also takes me to new places, and it gives me a different view on life. Also, you're surrounded by lots of people from different backgrounds, different experiences. That's something that's really helped me over the years. And then...

**Katie** 28:08

How many years have you been skateboarding?

**Joel** 28:09

I've done it since I was a young child in Liverpool. Yeah, I think it was the summer holidays before I joined secondary school.

**Katie** 28:16

Oh, wow.

**Joel** 28:17

I got hooked.

**Katie** 28:19

One thing I have noticed that you're very good at at AB with your creative team is taking that moment when you can go and visit museums, exhibitions, whatever it might be, to get that external influence as well. Are you constantly just looking at things through a creative lens, going "I love the way they did that"?

**Joel 28:43**

I think so, yeah, I think that's the designer in me, definitely. But I think it's doing something that breaks your own routine as well, right? Okay, so we all in our busy lives, get carried away by routine, the routine just consciously stepping out of that and thinking, I'm going to visit an art gallery, or I just love going into central London. I live south London, if I feel like I need some inspiration, I don't even need to go to a gallery. I can just walk across Waterloo Bridge and take it all in and feel energised by it. But the same time getting out to the countryside, getting some fresh air, all that sort of stuff, just doing something new. Yeah, really helpful to get the inspiration going.

**Katie 29:24**

Yeah, getting off the treadmill. Yeah. I've always said I've never had a good idea sat at my desk. There's a scene from Mad Men, where Don Draper is looking at the ceiling before a big pitch, trying to come up with a creative idea. And he says, You've got to think about it, think about it, think about it, and then stop thinking about it, yeah, and then it will come to you.

**Joel 29:46**

yoeah, that makes sense. Yeah. I can definitely relate to that.

**Katie 29:49**

So it comes to us in the shower, not when we're sad, yeah.

**Joel 29:53**

I mean, I know from COVID, I was probably doing it before then, but I COVID taught me. Yeah, but I have certain parts of the day that I'm much more productive, and just sitting at a desk isn't going to get me there. Being able to work with your energy a little bit more and carving out time to do that creative thinking, clocking in at nine o'clock and finishing at the end of the day doesn't really do it for me. I think we have to to some degree, but to have that flexibility around the time that you can do it.

**Katie 30:26**

I think that's a really important point. And I know not everyone can do this if they don't have a laptop, depending on where they work from, it's difficult. But am I right in thinking sometimes you'll just change the stimulus by working in a different room, yeah?

**Joel 30:38**

Just get away. Get different surroundings, yeah. The ideas aren't just going to pop into your head and they can come from the strangest place. I think that just getting away and having a little walk is always the one for me if I'm stuck on something.



**Katie** 30:54

When you think about the creatives that you've most admired over the years, they might be designers, photographers, illustrators. Do you think they share a common trait or characteristic?

**Joel** 31:10

Yeah. I mean, the obvious one is curiosity. I don't think you can be creative without curiosity. The designers, writers that I look up to and inspired by, they really care. They care about what they do. They care about who they're doing it for, and that automatically gives that a sense of connection in their work. You know that they're really thinking about who they're producing work for, to create that connection.

**Katie** 31:40

You're making me smile, because I've just come off a call with a client, and we were talking about how, although the leadership team sign off the communication, we've got to be careful not to write for the approver, as Steve Crescenzo says a guest on a previous podcast, we are creating, writing, producing for the audience and not the approver. And I think sometimes we've got to say it's not for you. I remember a client once saying that she got in the back of a cab with her chief executive, and the chief executive was like, come on, then show me I've got a gap between meetings. And I remember her saying, Before you see it, you're not going to like it, but that's the point.

**Joel** 32:21

We need to do that. We need to make sure that we're producing work for the audience and not the approver as well. Yeah, quite often I think you're up against time, and you've got a looming deadlines, even subconsciously, think through here what's going to get, what's going to get signed off.

**Katie** 32:38

I'm sure we're not the only creative agency to do this, we'll often show three versions. We'll show the safe version that we know is going to get signed off without a thought, the slightly bolder version and then the 'they're never going to go for this. But let's just have fun' version. You know what the client always does at the end. Do you want to finish the thought about what happens when they see the three?

