Silverback Studios

Innovation Review — Summary of Manager Interviews

Prepared by: Jess Saltz and team
Process: Semi structured interviews
Respondents: Managers across creative functions, sampled to reflect tenure and number of logged changes & patents (team level).

Question 1

Based on your experience, what do you think could explain a decline in the number of significant technical/structural changes being logged — for example workload, team size, management style, tooling, process/approval overhead, or something else?

Individual responses N = 16

Manager 1: Long tenure (5 yrs) | Logged changes & patents: High

Q1: *People generally seem more careful now than they used to be — more cautious about putting a half-baked idea out there, more conscious of getting it right the first time. I don't see that so much in my own team, we've kept a pretty loose, experimental way of working. But you notice it around the building — in the hallways, in cross-team meetings — a kind of general wariness that wasn't really there a few years ago. Less appetite for just trying something and seeing what happens.*

Manager 2: Short tenure (9 months) | Logged changes & patents: Low

Q1: *I've been fairly direct with my team about this — everyone needs to stay in their lane and follow the process we've got, because that's genuinely the only way a team of our size can function without things falling apart. I think there's sometimes a bit of nostalgia around here for the early days, when it was twenty people in a room figuring things out as they went. But we're not that anymore. We're running a business, and I think it's important people understand that. Honestly, though, if you're asking me what's driving, I don't have a theory.*

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Manager 3: Long tenure (7 yrs) | Logged changes & patents: High

Q1: *When you first asked me about this, my first reaction was — decline? Not in my team. I looked at our own numbers before this conversation, actually, and the change rate has been pretty steady for years, no real dip. If anything, I think what's kept it steady is that people on my team genuinely aren't afraid to bring things forward. There's a real appetite here — people pitch ideas constantly, half-formed, weird, sometimes clearly not going to work, but nobody gets shot down for trying. I've always thought that's the thing that makes the difference, more than any process or tool. Beyond that, though, I couldn't point to any single explanation — workload, team size, whatever else — for a broader slowdown.*

Manager 4: Short tenure (5 months) | Logged changes & patents: Low

Q1: *I run a fairly disciplined ship. If someone on my team wants to propose a change to how something works, I expect a real level of confidence behind it — not just 'this might be interesting,' but a genuine case for why it's going to help. We simply don't have the bandwidth to chase every idea that sounds appealing on the surface. Given everything riding on this release, I think that's the right way to operate right now. As for a cause of any wider slowdown, I genuinely don't know — I wouldn't want to speculate about things like workload or time pressure, as I don't think that's a factor.*

Manager 5: Long-tenure (7 yrs) | Logged changes & patents: Low

Q1: *My approach is fairly transactional. I want my team focused on getting things done, staying within the scope of what we've actually committed to delivering. At our scale now, with the deadlines we're working against, I'd rather people put their energy into the work that's actually on the plan than spend a lot of time exploring things that may or may not go anywhere. If you're asking me to speculate more broadly, though — and this is just a guess — I do wonder whether it has something to do with being in charge. Some of my colleagues who've been around a long time tend to hand over a lot of autonomy. I'm not that kind of manager; I want to stay in control, keep my hands on the steering wheel. I get the sense some of the newer managers hold a similar view.*

Manager 6: Long tenure (7 yrs) | Logged changes & patents: High

Q1: *This is something I often talk about with a couple of the old guard here — people who were around before Sony came in. And they all say the same thing, more or less: that willingness to just try something new, even if it might not work, is the real Silverback spirit. It's practically in the DNA of the place, or at least it was until a few years ago. My team still operates that way, and I think that's exactly why our output hasn't slipped.*

Manager 7: Short tenure (10 months) | Logged changes & patents: Low

Q1: *Efficiency is what I care about most in how my team operates. People are welcome to bring*

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ideas forward, but I hold them to a fairly high bar. It needs to be well thought through, not just an interesting notion someone had over lunch. Not every suggestion is going to make the cut, and I think my team has come to understand and accept that. It keeps us focused on what actually matters for the release.

Manager 8: Long tenure (6 yrs) | Logged changes & patents: High

Q1: I don't want this to sound like a dig, because some of the newer managers we've brought in are genuinely very capable — properly trained, MBA types, the kind of people who know how to run a large team efficiently. And they do get the work done, no question. But if I'm being completely honest, some of what I see in those teams feels a bit bleak. There isn't much room left for fun, for just messing around with an idea because it's interesting. It's all quite disciplined, quite serious. I don't think that's necessarily wrong for a company our size, but it's a very different atmosphere than what we started with.

