

TRYING TO  
BE FUNNY

# The Future of Planning

Where will planning go next? Will different agency planners – creative, media, digital, strategy – form a collaboration of like minds, or will planning reside at the client? An Admap roundtable of six planning sages recently gathered to debate their future

**Moderator:** Paul Feldwick, consultant, author, *Admap* columnist and former executive planning director at BMP DDB.

**Participants:** Adam Morgan, consultant, author of *Eating The Big Fish*, and former European planning director at TBWA; Will Collin, founding partner of Naked Communications (pictured second from right); Rachel Hatton, planning director, Ogilvy Group UK (pictured centre); John Owen, joint managing partner, Dare Digital; Sarah Watson, head of planning, DDB London.

“**T**he big question is how do we reach some way of working together? That throws up big questions for me about planning and what we do. At the same time, there is all the pressure on margins. Can we even continue planning like we have done in the past from a resource point of view? Compounding all that, there's all this stuff coming through on neuroscience. So I feel in a moment of existential - I wouldn't say crisis - but it really is a very, very interesting moment to work out what planning is and what we're doing.”

Sarah Watson's opening words neatly indicate three big reasons why 'The Future of Planning' may look problematic - or exciting. First, the growing complexity of communication channels and the range of agencies serving them. Second, the fundamental shifts in agency business models away from commission, toward fees where every job needs to be transparent about its scope and its value. Third, the sense that there is a growing body of relevant new learning that planners could be making use of, but generally aren't, because of pressures on time.

How can these issues be resolved to benefit both the advertising industry and its clients? Will 'planning' survive, and if so, where will it be found in future? What core skills remain timelessly relevant, and in what ways will it need to change and reinvent itself?

These were some of the questions we had gathered to discuss, myself and five planners (or ex-planners) sitting around on large, squashy sofas at Dare Digital's London offices.

**John Owen:** "Planning in digital is fairly young, so it's a different beast to planning in an above-the-line agency. There's a lot more of what Russell Davies calls 'gardening' going on. You don't launch and leave, you tend. There's a lot more interaction; there is a day-to-day responsibility. Rather than setting a direction and then going off and coming back, you're there the whole time. I got a sense from the APG awards that planning in general is moving in that direction."

**Adam Morgan:** "It's impossible to discuss the future of planning without discussing the future of agencies. In a sense, there never has been one planning. There have been planners as 'brand people'; as 'consumer people'; agencies where it was essentially a new business tool; and then there has been the 'creative midwife'. I don't see a lot of clarity within agencies about what the source of authority for planners is among those four things any more. And that loss of clarity of authority is happening at a time of



Adam Morgan

enormous instability in relationships between agencies and clients."

**Rachel Hatton:** "I think agencies are wrestling with a loss of influence from the position they had 20 or 30 years ago. There was a lot of thinking about how communication worked in the 1960s and 1970s. It feels like, now, it's all practice and no theory. If we want to professionalise as an industry, we need to pay more attention to how communication actually works in this new world."

**Will Collin:** "Planning at its best has always been a quest to find answers to the problems clients are wrestling with: achieving brand growth, sales targets, winning new users or whatever it might be. Planners are naturally sceptical, questioning, analytical, but also very practical in trying to unpick the pocket-watch to find out how it works, so you can then make it better. My sense is that the skills of planning and the aptitudes of planners remain as valuable as they ever were. But the home within which those skills can best be applied isn't necessarily in a classical ad agency any more, because a classical ad agency is in business, first and foremost, to produce campaign outputs. But my sense is that planning is arguably more important than it ever has been because of the breadth of things that brands need to do to thrive."

So, if planning is potentially more important than ever, what are the core skills that need to be nurtured?

