

**Bring in the arts and get the creativity for free:
A study of the *Artists in Residence* project**

Alexander Styhre & Michael Eriksson

Dept. of Project Management
Chalmers University of Technology
Vera Sandbergs Allé 8,
SE-412 96, Göteborg, Sweden
Phone: +46 31 772 44 28
Fax: +46 31 20 91 40
e-mail: Alexander.Styhre@chalmers.se

Abstract

In the literature on creativity and innovation, there is a tendency to idolize great contributors to the liberal arts as extraordinary creative individuals. Such *ex post facto* accounts of “great men and women” are however of limited value for everyday practices in organizations. This paper reports insights from a Swedish project named *Artists in Residence* (AIRIS) wherein artists including musicians, painters, and actors and directors, dancers and choreographers collaborated with a regular company or workplace during a ten-months project, aimed at helping the co-workers think in new and creative terms. The study concludes that there are many benefits from making the world of artists and the world of work intersect, but there is also a certain demand on the participant to fully commit to the project. Even though the culture project was positively received among co-workers, only a limited effect on workplace climate could be reported for the 2005 evaluation while the 2006 evaluation indicates more positive effects. Still, amount of texts advocating artists’ creative skills and experiences outnumber the cases of actual projects bringing the two groups together. Studies of projects like AIRIS shows that there is a great potential in bringing artists into industry.

Keywords: Creativity, artists, collaboration.

Introduction

“Art is a means of experiencing the process of creativity.
The artifact itself is quite unimportant”.

Viktor Shklovsky ([1929] 1990: 6)

Culture and art are beside science two of the most praised human accomplishments. Museums and galleries throughout the world are dedicated to various forms of culture and art. At the same time, artists tend to be marginalized until they have managed to attain recognition within their field. Like in few other fields, the contrast between the poor struggling artist prior to her or his recognition and the life of the famed and successful artist is more accentuated. For instance, the life and afterlife of Vincent van Gogh is a particularly illustrative case; during his life time living an obscure and troubled life, but after his death becoming the paragon of modern painting, constituting a veritable art industry in his own right. In the field of innovation management and in the literature on creativity in general and as an organization resource, there is a tendency to regard various forms of artists as embodiments of creativity. Culture icons such as Picasso, Van Gogh, Bach, Mozart, and so forth, are stock household names denoting the creative capacity of the genius. However, not even Bach—the first of great German composer in the tonality tradition—was fully recognized during his lifetime (McClary, 1987: 55). Osbourne (2003: 519) is sceptical about such uncritical accounts of creativity (see e.g., Miller, 1999) and advocates what he calls “a *post-heroic* conception of creativity”. From history we learn—if we are capable of learning anything at all—that creativity is situational and contingent and the product of complex discursive articulations (Amabile *et al.*, 1996; Amabile, 1997, 1999; Andriopoulos, 2001; Mumford *et al.*, 2002; Basadur, 2004). Creativity is what is declared in *ex post facto* second-order statements rather than some innate quality of a particular work. Still, artists and culture workers of various orientations are trained to think in new terms and along divergent lines. Such properties are increasingly valued in a working life characterized by time pressure and the demand to do more with less. Several studies of innovation and the use of creativity emphasize the need for expanding the perspective and to take alternative views in innovation work and creative work. In such a perspective, artists are often regarded as a resource poorly exploited in industry. However, there are few studies of how such collaborations are carried out. This paper reports a study of a Swedish project, *Artists in Residence* (AIRIS), aiming at, *inter alia*, making artists and industry collaborate more closely. The project, originally started in 2002 and still

running, is an interesting example of how artists and industry and public sector organizations may learn from one another. Projects like AIRIS are representative of a general recognition of the opportunity to cross-fertilize the field of culture with industry. It is the product of a society increasingly being aware of the need for not only fine-tuning an existing order of things but also for being able to think in new terms.

