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Many people aspire to careers in the arts and creative industries. However, it has long been known that it can be challenging to navigate a creative career: that competition for work can be intense, particularly for entry-level positions, and that success requires advanced skill sets in addition to a high degree of artistic talent and proficiency. In this article, Dr Ruth Bridgstock draws upon her doctoral and post-doctoral research to explore the challenges involved in building a creative career in Australia and suggest ways to support emerging creatives to build satisfying and sustainable careers.

Making it creatively: building sustainable careers in the arts and creative industries

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Ruth Bridgstock

ARTS AND CREATIVE INDUSTRIES

The arts have always played a central role in individual and social well-being and development. Over the last decade policy makers in Australia have also started to argue that creativity, which underpins innovation, is essential to economic growth in the 21st century. 'Traditional' arts-based fields such as music, dance, drama, writing, publishing, and the visual arts have been included with film, television, radio, advertising, games and interactive content, architecture, and design, into a category of economic activity known as the creative industries.

The unifying themes of the creative industries are individual creativity, skill and talent, and the potential to create wealth and jobs through the generation and use of intellectual property.

Another unifying theme is the distinctive labour force profile they share (Throsby & Zednik, 2010). In contrast with more conventional industries such as financial services or manufacturing, the sector contains a very high number of small-to-medium enterprises, sole-traders and micro-businesses. Work in the creative industries is often freelance, or performed on a short-term project basis. Creative industries careers are largely individually navigated, often with minimal opportunity for stable employment or progression within a single firm. Although creative workers tend to have similar levels of education to professionals from other sectors,

decisions regarding employment are much less likely to rely on formal educational credentials or professional accreditation, but rather are often dependent on informal contacts and the quality of previous work.

Recent research using Census and Labour Force Survey data indicates that while some creatives are employed to perform creative work in core creative industries sub-sectors, an equal number eventually become embedded in creative occupations outside the creative industries, doing jobs like designing 'serious games' for injury rehabilitation (Cunningham & Higgs, 2010). Others perform valuable support or management roles in creative sectors.

Although there are numerous examples of outstandingly successful people working in the arts and creative industries, many emerging creatives find it difficult to establish themselves in creative work. There are a number of reasons for this. It can take significant time and effort to set up a business and build up career networks, and demand for entry-level creative work often exceeds supply. These challenges can result in extended education-to-work transition periods, including multiple entry attempts. In order to build a portfolio of work and create much-needed industry contacts, emerging creative workers may undertake further specialist training or unpaid internships. They may experience spells of

unemployment and underemployment during this entry phase. Multiple job-holding within and outside the creative sector ('day jobs'), is common amongst both emerging and established creatives.

CAREER SELF-MANAGEMENT

My research is concerned primarily with identifying ways to support and develop the careers of creative workers, particularly through higher education. In 2006–7, I conducted a study which tracked 200 new graduates from Australian university creative industries courses forward for one year, in order to investigate which skills were important to early creative career success (Bridgstock, 2011). My theory was that because the careers of creative workers tend to be individually navigated, career self-management skills could well be crucial. As part of the study, I developed a career management competence scale based on the Australian Blueprint for Career Development (Haines, Scott, & Lincoln, 2003) which I administered to the graduates at the time of course completion. The Blueprint identifies the skills, attitudes and knowledge that individuals need to make sound choices and to effectively manage their careers. One year later, I administered another survey which asked about the graduates' earnings from creative work and overall, and their perceptions of their levels of employability and career success.

I found that two clusters of Blueprint skills measured at time 1, were strong predictors of all of the career success measures one year later. The two clusters were: (i) self management, relating to internally focussed career skills such as building and maintaining a positive self image; changing and growing throughout life; participating in lifelong learning; and maintaining balanced life and work roles, and (ii) career building, relating to externally focussed career skills such as finding and obtaining work, locating and using career information, and making career enhancing decisions. In short, the graduates who possessed well developed career management skills experienced better initial career outcomes than those who did not. To my knowledge, this study was the first to make an empirical link between graduate skills of any type and career outcomes.