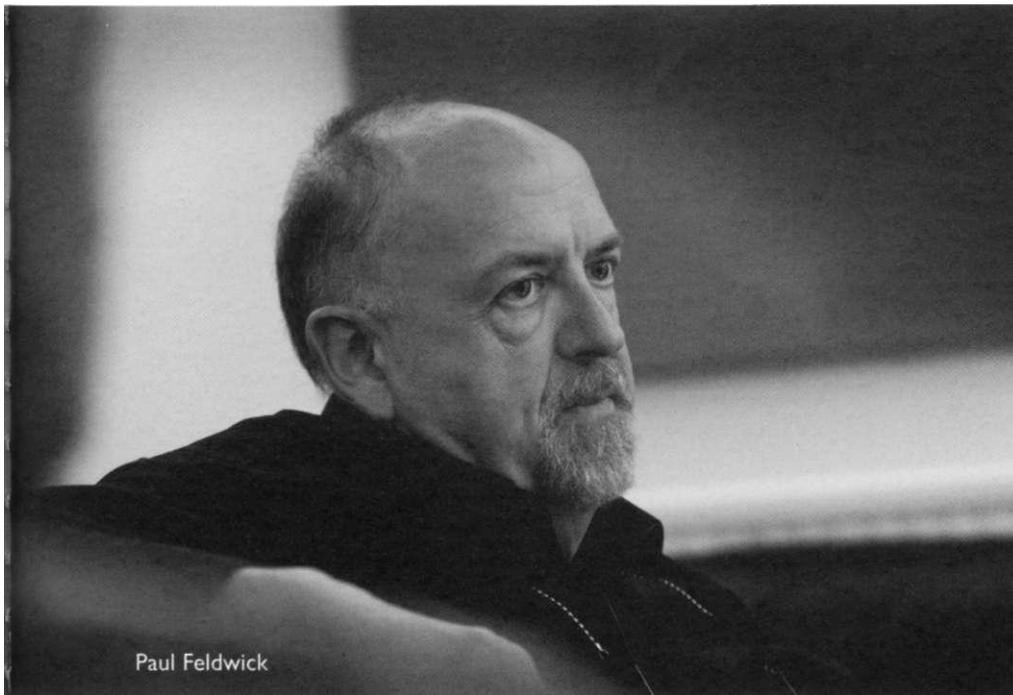
**John:** "Three key areas: one is business/commercial. Maybe there is a specific breed of

planner that takes responsibility for understanding the commercial requirements, and articulating those to the agency, setting KPIs and monitoring progress. Creative is another, but do you constrain your creative horizons to comms, or go beyond that and have ideas that can change businesses? The third is implementation. It's not enough to go: 'Great, we've given birth to a great idea, we'll be back when it's time to measure it.' It's about managing a website or an online programme within social media, having ongoing conversations - that is still a strategic role."

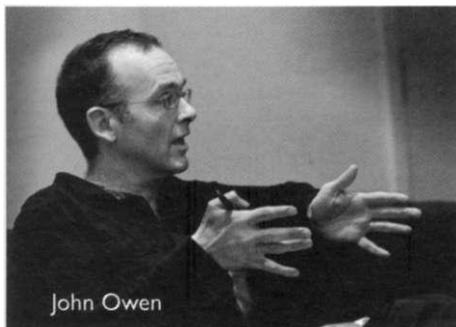
**Rachel:** "I think what planners bring is a sense of 'otherness' to organisations. They're not involved in the day-to-day, but they have the ability to ask very powerful, yet naive questions about business. And I still think consumer understanding, in a world where it's all about how you affect behavioural change."

**Sarah Watson:** "There's one word for me, for planners, and that's 'instinct'. I was at the graduate pitches last week and the client said: 'I love it, I completely love it. They've found the gold. The work is not right, the plan is not quite right, but it doesn't matter - they found the gold.' I thought: 'That's what planning is.'"

**Adam:** "I agree that insight should be the province. But it is almost always referred to as 'consumer insight'. Actually, there are all sorts of different kinds of insight. It can be about extracting value from the brand and its history, as much as consumer groups. A much broader sense of insight would, for me, be the prime skill that I don't yet see as developed as it might be."



Paul Feldwick



John Owen

**John:** "We just talked about complexity and confusion; it's about bringing simplicity and answers and direction. Don't worry about those 100 things, do this one thing. That's still the job."

But these visions for the planning role leave some practical questions unanswered. In a world of multiple agencies, each with a planning role, whose job is it to have the big strategic insight - to 'shuck the oyster', as Adam puts it? And how does that role relate to the ongoing management of the communication process - the 'gardening'?

**Sarah:** "I think what's emerging is that there are different points of the process. There is, as you say, 'shucking the oyster', and there is the more behavioural and day-to-day 'gardening'. It's all legitimate, but maybe there are different parts of the brain to be used at different moments. At the moment, we're all just a bit excited about everything, and not disaggregating it properly."

**Adam:** "Regardless of how simple

your thought is, it's going to be complex to make it happen. So you've got to embrace that complexity, but have a relatively single-minded or simple thought that you can drive through."