The concept of aesthetics and its importance for creativity

The concept of aesthetics is arguably as old as Aristotle's *Poetics* (Holquist, 2003: 368). However, it was not until the Romantic movement in Germany in the eighteenth century that the German philosopher Baumgarten and his more famous disciple Immanuel Kant "invented" the discipline of aesthetics. Aesthetics is since then part of continental philosophy. The perhaps most widely cited text on aesthetic is Friedrich Schiller's *Letters on aesthetic education*, first published in 1795. Schiller thus places aesthetic cultivation at the center of the development of man: "In a word, there is no other way to make the sensuous man rational than by first making him aesthetic", Schiller (1795/2004: 108) claims. "Aesthetic education" is for Schiller then not a matter of guiding the pupil in the domain of the decorative and ornamental arts but of providing him (and later on, her) with the tools for becoming "rational". Kant did not follow Schiller on his insistence on giving aesthetics a clear social role but rather spoke of art as having a *Zweckmässigkeit ohne Zweck*, "having a quality of being purposeful without having a purpose" (Holquist, 2003: 368). Ever since Kant, aesthetics and forms of rational thinking, grounded in logic, have been separated (Luhmann, 2000: 15). Art on the one hand, science on the other. In the field of innovation management and the creativity literature, such a strict distinction becomes blurred. A number of definitions of creativity may here be provided: "We consider employee creativity to be the production of ideas, products, or procedures that are (1) novel or original and (2) potentially useful to the organization", Madjar, Oldham and Pratt (2002: 757) argues. Shalley and Gilson (2004: 36) speak of creativity accordingly:

Creativity relevant skills can be defined as the ability to think creatively, generate alternatives, engage in divergent thinking, or suspend judgment. These skills are necessary because creativity requires a cognitive-perceptual style that involves the collection and application of diverse information, an accurate memory, use of effective heuristics, and the ability and inclination to engage in deep concentration for long periods of time.

Scott and Bruce (1994: 581) say that the concepts of creativity and innovation are often used interchangeably in the literature but argue that “creativity has to do with the production of novel and useful ideas . . . and innovation has to do with the production or adaptation of useful ideas and idea implementation”. A major scientist like the British physicist David Bohm (1998) emphasizes that creativity is demanding because it insists on making us think against what we have learnt throughout our upbringing, namely that things may not be what they appear, that the order of things may be different, and so forth: “[c]reative work requires, above all, a creative state of mind. And, generally speaking, what we learn as children, from parents, teachers, friends, and society in general, is to have a conformist, imitative, mechanical state of mind that does not present the disturbing danger of ‘upsetting the apple cart’ (Bohm, 1998: 16). Thus, more recently, creativity has been emphasized as an organizational resource that does not obey the same procedures as other organizational resources (Guillet de Monthoux, 2004; Linstead and Höpfl, 2000; Guillén, 1997). Antonio Strati (1999: 176), a proponent of an aesthetic view of organization, says: “When we study people’s creativity . . . we observe organizational forms very different from those to which we have been accustomed by the dominant Taylorist and Fordist models”. Sternberg (2003: 391) emphasizes creativity in leadership work: “Creativity is important for leadership because it is the component whereby one generates the ideas that others will follow . . . Many leaders are academically and even practically intelligent, but uncreative; they lead people through their ability to influence rather than through their agenda”. Leading creative people is practice that is complicated because creative individuals, Sternberg (2003) suggests, are thinking in new terms and are willing to redefine problems, take risks and tolerate ambiguities. In the literature on creativity, the “extra-rational” qualities of creative individuals are emphasized. Creative individuals accommodate aesthetic skills and qualities and can see beyond the narrow horizon of utility restraining many co-workers in organizations. Another concept brought into the analysis of creativity and innovation is *play*, conceived of as a domain wherein alternative modes of thinking are permitted and actively promoted (Anderson, 1994, Dougherty and Takacs, 2004; Dodgson, Gann and Salter, 2006). Play is here what is sharing a number of characteristics with aesthetics as what is broadening the perspective and enables new worldviews. Some writers suggest that it is in the first place large and mature organizations that need to develop such skills (Sharma, 1999; Schumann, 1993), while smaller and younger organizations have maintained their capacity to pursue creative thinking.

In summary, creativity and innovation are, at least partially, informed by an aesthetic capacity of individuals or groups of individuals. An aesthetic view of things is

enacting plural views and facilitates a change of perspective. It also helps defamiliarizing or denaturalizing predominant beliefs, assumptions, or practices and open up for new discussions. However, even though such virtues are advocated in theory, there is little evidence how aesthetic thinking may be brought into industry in practice. In the following, one such project is examined.