**Joel** 33:02

They make a big bowl of design soup out of the ideas, don't they? But it's worth it. Sometimes we get it, they go for the bigger ideas. And it's worth it. And it's not very often,



but you have to keep pushing for that. Yeah, I think even from the creative zone satisfaction, to be able to go wild with an idea—

**Katie** 33:25

Even if I just keep it in their bottom drawer and get it out later and go I think it's ready. I think we're ready for something like this or but...

**Joel** 33:32

That again, the teams that we're working with, the more, the braver they can be, the braver we're going to be. It will create better work in the long run, and we've known that. We've had clients over the years that have... they know the rules. They know the rules. They know when they're breaking the rules, but they know when it's right to and they're happy to push us in that direction.

**Katie** 33:53

Yeah, oh, I'm smiling now because you and I have met them over the years, but the ones that go, Yeah, but what would it look like if it was on steroids? Let's break the rules. You do need a strong client with a strong vision for that, but it's so much fun when that happens.

**Joel** 34:08

That's the thing about creativity, isn't it? It's taking a risk. Yeah, it's and that's on all levels. So that's for us as a creative agency, but also internally, to be willing to take that risk and it might fail, but yeah, you know, it's it. If it works, it's going to work well.

**Katie** 34:28

So a slightly related question to that, when you're hiring, what are you looking for in terms of a designer, a writer, a creative in general, what sort of trait or characteristic we've mentioned, curiosity, anything else?

**Joel** 34:42

I'm looking for passion, right? Passion and ideas, I think, is the is the big one. And I think to set someone up to be able to show that, I think if you asking them a simple question, talk me through or show me a piece of work that you're most proud of, and that will often allow them just to really displayed their passion.

**Katie** 35:03

Do you feel comfortable sharing the story of what happened when Charlie was interviewed one of our very junior designers?

**Joel** 35:10

I think it was, it was pretty much his first job. He was working in, I think he was working in like a CNC factory, cutting wood or something at the time, trying to get design work. And Gaby, our associate creative director had lined up, I think she'd line up three in for me to join the second interview throughout that week, and I'd already met two really good candidates that I was quite excited by. And before the call, before the interview we're doing over Teams, I'd have a quick chat with Gaby, and she taught me through what she thought the strengths and weaknesses of the candidate were, and took me through their background a little bit. And when it came, it was a Friday, I think, Gaby just said, I just want you to meet this this guy, and she was like, I'm not going to talk. I'm not going to tell you about his portfolio. I'm just going to let you let you go, let you see what he's all about. I was just blown away, straight away. We talked about passion, and he was there. He was using that moment. He was given everything he had to that moment. It was like watching an X factor audition or something, but a good one. I was just blown away. I was speechless. I was like, and he was talking me through his work. It was so powerful for someone fresh out of university, and how much he cared. I don't mind saying I had to turn my screen off because I tears in my eyes, you know, just seeing how vulnerable, he was happy to be on the call. How much he was really taking that, taking the opportunity.

**Katie** 36:44

I love that so much, and he brought all of that passion to the team. There's a big philosophical question I'd love to ask you, are creatives born or are they made?

**Joel** 36:57

I think the real ones probably are born, but I think you can become more creative. We all know those people who are just naturally creative. They look at the world in a different way. They approach everything in a slightly odd way. At times, might even annoy the heck out of a lot of people just because of the way they operate. Well, I think you can definitely teach yourself to be more creative. I think I just think by doing more things, experience and more, more, you know, experience and new, new things and sort of breaking the normal will help.

**Katie** 37:31

We should mention AI at some point in this conversation. People might be expecting us to. I read a statistic recently that said 90% of all content will be AI generated by the end of next year. I guess that means AI will have touched the content in some way, which I'm guessing won't be a surprise, because AI is now built into things like Grammarly, so if you're writing, there's an AI element. What's your prediction for how AI will shape the future of creativity, of design?