CAREER IDENTITY

I then became interested in how tertiary creative students might be able to

develop career management skills through their university work experiences. My own research, as well as existing literature, suggested that an adaptive career identity is pivotal to the development of the ability and propensity to career self-manage, including the ability to engage effectively in disciplinary content learning at university. A career identity is a structure of meanings in which the individual links their own career motivations, interests and competencies with suitable career roles (Meijers, 1998). There is strong evidence that many emerging creatives may need support to develop an adaptive and realistic career identity based on knowledge of themselves and the world of work, before they engage in advanced disciplinary learning. Students can enter creative courses with poorly defined notions of what they will do afterwards, or with overly rigid and foreclosed career identities (e.g., "having a career just like that of film director Peter Jackson"), influenced by unrealistic ideas about the world of work in their fields. These identity issues influence student engagement with coursework, as well as their career-related experiences and behaviour afterwards.

Although university career development services are well aware of the importance of student career identity, and do much to support students with the identity building process (often on an opt-in extra-curricular basis), these services are often not well integrated with tertiary creative course provision. Creative courses tend to emphasise the career building aspects of career development, especially concrete skills for gaining or creating employment, such as portfolio creation. Because adaptive career identity building is usually not a core part of coursework, creative students may not be able to make maximum personal sense of, and therefore take full advantage of, learning opportunities during the course. They are also more likely to experience distress and anxiety during the final semesters of coursework, as they realise precipitously that they are not as prepared as they might be for the impending transition to a challenging world of work.

During the career identity building process, students reflect upon their own career needs, values, and influences ('self-awareness' in the SODI model of career development outlined by Watts, 2006), and in turn learn about, and

experience first-hand where possible, various aspects of the world of work and their intended occupations ('opportunity awareness' in the SODI model). For creative students, becoming aware of the potential challenges involved in navigating a creative career is particularly important. The iterative and reflective process of career identity building emphasises the self management aspects of career management skills. This process may involve 'turning students on' to opportunities they had not yet considered (remembering that a significant proportion of creatives are employed doing creative work in non-creative sectors). During the adaptive career identity building phase, students also acquire skills and strategies to continue the reflective process for themselves in an ongoing way.

The career identity building process as just described should commence in the first year of a university degree. Once this process is well underway, students will be better positioned to find personal relevance and therefore engage actively with learning opportunities, and also to drive their own skill acquisition in line with their own goals. They will also be more likely to connect with the outward 'career building' aspects of career management skill acquisition as they are offered. Thus, later years of undergraduate creative industries courses should be involved with the development of industry-specific knowledge and know-how, including how to build industry networks, and how to find and obtain or create work.

EMPLOYABILITY SKILLS FOR THE CREATIVE WORKER

My most recent research builds theory about the specific work-related capabilities needed for creative employability and career success. I conducted case studies of outstandingly successful Australian creatives, and identified formative individual, social-contextual, and environmental factors which were influential to their career development. Below I provide a brief description of six important creative career capabilities which arose from my project findings.

Discipline-specific depth

All participants experienced an extended and immersive formative period of skill development immersion within their primary field of expertise, usually (but not

always) commencing during middle school years. Their formal educational experiences contributed meaningfully to this formative period, but school and university were not sufficient to meet all of their skill development needs. Special interests were pursued through private lessons, informal study or practice, and/or working with an experienced mentor (e.g., through the family business).

Disciplinary agility

The creatives exhibited diversity in their skill sets, and had eclectic educational backgrounds (e.g., visual art and maths; dance and science; animation and marketing). This afforded them unusual and creative perspectives, and assisted them to traverse different disciplinary perspectives and terminologies. Trans-disciplinarity is important for creatives because bringing multiple disciplines together can spark innovative new ideas. Disciplinary agility can also provide a potential employability advantage by helping creatives to obtain or create work in non-traditional sectors. In addition, cultural agility and bilingualism can be a strong advantage in the globalised, networked world of 21st century creative work.