A note on methodology

The AIRIS project was studied by one of the authors during a period of 2004-2007. The first year, 2004, was examined through retrospective telephone interviews with company and public organization representatives. From 2005 and onwards, the project has been followed in greater detail. The methodology of the study is based on both quantitative and qualitative methods. In order to examine the willingness to change in the participating organizations, two instruments were used at three times during the project duration: in the beginning, in the end, and in the end of the project. At each time, twenty randomly selected participants in each project were asked to fill in the questionnaire. The response rate was about 80%, taking into account significant variations between project (ranging between 60 and 95%). In addition, interviews were conducted with the managing director and a co-worker representing the personnel function or the trade union at the site. By the time of the middle and end survey, the participating artists were interviewed. Interviews were semi-structured and conducted by two persons, one researcher and one representative of the AIRIS administration team. By the time of the middle measurement questionnaire, the research team conducted a field study of the individual projects, providing a more contextualized and detailed insight into the projects. Interviews lasted for about one hour and were tape-recorded.. Moreover, in the 2006 project, one of the authors of the paper participating in meetings with the AIRIS project team, serving as a discussant for the project team and helping to provide a more coherent theoretical and methodological framework for the project.

Artists in Residence

In Sweden, the culture sector is largely funded by tax money and only to a minor extent by ticket sales. Culture workers and artists are also facing periods of unemployment. On the

other hand, Swedish industry and public sector organizations are working under great pressure to become more effective and to do more with less. During such conditions, organizations become less capable to think in new terms and to fully exploit the creative competencies of its co-workers. The AIRIS project is one arena where artists and industry may join hands and learn from one another. In the following, learnings from the project will be discussed. The Skådebanan organization was founded in 1910 to work with theatre as a means of public schooling, making individuals with little experience from theatre and other cultural forms become involved in cultural activities. Skådebanan became a movement with local and regional offices and organizations scattered throughout Sweden, engaging in a variety of culture projects (see Gullet de Monthoux, 2006, for an overview). The Västra Götaland region Skådebanan office collaborates with a number of organizations including The Gothenburg Business Region organization, the Västra Götaland region government, and the Swedish National Council for Cultural Affairs. The AIRIS (*Artists in Residence*) project aims at expanding the intersection between the industry and public administration and the domain of culture. In Sweden, a number of organizations are actively promoting an increased intersection between culture and industry. For instance, the *Arts and Business* organization is an organization promoting basically the same goals as Skådebanan, arranging workshops and events wherein the benefits of bringing culture and industry closer is elaborated upon. While organizations like *Arts and Business* are primarily promoting the idea of using artist's skills more effectively in industry, the AIRIS project is a project wherein artists are actually located in a specific firm or organization for a period of 10 months to work with a culture project. However, the culture project actually include three separate goals: (1) a *culture-political goal* to create an arena where industry and the culture sector and its agents can meet and interact, (2) a *business development goal* aimed at enhancing the creative capabilities of industry and public sector organizations, and (3) a *labour market goal* where new arenas for employment opportunities for professional artists are being created. The culture projects are individually designed in collaboration between the artist and the participating organizations and include three phases. During the first phase (two months), the artist is researching the organization and creates contacts with the co-workers and they jointly formulate an action plan for the project. The action plan is thus the outcome from a close collaboration between the two parts. In the second phase (six months) the artist is working with the action plan and develops a number of activities, events, or workshops in collaboration with the co-workers in the organization. The last phase includes an evaluation of the activities and a final seminar wherein all participating artists and companies report their experiences and learnings. The

AIRIS project include a number of different categories of art forms such as acting, arts, popular and classic music, choreography, and photography. In addition, the participating companies and organizations represent a great variety of industries and public sector organizations. Participating companies pay a relatively small fee (about 5,000 euros per project in 2005 and 15,000 euros in 2007) to participate and the artists are paid by the AIRIS project. (see Table 1 below for a summary of participating artists and companies).

