



Thursday, May 17, 2007

[Contact Us](#) | [Site Map](#) | [Search](#)

HOME

[ABOUT US](#)

[MEMBERSHIP](#)

[CORPORATE PARTICIPATION](#)

[SURVEYS](#)

[PROFESSIONAL DEVELOPMENT](#)

[KNOWLEDGE CENTER](#)

[PUBLICATIONS](#)

[HR RESOURCES](#)

[PUBLIC POLICY](#)

[JOBLINE](#)

[HR BOOKSTORE](#)

[AWARDS](#)

[REGIONS/ CHAPTERS](#)



Embracing the Artistic Creativity and Diversity of Your Employees

Organizing an Employee Arts Festival

By James Burger, communications manager for the Office of Human Resources, Dartmouth College

May 16, 2007

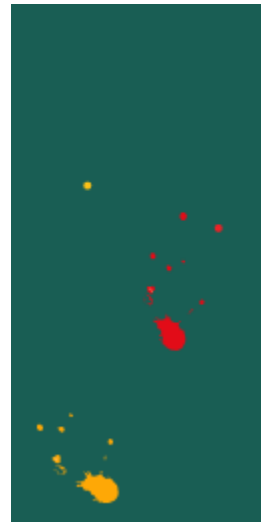
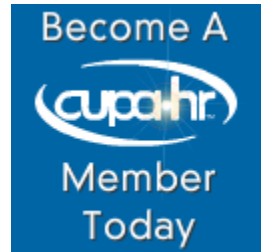


Is there a brilliant composer balancing financial statements in the next office? Has the cashier in your cafeteria begun work on a novel? And how about that technician who is always so helpful when your computer crashes — might she be working on a series of watercolor landscapes?

The chances are great that within your organization there are various employees who have artistic talents and whose creativity is part of the energy that sustains them. Having an outlet for their art can be rewarding for them as well as inspiring for their co-workers. Employers benefit when their employees are energized and recognized by their peers. What better way to tap the power of creative individuals than to sponsor an arts festival at which they can display their works?

In September 2006, Dartmouth College did just that. ArtWorks, an all-day event led by the Office of Human Resources, featured more than 30 exhibits and performances, in areas ranging from the visual arts to poetry, comedy, video and music (see side bar for demographics). Although the exhibiting artists were Dartmouth faculty and staff exclusively, the festival was open to students and to the public, and it drew nearly 300 attendees. A favorable review in *The Dartmouth*, the college's student newspaper, lauded both the quality and the diversity of the works while stressing the positive audience response.

Dartmouth's ArtWorks festival brought together a wide range of individuals: a security guard, a Religion & African and American Studies professor, a library services assistant, an assistant dean and an accounting assistant were just a few of the participating artists. The event



not only provided employees with an opportunity to meet one another, reinforcing the college's sense of community, but also it offered the artists' co-workers a chance to learn more about them. The spirit of collaboration and collective pride was palpable throughout the day.

Preparing for the Event

The ArtWorks six-person planning committee began biweekly meetings in June for the September event. The group comprised members of the Office of Human Resources, the Hood Museum of Art, the Hopkins Center for the Arts and the Upperclass Deans' Office. To introduce the ArtWorks festival to the Dartmouth community, an e-mail was sent to all faculty and staff announcing the event and soliciting submissions to exhibit. An ArtWorks Web site (<http://www.dartmouth.edu/~hrs/artworks/>) and e-mail account were established as the central points of contact, with a fixed deadline for submission.

Artists were asked to submit samples of their work in an electronic format via e-mail. Exhibition guidelines and the requisite release forms were vetted by the Office of the General Counsel. ArtWorks was designed to feature live performers as well as exhibitors, so the planning committee conducted various "walkthroughs" of the exhibition space to develop the most efficient staging and layout design. Artists' job titles, as well as the titles of their works, were confirmed prior to printing promotional materials, name tags and exhibit cards. Because the artists were responsible for delivering and hanging their work the morning of the event, setup and breakdown times, as well as the performance schedule, were established clearly in advance. Two hours were allotted for all participants to set up their exhibits and, in the case of musical performers, their instruments. This group effort fostered a communal spirit and set a very positive tone for the day.

Evaluating Submissions

Dartmouth's ArtWorks festival, fortunately, elicited a manageable number of submissions, with enough diversity and quality to ensure consistently interesting exhibitions. That is by no means the norm. In developing an employee arts event, it is important to be prepared for various scenarios. If the level of interest is widespread, and the level of submissions is exceedingly high, a decision will need to be made about which works or artists to include.