**Joel** 38:05



I think we have to be mindful of how we're using it. As you say, it's starting to be baked into a lot of things. If you're browsing Google, the top results are now AI generated. If you're using Photoshop, there's things in the background that have got AI in it. But I think when you're using the tools being mindful of just trying to use it to solve all of your problems, I don't think is a wise move, I think for many reasons, but I think for even just protecting your own skills. If you're suddenly just using AI to solve problems that you would have worked out yourself, over the long term. What's that going to do?

**Joel** 38:19

Yeah to your skill base.

**Katie** 38:44

I like that answer. Thank you. Thank you.

**Joel** 38:44

I don't speak another language, but if you speak French and you don't use it for years, you forget it. So you need to keep using our skills. I think it's also on an industry level. We're seeing it replacing some of those entry level roles. And we need those people to come in. We need those people to come in and challenge our thinking, to keep us on our toes, and to be saying the ludicrous ideas that aren't going to work, but one of them will, and we need that. So I think just being, being mindful of how we use that, the possibilities are endless. I think within IC have the things you could produce with AI are phenomenal. But I think let's just be mindful of how we use it. I don't want to live in a world where 90% of visuals are AI produced. If I'm being honest on it, when I'm looking at AI generated art, it does lack a bit of soul for me, you know. So I think using it as a tool is it's the way to use it, rather than using that as the answer.

**Katie** 39:49

This episode of the internal comms podcast is brought to you by my very own Friday update. Would you like a short email from me, never more than five bullet points long, giving you my take on the week's news from across the world of communications? This might be the latest reports, books, podcasts, conferences, campaigns that have caught my eye during the week. I always limit myself to just five nuggets of news so you can read it in record time, but still feel a little bit more informed, hopefully a little uplifted as you end your week. Now, this is subscriber only content which was initially intended just for AB colleagues and clients. I don't post this content anywhere else, so you do need to sign up, but that is super easy. Simply go to [abcomm.co.uk/Friday](https://abcomm.co.uk/Friday). We just need your email address, and it's equally easy to unsubscribe at any time, so give it a go that sign up page again. [abcomm.co.uk/Friday](https://abcomm.co.uk/Friday), and if you do choose to be a subscriber, I very much look forward to being in touch.



**Katie** 41:23

Let's head over to those quick fire questions. What's the best piece of advice you've ever received about fostering creativity?

**Joel** 41:33

Creating a safe space for ideas to happen. I think because there's a certain vulnerability isn't there when you're being creative, you need to be in a space where you can say something that you think might just be the daftest thing ever. Yeah, and I know at AB, we really try and encourage that. Well you and I have been in many brainstorms over the years where we said, no idea is a bad idea, and just to get that conversation flowing. What you don't want is to be sat in a room full of really creative minds who just don't want to share things because they look daft. I've heard you ask a few daft questions in your time to get the conversation flowing.

**Katie** 42:09

Almost every sentence will start 'This is probably a really silly idea,' but the idea is that sparks another thought, which sparks another one, and then someone's got to be the first one to push a domino. And that's kind of how I feel about that. And I think we're talking about psychological safety, which people understand a lot more of what that takes and how important that is. It takes time to build a culture around that. It doesn't happen overnight, but it's a muscle you can develop over time. Definitely, for sure, I would also say my observation is that everyone likes to prepare for those sessions slightly differently, and I think that's worth bearing in mind. Don't just bring everyone into a room and expect all of sudden they're going to come up with great ideas. I'm fine with that. I quite like that spontaneity, but I've noticed a lot of people want to be able to have a think beforehand, get their thoughts in order, and I think you got to respect a bit of that as well.

**Joel** 43:06

Everyone comes to their ideas in different ways, don't they? And some, some people like that. They'll I think some people like the the energy in the room, and they like to bounce off people, and they're not afraid to share what springs to mind. And other others need to digest the information a bit more and spend a bit of more time on and do a little bit of exploration themselves. And then I think coming to a brainstorm where people have done a bit of prep, you're going to get, yes, better results.