Manager 9: Short tenure (7 months) | Logged changes & patents: Low

Q1: *One of the first things I did when I took over this team was make it clear how I wanted to work: this isn't a trial-and-error kind of environment. If someone wants to propose a change, I expect them to have thought it through properly first, to be genuinely confident it's going to improve something, not just bring it to me because it's an interesting idea they had. I think that's a reasonable standard to set, especially given the size of the operation we're part of now. If you're asking me about why the number might be dropping more broadly, I'm afraid I don't have a theory. Workload maybe, there is quite some time pressure, but my team can handle that.*

Manager 10: Long tenure (7 yrs) | Logged changes & patents: High

Q1: *I can't really speak to what's happening in other teams. But I do sense that the more business-like approach that's crept in over the last couple of years. I think the sheer growth of the place has cost us something. If I had to guess, I'd point to management style. Some of the managers who've come in more recently strike me as 'real' managers: very MBA, very metrics driven. But I don't always get the sense they feel personally invested in what we're actually building.*

Manager 11: Short tenure (8 months) | Logged changes & patents: Low

Q1: *My priority, plainly put, is getting the work done, reliably, solid. That's what they hired me for, and that's what I hold my team to. I do value it when someone flags a possible improvement, something with real substance behind it. But a lot of what gets suggested, in my experience, is closer to innovation for its own sake - interesting in theory, but not actually what the team needs to be spending its time on right now. I try to be honest with people about that distinction. I don't think workload, or the process has anything to do with it.*

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Manager 12: Short tenure (8 months) | Logged changes & patents: High

Q1: *I've only been here eight months, so I don't have the long view a lot of people here do. What I can tell you is that my team's output has stayed strong the whole time I've been leading it, so whatever's happening elsewhere, it hasn't touched us directly. But even in the short time I've been around, I've picked up on the 'old' people talking about a shift, a sense that there used to be more appetite for risk-taking, back when the studio was smaller. I hear it mentioned enough that I think there's probably something to it. Regarding team size, workload, tooling, I couldn't tell you which of those, if any, has an impact.*

Manager 13: Long tenure (5 yrs) | Logged changes & patents: Low

Q1: *I appreciate it when someone on my team brings me a suggestion for how we could improve something, I don't want to give the impression I shut that down. But I've also learned, over the years, that opening that door too wide invites a lot of ideas that just aren't realistic, that are more about the idea being interesting than actually solving a problem we have. Innovation for the sake of innovation, basically. Sorting through that can become its own distraction from the work we're actually supposed to be delivering. That is why we don't meet deadlines. As for other factors, I couldn't really say. But I don't think workload or team size or anything like that is a thing.*

Manager 14: Long tenure (6 yrs) | Logged changes & patents: High

Q1: I'll tell you honestly what I tell everyone who joins my team: there's no such thing as a bad suggestion here, at least not one you get punished for making. Some of the ideas brought forward started as things that sounded, frankly, a bit wild when someone first said them out loud in a meeting. But we don't put a ceiling on that. That's not something I invented, it's just how this team has always worked, going back to before I even joined, and I've made a point of keeping it that way even as we've grown. If you're asking me to speculate about the cause more broadly, though, I do wonder about how managers relate to their people. A lot of us who've been here since early on tend to give our people a lot of trust, let them run with things. I've noticed some of the newer managers operate differently, more hands-on, more control over the day-to-day.

Manager 15: Short tenure: (1.5 yrs) | Logged changes & patents: Low

Q1: *I try to keep some perspective with my team on what kind of company this actually is now — we're talking about a billion-dollar corporation, not the playful startup some of the longer-serving staff still seem to picture in their heads. There genuinely isn't a lot of room for fantasizing about what might be cool to try. The work needs to get done, on schedule, and that's the standard I hold my team to. I don't think that's an unreasonable way to run things at our scale. I don't have a good answer for what's causing this elsewhere in the company, like workload, leadership support, or anything else, I can only speak for my own team.*

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Manager 16: Long-tenure (6 yrs) | Logged changes & patents: High

Q1: *The word I keep coming back to is discipline. The whole place feels more disciplined than it used to — which, again, isn't criticism, we're a much bigger operation now. But I do think the focus has shifted, generally, toward hitting performance numbers rather than just chasing something genuinely new because it might be great. My own team hasn't really felt that shift, we've kept doing things more or less the way we always have. But it's definitely the broader mood I pick up on when I talk to people from other parts of the studio. I'd point at management style, too. A lot of the new people we've hired into leadership roles, frankly, don't strike me as gamers at all — I'm not sure some of them have ever really played the kind of games we make. That wasn't something you saw in the early years. Back then, everyone leading a team genuinely loved the product. But that has changed.*

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