**Will:** "With all the complexity, with all the pragmatism and commercial pressures, it's easy for things to have their corners shaved off. I think the planner's job is to hold the strategic line and be true to what is at the heart."

**Adam:** "Are we saying, then, that there are two types of planning? Clarity planning and complexity planning?"

**Rachel:** "We are cleaving to a notion, aren't we, that we can do the whole thing? Certainly, I have, personally. I've always wanted to think I can do all of this stuff, get my head round digital. Maybe that is just arrogant planners."

**Will:** "I don't think that's possible."

So, maybe planners in the future will need to find ways to work effectively together, not fight over strategic control. Adam suggested the planner's role has always been potentially that of catalyst as much as leader - not necessarily to create the strategy, but to ensure a strategy is created.

**Adam:** "Planners are pretty collaborative by nature and happy to contribute to a process without necessarily wanting to stamp it with their name and identity. That's fundamental to how good planners and agencies will work in the future. It isn't the job of one agency any more to solve everything. It's collaborating."

**Rachel:** "One thing that struck me about the APG papers this year was that there were loads about how planning was able to catalyse

or facilitate a process, rather than nailing the one blinding insight that unlocked the whole thing."

**Will:** "There definitely is a problem where you have a multi-agency structure team where there are planners in each of the respective disciplines. If each of the planners sees it as their role to 'shuck the oyster', that ain't going to work, whereas if each of the planners sees their role as 'tending the garden', that'll work nicely because they've all got their different plots."

**Adam:** "Where does that clarity come from - the agency side or the client side?"

**Will:** "It can be either. The cream can rise to the top, and the authority naturally falls to the most authoritative person, or the client can act as ringmaster and say: 'These people are the ones to set the strategy and the rest must follow' You get a bit of both. The latter probably works better because, otherwise, there will be wasteful jockeying for position before order emerges."

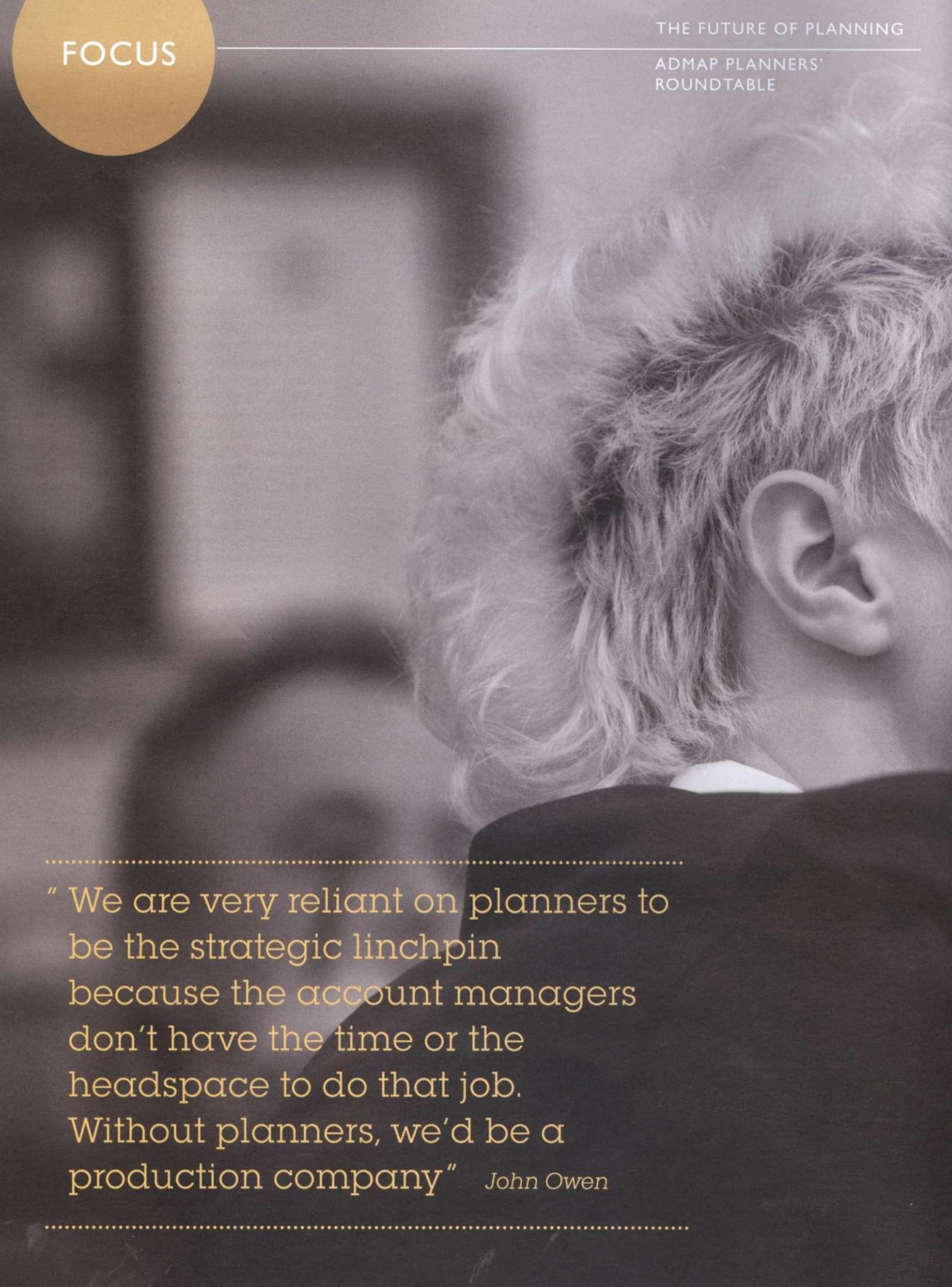
Taking that a step further, the lead planning role could be within the client organisation itself. So far, this hasn't happened much, but might we see it more?

