TABLE: The Collaboration Infrastructure for the Future

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Cristian Petschen founded TABLE almost as an afterthought. Petschen, the CEO of TABLE, and his co-founders, created the company Dropr in 2009 to make the process of sharing one's creative work easier. Dropr was designed to be a website that could host the portfolio for those in creative industries such as graphic design and filmmaking—and to allow interested "buyers" to review and connect with the creatives. It was attempting to solve one of the largest problems for workers in the creative field: the inability to connect quickly and efficiently with buyers and create new material without a middleman. Unlike most professions, creative fields are often fraught with issues surrounding organization, connectivity and structure. Many creative workers either produce their content while simultaneously maintaining a job in another more structured field or have found work at a firm that hires creative workers and connects them with buyers who require their services. Other companies have also attempted to solve this problem.
Society6, a company based in Chicago, for several years has been hosting artwork from graphic designers to sell directly to consumers. Deviant Art has been around for over a decade and was one of the first sites to use social media as a means to share one's art with others. Dribbble lets creators exhibit their portfolio of work, and buyers can review these and connect with them.

This is a problem that plagues other fields outside of the creative industry. The "middlemen" simply connect producers of goods and services and purchasers and this has been an issue for both sides of the transaction for decades if not centuries. Prior to the advent of the internet, it was nearly impossible to conduct most transactions without some kind of a service that linked the two parties together. In agriculture, rural farmers, specially "small growers," are usually manipulated and often cheated by large "brokers" who act as middlemen with access to large corporate buyers. These problems are being tackled by companies like Greenfence, which is creating a community and ecosystem of buyers, sellers

and supporting services for the food industry, with the eventual hope of directly connecting growers/farmers with buyers for prices that are fair to both parties. Uber, the ever controversial taxi service, can also be seen as the result of this void between consumers and providers. Taxi companies are angry by the San Francisco start-up due to its immense popularity with consumers. Consumers widely prefer Uber because they felt that taxi companies charged absurd rates for sub-par service. Employees of taxi companies also say they were being abused by their employers. One driver, who now operates under Uber, said a Boston based taxi company made him purchase his own car, own license and pay other fees to the company before he could see any profit. He said drivers saw only a small amount of the profit made off of a trip and relied mainly on tips for their wages. Under Uber, drivers now can enjoy slightly more freedom and feel less constrained by their company.

Creatives are now catching on to the trend; although creatives tend to be some of the sharpest users of technology, networking amongst them has stayed relatively primitive. If they are not being hired by a firm, many creatives rely on word of mouth and other third party connectors to spread news of their work. A prominent example is the agent system used in music and motion pictures. An actor, the creative, often requires an agent, the connector, to land parts in films and connect with other directors and producers. This is true even on the ground level of creative work. Chrissy Bulakites is a photographer living in Boston, MA, and has been able to make a living off of freelance photography. "It's not easy, but I've finally been able to make photography my full time gig," she said. However, only a minority of Bulakites' work comes from networking done on her own. "I'll always shoot a friend's music video, and it's definitely good to build a portfolio through that, but it's pretty difficult to find work without hiring a booker." Much of her work comes from wedding photography, a field she can only access through a booking agency that is hired by couples when they plan their weddings. The agency not only has access to the couples, but more importantly has built a relationship with wedding planners who advise couples to book the agency. Bulakites says she often only meets the wedding planner the day of the wedding and rarely communicates with them. This lack of communication between Bulakites, the creative, and the wedding planner, the consumer, is what keeps the booking agency in business, and

like the early users of Dropr is what frustrates most creatives about their line of work.

Dropr was well received with numbers hitting well over 100,000 people, however, Petschen says the data showed that even though the numbers were high users were not being engaged. "When you asked people, they would tell you they really liked it. But, the numbers show they weren't being very engaged. People would go there and hang up their work, like a gallery, and then they would leave." Petschen went straight to the users and tried to understand why they were not being more interactive with Dropr. Across the spectrum of users the answer seemed to be the same---creatives wanted to not only meet buyers of their services but also to connect with other creatives and be able to work with them.

It takes more than just connecting two people together to bring about meaningful and substantive change. There has to be effective collaboration as well. Creating networked and collaborative communities requires tools that can allow people to share media such as documents, host chat rooms, and potentially even host teleconferencing abilities. While this can be done through separate pieces of software such as Google Docs, Skype and Hangouts, the problem lies in making this entire process appear "seamless" and being able to host all of this in one area that also allows for meeting other creatives and consumers. The company Slack (more famous for its "fastest company to billion dollar valuation" fame), has compiled many of these functionalities into one service, but this is much more useful for established companies collaborating internally, than aiding the creative process. Seeing this problem, Petschen altered the concept of Dropr and transformed it into TABLE. He hopes to make the virtual table a metaphor for bringing together individuals who can then collaborate as a Group with a "seat at the Table". People can invite others to their Table, and collaborate on projects without the need of a middleman. An example he cites is a consumer "setting" a table that has a seat for a graphic designer, a marketing person and a photographer for a given project. The consumer can search for the right person and invite them to their table and vice versa, making the process much more personal than if they were to hire a firm. "I see TABLE as really the next-gen evolution of Slack—far more intuitive, faster, non-monolithic designed to manage and manipulate truly rich media, and cutting across the company boundaries to create these dynamic

groups that come together and dissolve once the project is over," says Sunil Singh, the Managing Partner of Citadel Ventures, a seed-stage stage Silicon Valley venture fund which is one of the early investors in TABLE.

TABlE is creating an organized process for a disorganized field, and is directly opposing the agency model that has been the standard in creative fields. It is not far-fetched to think that, with the media sharing, editing and annotation tools available "at the TABLE", entire movies can now be created on TABLE, with screenwriters being able to directly collaborate with directors as well as actors. This model can also lend itself to other industries. Restaurant owners can now search for, and bring together, general managers, bartenders and chefs much more easily than before. The model used by TABLE allows users to bring together the kinds of people they want to rather than hoping that the perfect candidate comes to them or they are connected with them. If the restaurant owner wants to open a bar that specializes in Latin American food and Mescal, he can bring together a chef who has experience in Guatemalan cooking and a bartender who used to work at a reputable Mescal bar much quicker than if he simply put a wanted ad on a website like Poached.

Finally, what this model also does is encourage collaboration and creativity making it a hotbed for new startup ideas to spring up. Engineers will hopefully not have to live in incubators to generate new inventive ideas with a website like TABLE. TABLE would allow engineers in the UK who want to work on a new music sharing program to find and connect with engineers living in Bangalore who want to work on a similar idea.

TABLE and the model it is creating are not necessarily going to alter these industries overnight, but it is putting the mechanisms and infrastructure in place to see a gradual shift in how the creative industry and potentially other industries interact internally and with external parties. According to Sunil Singh, "in a few years, TABLE could very well be one of the most ubiquitous plumbing infrastructure embedded in applications and websites, both consumer and enterprise, a natural choice whenever there is a need for collaboration and community-level engagement."