| Artist | Company/Industry |
|----------------------------|--|
| 2006 | |
| Artist | Food supermarket |
| Photographer | Health Care organization |
| Actor/Playwriter | Truck manufacturer |
| Choreographer | Construction company |
| Singer/Songwriter musician | Technical department, Municipality |
| Actor/director | Shipping company |
| Singer and Musician | Dental health care |
| Choreographer | Pharmaceutical company |
| 2005 | |
| Artist | Real estate company |
| Artist | Health care organization |
| Choreographer | Health care organization |
| Choreographer | Design bureau |
| Actor/director | Architecture firm |
| Musician | Highschool |
| Actor/director | Public transportation call-centre |
| Musician | Engineering company |
| 2003-2004 | |
| Artist | National Institute of Working Life |
| Choreographer | Petroleum company |
| Actor/Playwriter | Real estate company |
| Musician | Working life department, Municipality |
| Artist | Medical technology company |
| Actor/director | Highschool |
| Musician | Engineering company |
| 2002 (Pilot study) | |
| Artist | School |
| Musician | Civil engineering department |
| Artist | Engineering company |
| Actor/director | Human resources department, Municipality |

Table 1. Participants in the AIRIS project 2002-2006.

In the AIRIS project, artistic freedom is emphasized. The artists are not evaluated in terms of “measurable output” but in terms of qualitative effects, for instance if the co-workers learned

something about themselves or their work, or if they started to think in new terms. The artists are also expected to work with methods and events that suit their own domain of expertise, even though in practice there were examples of artists orchestrating activities outside of their core domain of expertise. For instance, a dancer worked with painting as part of her project. It is also worth noticing that the participating artists have significant work life experience from culture institutions and departments, but that most of them have never been part of a project like AIRIS. In 2007, however, a number of artists with previous experience from AIRIS projects are engaged in new projects. In order to support them in their individual projects, the artists met and discussed their experiences throughout the projects. The role of the artists is to operate as what may be called a “creative consultant” even though the participating researcher claimed it was important not to take on ready-made identities and roles but to conceive of the creative process as the gradual emergence of new and innovative positions for both parts of the project. Thus the concept of “creative consultant” may be misplaced because it bears connotations of a self-declared expert bringing both questions and answers to the organization and are implementing pre-conceived tools and methods. However, here the concept denotes someone being capable of offering alternative perspectives on predominant beliefs and assumptions, existing routines and work practices, and so forth. When examining what activities that took place in the projects, one notices the variety of activities. In some cases, the artists has arranged seminars and workshops or engaged the co-workers in producing their own artistic accounts of their work life experience, while in other cases, the artist has documented the work. For instance, a photographer working at a health care organization taking care of elderly people encouraged the co-workers to take their own photos on their two-directed way between home to work, accounting for their day-to-day experience of a all too familiar and largely taken for granted route. In addition, the co-workers made photo portrait of their colleagues. In other projects, it was particular skills that was focused and trained. The singer and musicians working at the dental health care organization arranged training sessions where the breathing and voice training were emphasized. In most of the projects, the artist’s work was initially regarded with some scepticism. For instance, in the truck manufacturing company, the artists claimed that the co-workers thought that he was some kind of consultant hired to lay off people. After a while, the participants in the companies and organizations thought of the collaboration with the artist as being rewarding and helping them to learn something about themselves and their co-workers. However, an evaluation of the effects of the projects conducted by a research team could find little evidence of any significant changes in the work climate in the work places in the 2005

evaluation. A rather small improvement in what was called “work climate” is however accounted for. In 2006, when additional resources were added to support the artists’ work, changes in work climate were significant but in workplaces where leaders were changed, thereby disrupting the process, the effects were less significant. However, the lack of firm quantitative evidence supporting the AIRIS project does not need to be overrated. Research shows that it is complicated to provide evidence for significant changes in behaviour from most training and education investments. Instead, what may be called anecdotal evidence suggests that equally participating artists and co-workers conceive of the AIRIS project as being rewarding and interesting. Previous research shows that changes in attitude are not fully accounted for before twelve to twenty-four months after projects are terminated. Criticism of the AIRIS project, for instance articulated in a debate in Gothenburg’s largest daily newspaper, *Göteborgs-Posten*, emphasized the use of art and artists as a “production factor” in the broader move towards the increase of the “creative content” of work life declared by for instance Richard Florida (2002). However, such debates need to be contextualized within a broader debate over the financing and funding of culture in Sweden. Proponents of the liberal arts argued that artists should not have to “prove themselves useful” but that art—just like science, its spokesmen suggests (Gieryn, 1983: 787)—has an intrinsic value beyond utility. However, the AIRIS project was never articulated and enacted in such terms but as instead aiming at helping industry and the public sector develop new skills and capacities on basis of their cultural training. These objectives proved to be appreciated and a project was awarded SABA, the Swedish Arts and Business Awards, in November 2006.

