

The Art Market Adjusts: Changes in the work force

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I mentioned in a previous Q&A in this series that we are hearing buzzwords in the art industry during this pandemic, and unfortunately one of those buzzwords that is making many in the art world uncomfortable is “furlough.” We’ve seen the news reports. We know that there will be some employment adjustments. So how can we all be proactive during these uncertain times?

In this Q&A, I speak with Sarah Murkett, Founder at Murk & Co, to discuss ways for employers and employees to turn the current situation into an opportunity to set goals, network, and improve skills.

Diana Wierbicki
Global Head of Art Law

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Diana: With hiring seemingly at a standstill at the moment, what would you suggest individuals do as we prepare for companies to begin hiring again?

Sarah: Let’s first acknowledge that we are in unprecedented territory here. COVID-19 has created a global crisis the likes of which has not been seen since WWII that has resulted in a wide-spread economic shut-down. Uncertainty rules and we are collectively focused on how to survive, both literally and financially. And until we flatten the curve of infection, the world will remain in crisis mode.

It is estimated by NPR that around 17-million people in the United States have filed for unemployment over the last three weeks, which The New York Times claims, in a healthy economy, would normally hover around 500,000 in any given week. That means that when jobs do open up there is going to be fierce competition for those positions, so now is a great time to prepare.

After you have gotten over the panic and settled into a new routine, allow yourself to slowdown. Many of us were so busy in our pre-coronavirus lives that we never had a chance to stop and think about where we are in our careers and where we would like to go. Take that time now and start to envision what you would like to be doing in five or ten years. Once you have a goal then plotting a road map for how to get there is that much easier.

With your goal in mind then you should assemble your application documents. Update your resume and work on the story of your career. Your resume should be short and easy to read, with a focus on accomplishments and contributions, rather than a list of responsibilities. And if you have not developed a strong verbal narrative to make sense of the choices that you have made in your career, explaining how you have arrived in the place you are today and the ways in which you would like to apply your experience to an opportunity that would allow for, even demand, continued growth with any company into the future, then now is the time to do so. Making a strong and confident presentation is the key to setting yourself apart.

And lastly, even though the rules of social distancing essentially have us on lock-down, it is important to take time for networking. If there are companies that you are interested in connecting with then start following them on social media. Participate in online programming, if this is something they are offering. If someone that works at a company you are interested in joining is a friend of a friend then ask for an introduction to find out more about the culture there. And get registered with recruiters in the field, sending them your resume and story, including the types of positions you are most interested in pursuing.

These tips are for all job seekers, whether they are currently employed or not.

Diana: In your experience, what skills have you found important to the art industry that you would suggest individuals work on developing

during this time?

Sarah: While the art world is a niche industry, it also ranges across a number of diverse sectors including museums, auction houses, galleries, advisory firms, art fairs, publications, foundations, private collections, artist studios and art service companies, all with different functions and cultures. But one area of concentration that any candidate would be wise to develop are soft skills.

If you do not know what soft skills are, they are valuable interpersonal skills that go beyond the basic requirements of the position (hard skills), and are often more important for small teams because these personal attributes are not really taught. They include things like: adaptability, attitude, communication, creative thinking, work ethic, team work, networking, decision making, positivity, time management, motivation, flexibility, problem solving, critical thinking and conflict resolution.

As I am not a career coach or an expert in this particular area, I have instead identified a number of fabulous online resources to help anyone learn about, as well as practice flexing, these particular muscles as follows:

Go Skills offers online courses in areas like Microsoft Office, Finance and Project Management. A majority of their courses seem to be about specific computer programs but they also have a whole section on Soft Skills. They put together this great page that gives an overview on what Soft Skills are and why they are important:

<https://www.goskills.com/Soft-Skills>

Udemy is an online academy that creates customized learning opportunities for a company's workforce to help deepen skills, increase employee engagement and create a happier workforce. They wrote an article on the "TOP 10 Soft Skills for 2019 in the Workplace" including recommendations for online courses that you can take for a small fee:

<https://www.udemy.com/blog/top-10-soft-skills-for-2019-in-the-workplace/>

wikiHow offers 3-ways to improve your soft skills, delving deep into each area and offering practical advice for improvement. The areas include:

Developing your communication skills

Strengthening Interpersonal Relationships

Demonstrating Enthusiasm and Ingenuity

<https://www.wikihow.com/Improve-Soft-Skills>

And lastly, in the orbit of soft skills is emotional intelligence. The leading expert on the topic, Harvey Deutschendorf, was interviewed on "Why Emotional Intelligence Matters". That talk can be enjoyed through a podcast posted on the Toastmasters International website. If you do not know Toastmasters International then you should. They are an educational non-profit that teaches public speaking and leadership skills through a world-wide network of clubs.

<https://www.toastmasters.org/resources/news-and-announcements/podcasts>

Diana: What would you suggest companies work on?