Social network capability

Although the participants were individually recognised for their work, they in no way ‘created in isolation’. Their social relationships shared a number of distinctive features and patterns which were important to success, including a balance of strong transdisciplinary and intra-disciplinary ties, and a wide network of weak and indirect ties. These relationships were reflectively and proactively built and maintained, with a strong emphasis on mutual benefit and collaboration (Bridgstock, Dawson, & Hearn, 2011).

Digital savvy

The creatives remained abreast of and open to, the globalised creative, collaborative and marketing possibilities afforded by 21st century online digital

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Strategic career connections

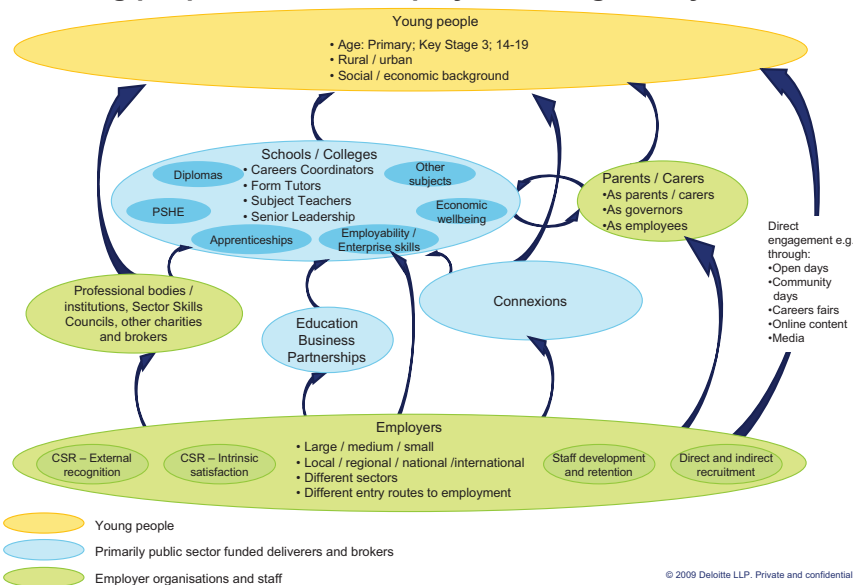
The vision of the Education and Employers Taskforce in the UK is to ensure that every school and college has an effective partnership with employers. This will provide its young people with the inspiration, motivation, knowledge, skills and opportunities they need to help them achieve their potential and to secure the UK’s future prosperity.

The Taskforce has two websites—the Employers’ Guide and the Teachers’ Guide. They each show the ways in which employers and education can work together, and the benefits that come from collaboration. They are accessible through www.the-guides.org.

HOW CAREERS ADVICE IS CURRENTLY PROVIDED TO YOUNG PEOPLE

Employer involvement is an important aspect of career education and young people hear from them through a variety of channels. This diagram from the Education and Employers Taskforce paper prepared by Deloitte’s Education and Skills practice, depict how employers currently contribute to the careers advice that young people receive. They note that the system “includes the key, but not all, components of the current complex careers advice system”.

Young people hear from employers through many conduits



SOURCE AND REPRINTED WITH PERMISSION: Helping young people succeed: How employers can support careers education. Education and Employers Taskforce. 2010. Retrieved from: www.educationandemployers.org/media/7630/deloitte%20et%20young%20people%20succeed%20report%20final.pdf

JAN 2011 UK Government to expand work experience for young unemployed

Young unemployed people will get much more help to access extended work experience opportunities to get the best possible start in life. • Under a new scheme young people will be allowed to do work experience for up to eight weeks so they can get a proper stint in a business for their CV and providing real value to the employer. Under the old system people were only allowed to do two weeks experience. If they tried to do more they could face a loss of benefits.