**Katie** 43:34

What would be your dream brief in the internal comms space? Any client, any organisation, any topic you like, what would be the dream?

**Joel** 43:46

Do you know what, I'd like to brand an organisation from the inside out. I think that would be great if a company is going through a rebrand and they'd go to a design or a creative agency, go to the internal comms agency that knows that organisation inside out and work with the organisation and the people inside to create their brand. I think that could be an interesting one to work on.

**Katie** 44:07

Get in touch listeners, if you want us to help solve that problem. That sounds such good fun. What I love about that idea is that when you present it to the outside world, there's no air gap between who you say you are and who you really are. Wow, if you could own any masterpiece from any time in history, what painting would be hanging on your wall?

**Joel** 44:32

I've always really liked Peter Blake. I think he was really integral to my kind of development as a designer, seeing looking at his work, and the graphical element of how he summed up the time in his work really struck a chord with me. And I remember going to see an exhibition of his. It was probably in early 2000s in the Tate, and I just loved it. I loved it. So can I have the Sergeant Pepper's album artwork please?

**Katie** 45:04

Is that it? Is that what makes a fantastic artist that their work is representative of a time and of an era that you can point to it, and it conjures up more than the image, but something around the image?

**Joel** 45:18

Yeah, I think so. I mean, that's pop art, is that isn't it creating art of that time, it's making connections. So if you you know, that's why some people like, we like we all like different kinds of art. It's what we have that connection doing. Sometimes you can't even put your finger on what it is. It triggers something, it sparks and you like, you know?

**Katie** 45:38

And it's even hard to put words to I remember when the Tate Modern opened and that whole room of Mark Rothko paintings, and I was thinking, this shouldn't work. These are just, this is red and black on a canvas. I cannot take my eyes off it. Why? You would probably be able to explain to me what.

**Joel** 45:57

Yeah, I mean, it's give it's giving you an experience as well. Isn't it seeing that it's much more than just looking at pictures on the wall. Half the time, it's the environment that you're looking at in and and if it's when you, if you look at, I don't know, modern art in a church



building or something, the contrast between it or creates something else becomes more, almost more experiential.

**Katie** 46:19

Thank you for that. And finally, you get the metaphorical billboard that all guests get, a billboard for millions to see. And you can put on this billboard anything you like, any message, any image, what are you going to put on your billboard Joel?

**Joel** 46:35

I know this question. Obviously, I've listened to many of your podcasts over the years, and I was thinking about this one on the way over here, and I was flapping between what I should put on there. And I know I just need to keep it simple. I know, keep it simple. It's quite a good one. I might have that one, but I think I'd go for 'Lean in.' Oh. I think just when you lean into something, it just makes it better. You're going to get better results. If you break down your barriers that are holding back and just lean into it, it's going to create some quite exciting results. And I think also, if you're into skateboarding, you need to lean in other wise, you're going to fall on your backside.

**Katie** 47:13

Thank you so much. Joel, I know this isn't your favorite thing to do, speaking like this, but I really appreciate it.

**Joel** 47:22

You've made it very easy. Thanks, Katie, and I do have to thank John as well here, because John's always in the background of a lot of things you do at AB. He's silently sitting here but thanks, John.

**Katie** 47:35

And that is a wrap for this episode of The Internal Comms Podcast. If you enjoyed this show, I would be incredibly grateful if you could give us a rating on Apple podcasts, that just helps your fellow comms professionals around the world find our show. For resources, links, show notes, a full downloadable transcript of this episode, head over to AB's website, that's [abcomm.co.uk/podcast](https://abcomm.co.uk/podcast). You will also find there our entire back catalog of 111 episodes. My thanks to Joel, producer John, sound engineer Stu, Content Manager Madi, designer Rob and the rest of the crew at AB who keep this show on the road. I'm immensely grateful to all of you. And finally, my thanks to you for choosing The Internal Comms Podcast. I love it when you reach out to me on LinkedIn to say how much you value the show, your feedback is the fuel for what we do here. So lovely listeners, until we meet again, stay safe and well and remember what's inside that counts.