In the professional (and highly competitive) art world, juries are responsible for evaluating and choosing the works. The artists understand that judgment is part of the process. However, such competition tends to deflate the positive energy, inclusiveness and teamwork that are at the core of a successful employee event. Similarly, awarding prizes, while wonderful for the recipients, can polarize participants and raise concerns of favoritism. For ArtWorks, we were prepared to accept submissions on a "first come, first serve" basis if there had been interest from a large number of artists.

In addition to accepting or rejecting submissions based on quantity, the other major issue is the potential for disallowing offensive material. Such a sensitive decision can be difficult to make, particularly in an academic environment that champions free speech. For that reason, the ArtWorks guidelines made clear to artists up front that the event committee reserved the right to "remove obscene, unlawful or otherwise inappropriate material from the exhibition at any time at its sole discretion."

Room Layout, Performance Schedule and Other Logistics

Depending on an institution's size, the time commitments required and the space available, it may be appropriate to organize an employee arts event around a specific theme (e.g., visual art exhibits or musical performances). For its ambitious debut, ArtWorks combined exhibitions with films and live performances. While this approach complicated the logistics, we felt that it would make for a livelier event that not only would draw a more diverse audience but also would display a broader range of talent. Post-event responses from participants and attendees attested to the wisdom of that decision.

To accommodate the needs of the artists, musicians, spoken-word poets, filmmakers, jewelers and comedians, ArtWorks utilized a large, open space in Dartmouth's student center. The room's size (50' wide by 80' long) allowed for staging, a drop-down projection screen and tables at the periphery for jewelry. Soft-wall dividers were used for hanging smaller works, while easels displayed large paintings and photographs. A central labyrinthine layout allowed a smooth traffic flow for attendees.

"The location provided was very spacious, with great light and atmosphere," says Kelly Cusick, who displayed her jewelry at the festival. For her, the event's location was "the perfect forum to share my work with the Dartmouth community."

The room had its own small audio system, but since the needs of the live performers (ranging from solo classical guitar to poetry readings to a five-piece band) were so varied, an outside vendor was hired to do the sound mixing. The live schedule was tight (see www.dartmouth.edu/~hrs/artworks/artworks_schedule2.pdf), featuring back-to-back performances, and the start times were communicated to the performers well in advance, resulting in smooth transitions from one slot to another. All efforts were made to schedule performances that worked well before and after each other.

Use of the Web

From the outset, the Web was an integral part of the ArtWorks project. In addition to offering forms, guidelines and other general information, we notified the artists of plans to showcase their exhibitions online. Currently, the online gallery features exhibitions by a majority of the artists (see www.dartmouth.edu/~hrs/artworks/exhibition/index.html). In addition to images, the site includes text, video and music files. These exhibitions allow those who were unable to attend the live event to view and listen to works by the artists, who also receive wide-reaching exposure. Furthermore, new exhibitions will be added throughout the year, thus continuing the opportunity for creative employees to express themselves.

Post-event Debrief

Although ArtWorks was a spectacular success, the planning committee decided that there was room for improvement. A week after the festival was held, we regrouped to discuss pros and cons of the event's operation. What ran smoothly, and what needed further work in the future? More than 20 recommendations were made, including providing better seating, sponsoring an artists' reception, holding the event for longer hours and inviting more people to be on the planning committee.

Benefits of an Employee Arts Festival

"Out-of-the-box" thinking has long been a justifiably valued concept. Fueled by initiative and a willingness to take a chance, such an approach enables an individual to welcome change, develop strategic solutions, work collaboratively and look to the long term. While an employee needn't be an artist to solve problems innovatively, an organization benefits when

it encourages and embraces the spirit of its own artistic community.

Work/Life Balance

“This was the first time in my professional career that I was offered the opportunity to share my long-standing interests with the rest of the community,” says David Wheel, a human resource consultant and tuition assistance program manager at Dartmouth. He also happens to be a photographer and a musician who exhibited and performed at the ArtWorks event.

Increasingly, employees are looking for more than simply financial compensation as part of a fulfilling work experience. Many organizations offer recognition and wellness programs as enhancements to their workforce. To talented individuals, an arts festival offers elements of both. Not only is it gratifying for employees to show another side of themselves to their co-workers, but also it is emotionally and physically beneficial to give purpose to their creative processes — it is, in a word, re-energizing, and that’s a good thing for the employer.

Recruitment and Retention

An arts event is clearly an effective, inexpensive and, most important, *meaningful* incentive for an employer to offer. During recent interviews for positions at Dartmouth, various candidates have spoken enthusiastically about the ArtWorks festival. Whether they had been told of the event during the interview process or had learned of it as part of their research on the Web, they said that they found the college’s support of such a community-building event to be refreshing and one that demonstrated a commitment to its employees. Those who had visited the online gallery were impressed with the level of talent.