Full story: www.dwp.gov.uk/newsroom/press-releases/2011/jan-2011/dwp007-11.shtml

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developments (e.g., Web 2.0). However, they did not necessarily possess all of the required digital skills themselves. They maintained relationships with others who could supply specific technical know-how.

An enterprising orientation

Many of the participants operated within both subsidised (grant-based) and commercial working environments concurrently, and were equally comfortable with either mode of work. While some of the creatives had well-developed grant writing, business management and marketing skills themselves, for others it was sufficient to appreciate the need to find and exploit new markets, and to make the effort to forge strong transdisciplinary ties with like-minded people who had the necessary business and entrepreneurship expertise (Hong, Essig, & Bridgstock, 2011).

'Passionstance'

The creatives' career patterns showed an apparently paradoxical balance between: (a) passion for career, often expressed as wanting to 'make a difference', characterised by strong intrinsic career motivation and goal-directed action, and (b) planned happenstance (Mitchell, Levin, & Krumboltz, 1999)—an ability to adapt proactively, be resilient, and make the best of both positive and negative chance events.

SPECIFIC CAREER DEVELOPMENT STRATEGIES FOR EMERGING CREATIVES

I conclude my discussion with some specific career development strategies for emerging creatives.

Go in with your eyes open

Creative career decision-making should be based on realistic and up-to-date information about the world of work in the chosen field, including graduate labour market data, along with reflection on individual values, interests, career motivations, and skills. I recommend that emerging creatives undertake informational interviews with professionals in their field/s of interest, and possibly brief work placements, before making career decisions.

Immerse yourself

Ideally, emerging creatives should pursue their disciplinary interests and enhance their technical skills both within

and outside formal education. While school, vocational education and university can provide invaluable learning, extra-curricular and elective activities (such as work placements—Smith et al, 2009, project work and master classes) are fast becoming essential for the development of advanced skills and industry networks, and to demonstrate employability.

Find or create a niche

The most successful creatives find ways to differentiate themselves and their work from the rest of the market. Emerging creatives who can demonstrate an unusual and desirable combination of skills within the arts / creative industries and high growth fields such as science, technology, engineering, and health, are able to access creative career options not open to most. The ability to speak a foreign language is also highly desirable.

Look for hidden opportunities

A very large number of emerging creatives end up competing for a very small number of positions, mostly because they aren't aware of the significant number of hidden creative career opportunities available. Hidden creative work can often be found (a) in non-traditional sectors (e.g., designing 'serious games' for education, or providing visual design services in-house to a retail or engineering firm) and (b) overseas. While some (e.g., performing artists) may need to travel to avail themselves of opportunities overseas, more and more digital specialists are undertaking globally-networked project-based work from Australia. Much of this hidden work can be found via professional associations, and via informal social contacts (such as industry mentors).

It's who you know ... and also who knows you

More than in any other field, creative workers must build relationships in order to build careers. However, the idea of having to 'network' can be frightening or distasteful, and doesn't come naturally to many. Unfortunately, creative courses often don't include social networking as part of the curriculum. I suggest that creatives should start to practice networking as early in their careers as they can, and to treat networking as an important skill set which can be learned (Zack, 2010). Some may find it worthwhile to reframe networking as an opportunity to be genuine and get to

know people with whom they have a common interest, with mutual benefit in mind—whether it is in the context of informational interviewing for career advice; attending professional events; or meeting an industry work placement supervisor for the first time.

Every creative product needs a market

Most emerging creatives will be self-employed to some degree, and will need to market their creative products or services themselves. However, remarkably few arts and creative industries courses contain much content on creative business management, entrepreneurship and marketing. I recently conducted interviews with creative graduates about their enterprise skills, and discovered that those who enrolled in elective small business or marketing subjects run by business schools found these courses invaluable, even though the courses did not cater specifically to the creative industries. I recommend that all emerging creatives undertake some type of business/entrepreneurship training.

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