**Rachel:** "It goes back to being able to have that distance between what's going-on on a day-to-day basis versus having the space and freedom to think about other stuff. The beauty of agencies is that they work on lots of different bits of business where they can draw learnings across categories, across brands, across geographies, which you don't get in the client company."

**Sarah:** "It's also about proximity to the creative process. You couldn't really do that role if you weren't with the people creating ideas. But I could imagine the tide might go to either of those ends, where some clients say: 'Why would I pay people in-house to do all this? You take that money, I'll cut them out and you lot do it'; while other clients say: 'Why would I pay someone else because I'm paying my own people? I'll brief you direct.' Those are the real models that impact on how planners will be paid and valued going forward."

So it remains uncertain where planning will be located in the future, and there may be no single answer. But clearly, it can only survive where someone is prepared to pay for it, and one topic where the new agency models could perhaps show the way is how to move successfully away from the legacy of commission-based fee systems, towards business models where the agency's contribution is valued independently of media cost.

**John:** "Even if you're not paying commission any more, creative agency fees are linked to media spend. That's just crazy because the routes to the market now, via social media, earned media and owned media, are growing and paid media potentially is going to shrink."



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Sarah Watson

**Will:** "There is a positive interpretation of that - if the cost of distribution of messages is trending to zero, you have more budget for the thing that's going to spread. In fact, making it great so more people choose to spread it is the defining factor of success, so great insights and great creativity are more valuable than ever."

If I had to choose a single 'oyster shucking' moment from these two hours, it might have been something John Owen said towards the end. Planning is clearly of central importance at his agency, Dare - a new type of agency working in a relatively new discipline - and includes specialised fields, such as information architecture and search, because these are seen as part of consumer understanding. While planning, after 40 years, still seems to feel an anxiety to justify itself in some older agencies, it struck me that at Will Collin's Naked, it has become part of the core skill for which the agency is paid and, in Dare, it is central to the agency's own definition of itself: could John imagine his agency without planners?

**John:** "We are very reliant on planners to be the strategic linchpin because, generally speaking, the account managers either don't have the time or the headspace to do that job. Without planners, we'd not be the same agency. We'd be a production company."

So perhaps the key step that any agency needs to make to assure the future of planning is to define in its own mind exactly what it offers, and how, and if, their own version of planning is central to that offer. If an agency can do that convincingly, the problems of resourcing and paying for planning, and of duplication of roles, become soluble.

**Adam:** "I wonder whether agencies need to reverse the commoditisation process and distinguish themselves to a much more theatrical degree than they do at the moment. Then the role of the planner falls out of that."

I heard good reasons to believe that planning may, in future, be more important than ever: the need for greater clarity and direction in a more complex environment, the new knowledge now available about human behaviour, the need for effectiveness in marketing communications. But many agencies are still struggling to emerge from a legacy of business models and cultures that no longer work, with little clear sense of what will replace them. That can, of course, also be seen as a great opportunity. One final thought is that planners' skills could be applied more to designing their agencies' own future, as well as that of their clients.



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