The festival experience for Dartmouth employees was extremely positive. “ArtWorks was great!” says Jenn Kocsmiersky, a digital media assistant who created watercolor, charcoal and collage pieces. “I’ve been doing art for most of my life, but rarely do I get the chance to actually exhibit my work. This event was wonderful in creating a sense of community among other Dartmouth employees, in which artists could meet and even network with each other.” Others echoed her sentiments and felt proud to be part of an institution that would give them such a venue.

“I am thankful for the opportunity that human resources provided for artists that are employed by the college to give of themselves with their peer group,” says Leah Prescott, a spoken-word artist who is a coordinator for the college’s sexual abuse program. “ArtWorks was exciting, and I can’t wait to see what the festival will be like for 2007.” What’s more, Prescott met other employee poets at the festival, and she’s hoping to collaborate with them in taking poetry to the community at large. This will be an exciting venture for the poets, as well as a public relations “win” that can promote Dartmouth as an employer of choice.

Kelly White, an insurance verifier for Patient Financial Services at Dartmouth-Hitchcock Medical Center, describes her feelings succinctly: “I am beyond honored to have been part of ArtWorks.” Now *that’s* a compliment any employer would be thrilled to receive.

Collegiality and Team Spirit

In addition to the individual artists, the ArtWorks festival featured two group performances. Rick Peck, associate director of Gift Planning, was part of an improvisational comedy troupe comprising members of the college’s Development Office. He says that “through ArtWorks, I found performing with my colleagues to be great fun. I also found that it opened

my eyes to how diverse employees' artistic interests are. I hope this program continues to grow!"

James Graham, who played guitar and sang with Company Picnic, a band whose members are all computing professionals, states, "The event helped pull together our little group of musicians so that we continue to jam together and enjoy the fruits of a successful event." And, as a result of their performance at ArtWorks, they were asked to play at their division's holiday party.

These performers highlight one of the great advantages of bringing employees together in a creative environment. Not only did these two performing groups form bonds within their own work areas, but they also personalized their departments for other Dartmouth employees. Who knew that fundraisers could be so funny or that computer technicians could get people dancing? Performing live can be a perilous struggle — for a group, it takes teamwork and shared goals to be successful. Just as it does in the workplace.

Peer Recognition

Bob Oxman is the night security guard at the Hood Museum of Art. He's also a talented artist who works with pencil and ink to create comics in the graphic novel style. He displayed one of his latest pieces, *Frozen*, at the ArtWorks festival which, he says, "gave me the opportunity to exhibit my work to colleagues, friends, family and the general public. I also enjoyed meeting the other exhibitors and seeing their work. My hat's off to the fine folks at HR who organized the event."

Oxman's not alone in his appreciation of the other artists' talents. Sandy Adams, director of Development and Alumni Communications for the Dartmouth Medical School and Dartmouth-Hitchcock Medical Center, says that "creating art for others to enjoy is a supreme pleasure." ArtWorks showed her "the incredible talent that lies hidden within my colleagues, bringing a whole new level of enjoyment for me, both in the creating and in seeing what others have crafted."

Artists and attendees alike were inspired by the day. Some were excited to have received positive feedback on their art and couldn't wait to create more. Some, having seen their co-workers' artistic abilities, were eager to collaborate with them on departmental projects. There were those who established contacts for other exhibitions, for places to sell their works and for networking. And many felt proud to be part of an institution that strongly supported their artistic nature and gave them a chance to display their talent.

Conclusion

Brush strokes ... guitar chords ... words written and spoken. Not so different from successful projects, innovative products or effective work teams, really. Recognizing the creative power of your employees makes sense in so many ways. It's cost-effective; it distinguishes an organization as an employer of choice; it garners favorable publicity; it energizes individuals; it's fun; and, undeniably, it touches lives as only the creative process can — quite a return on investment. Art, indeed, *does* work!

ArtWorks at a Glance

- 42 participating artists and performers
- More than 100 exhibited works
- 26 departments

- Participants average nine years of service at Dartmouth College, ranging from less than one year to more than 23 years

James Burger serves as communications manager for the Office of Human Resources at Dartmouth College. He has an extensive background in the fields of film, television, the Web and music, and has been the editor and writer for *xylostyle*, an award-winning online magazine, and a guest lecturer for the Emily Dickinson International Society at Amherst College. In addition to chairing the planning committee, he also exhibited and performed at Dartmouth's ArtWorks festival. Burger can be reached at james.burger@dartmouth.edu.