Sarah: This is an incredibly uncertain time for art world businesses. With the disruption of revenue streams, most companies are trying to figure out how to stay afloat. The first, and most important thing is to take a hard look at the business to determine the overall financial picture and come up with an action plan for cut backs on expenditures, research into ways in which the company might be able to apply for aid or funding, and ideas for pivoting into new ways of making money.

Once you have this picture then you need to work on ways to effectively communicate your plan to your community, both internally (employees, contractors, vendors) and externally (clients, general audience), truthfully with compassion and generosity. In a time of high stakes, and even higher levels of anxiety, this is not an easy task. But how companies behave through this crisis will have long-lasting effects on their community and reputational value in the field.

The aptitude to implement this kind of strong leadership in a difficult time is akin to the soft skills we were discussing on the candidate side, but on a corporate level. On April 7th Brunswick Group hosted an invaluable webinar on, "Engaging Your Employees Through COVID-19" that is chock full of practical advice for companies, a recording of which can be found on their website:

<https://www.brunswickgroup.com/employee-engagement-advice-note-covid-19-i15595/>

If you happen to be in a financially stable position as a company, then now would be a great time to think about the future. This is going to be an employer's market and a great time to hire. With all the talent out there searching for work, you could be in a very privileged position to build a dream team. Separating the wheat from the chaff and identifying the right talent is going to be the key. And this is where a recruiter might be able to help.

In order to do this, you need to create an interview process. This would include setting standard criteria for reviewing applicants.

You will need to determine how many stages of interviews are required, along with the method of interview and who will be doing the interviewing. The first might be an introductory phone interview to discuss the role in further detail with the candidate and get an initial sense of their suitability in terms of hard and soft skills. The second should be more behavioral in nature digging down into things like what has made them successful in the past, what motivates them to perform and how they have overcome challenges. The third would be to meet with various members of the team, and possibly the principle of the company, if that did not happen at an earlier stage.

Create an interview script so that every candidate is treated the same and you are able to get a complete picture of their strengths and weaknesses.

And finally remember, that you are not out to hire the best candidate of the bunch. Your goal is to identify the perfect candidate that meets all of your criteria. At the end of the process you are lucky if you are in the difficult position of having to choose between two or more finalists.

Diana: After going through this process of social distancing, do you anticipate the demands of the art industry will change?

Sarah: Technology. Technology. Technology. The art world has been late to the game and this crisis has put a priority on the development of technology in a couple of key areas.

First, with the widespread closure of brick and mortar arts and culture institutions including museums, galleries and art fairs, there has been a rush to connect with audiences through the creation of online content. So far this is a mixed bag. There is an overwhelming amount of content to explore at varying levels of success. And this makes sense because unlike Athena, the goddess of war and wisdom, who was born fully formed from Zeus's head, digital media takes time to grow and nurture and you just kind of have to jump in and try things out to see what works. And as with most things in the art world, these are not usually experts who are being asked to develop this content, but rather it could be the communications person who has dabbled in social media, or a member of the team who saw what needed to be done and raised their hand to help out. They might not even have the right equipment or editing programs to create something on a professional level. This is a dawning of a new age filled with experimentation, like the silent film era, and everyone is going to be trying different things out, learning by doing and seeing what works. So, while we sit at home, looking for virtual ways to connect with our community, we are the guinea pigs. But like with anything new, therein lies opportunity. Digital is a growth area for any arts business and the industry will benefit exponentially from the investment in trained people to show us the way.

Second, as art world businesses are considered non-essential, let's assume that if you are lucky enough to still have a job, most people are working remotely. To work effectively from home, or any safe shelter a worker has chosen to hunker down for the duration, teams require technology to do so. At the very least they need a strong internet connection, a computer and secure access to company files (usually on a cloud). I also personally require a notebook to take notes. For over a decade I keep something I call an office in a bag. It weighs all of five pounds, and I can literally work from anywhere in the world with my setup. And even when I do not have access to wifi I can use my smart phone as a hotspot. This allows for freedom and flexibility. And now that art workers are getting themselves set up to work this way, I am not sure that they are going to want to give it up. So, moving forward employers should prepare for their employees to be asking for perks like a being able to work from home 1-2 days a week. This is an easy enough thing for business to give their employees, whose presence is not required onsite. It often leads to an improved quality of life, which results in happier people and increased productivity. And these are results that any company should want to help facilitate.

Diana: What do you anticipate the role of a recruiter will be in this new space?

Sarah: What I do is simple to explain. I am a matchmaker. I help my clients to find the people that they need to run and grow their businesses. I do this by listening so that I am able to develop an understanding of my clients' needs on the one side and build trust relationships with the very best candidates in the field on the other. My clients and candidates are bound to evolve as we navigate our way through this crisis. As always, I am here to listen and think creatively about how to evolve with them.

As an example, I am working on developing a series of helpful resources, for employers and job seekers alike. The first one will be on video interviewing, available through my soon to be regular newsletter. So, if you are interested in hearing more, please sign up through my website murkandco.com.

Follow the link to view other Q&As in our [The Art Market Adjusts Q&A Series](#).

[Click here](#) to read more insights on how we can weather the coronavirus outbreak with you.

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