Discussion

In the debate in popular management writings, there is an emphasis on unleashing the creative potential of the co-workers. However, tapping in to such resources is by no means a trivial matter, and years of specialization into certain domains and activities may not easily be abandoned to embrace new thinking. In addition, several authors suggest that one must recognize the aesthetic qualities of organizing, thereby broadening the scope of possibilities. The concept of aesthetics is here used in a rather broad manner to denote a range of qualities and virtues. On the one hand, there is the organization creativity literature emphasizing the need for novel thinking, and on the other hand, the literature on aesthetics assuming that an aesthetic mindset is capable of improving the creative capabilities of the co-workers.

However, there is a shortage of studies pointing at the actual use of aesthetic skills and competencies in organization. In the AIRIS project, the participating artists argued they initially encountered a mild scepticism from the co-workers who thought of the project as being some kind of management fad. As the project evolved, such scepticism tended to wane and most co-workers thought of the collaborations with the artists as being rewarding. The variety of activities arranged by the artists is substantial and so is the scope of workplaces and industries participating in the project. It is in general rather complicated to draw any conclusion from project because of this variety of activities and local conditions. The research is also complicated by the fact that out of a total of sixteen projects over 2005-2006, only eleven may be regarded fully accomplished projects for various reasons. The quantitative evaluation of effects of the project in terms of work climate did only show small direct effects. Still, the so-called anecdotal evidence suggests that representatives of the participating companies and workplaces expressed their appreciation for being given the chance to join the project. However, it is noteworthy that the participating companies and workplaces is only paying a rather modest fee for the ten months project and that it is the project itself financing the artists' work. It is to date rather uncommon that companies hire artists to serve as a creative resource but projects like AIRIS is providing evidence that artists may in fact contribute with their skills and experiences. Still, the ability to make fruitful use of such skills and experiences is demanding significant investment from both the artist and the participating companies and workplaces. Artists are used to operate in a domain wherein art is regarded to have a value beyond its immediate utility, while in industry and public administration there are other concerns dominating the agenda. Making artists see how they can contribute the everyday work life is thus a crucial objective for initiatives like AIRIS. At the same time, co-workers in companies and organizations hosting n artists needs to become aware of the fact that the outcome from the collaboration is dependent upon their full engagement. The domain of aesthetics and the domain of work must therefore intersect in meaningful and productive ways. If artists fail to take the role of the other, the co-workers in companies, there may be only marginal joint learning from the project, and if co-workers cannot open up for new thinking and action there are few opportunities for exploiting the creative potential of the co-workers.

Rather than merely assuming that aesthetics is a useful resource in organizations and particularly in creative and innovative organizations, or advocating an increased exchange of ideas, the AIRIS project is one of few projects actually bringing artists and companies together. The outcome is mixed but overall positive. Cases like the AIRIS project is valuable

for the literature on creativity and innovation because it shows that there are opportunities for making use of skills and experiences from the domain of the liberal arts in regular workplaces.

Conclusions

In the general interest for various forms of creativity in industry and public administration, creative artists and authors hold a position as the paragons of creative capabilities. Numerous essays and papers have pointed at the extraordinary contributions of a narrow range of iconic individuals such as Picasso or Van Gogh. In the contemporary economy, preoccupied with defining and exploring the opportunities for selling experiences and other creative services or events (see e.g., Wolf, 1999; Nyström, 2000; Jeffcut, 2000; Julier, 2000; Chung *et al.*, 2001; Florida, 2002; Bryman, 2004; Ritzer, 2005; Nixon, 2005), the ability to combine aesthetic skills with market thinking is a highly attractive combination. Rather than being mere fiction or a fantasy about a coming “creative economy” such ideas must be tested in real life settings. The AIRIS project is one attempt to actually bring together the world of aesthetics and the world of business. Although the overall reception of the project was positive, it is noteworthy that the costs for the participating company or workplace is relatively modest and that there is little evidence—at least in Sweden—of companies hiring artists to make them become more receptive to new ideas and work in new manners. Still, projects like AIRIS points at the great potential in better exploiting the skills of artists. Hopefully the future will bring new arenas where artists and industry collaborate.

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