



## Dance can benefit from the new world of work

The world of work is undergoing significant change. The term 'career' has broadened to encompass a range of paid work, employment and personal situations that challenge and capitalise on skills, interests and values.

Traditionally, 'career' suggested a choice of profession, a specialisation of talent and learning, and a reliable means of earning an income. The development and management of most careers was largely determined by the employer, varying economic or industrial trends, institutional practice, perhaps a family tradition or state of wealth. Things started to change in the 1970s, and since then there have been several major shifts in the work environment, or what we commonly call the world of work. The emphasis in career control has been sliding from employers to individuals, and this has unleashed new opportunities. As a result of this change, we need a broader and more dynamic approach to how we navigate and determine our career paths. This relates as much to those pursuing careers in the performing arts, including dance, as any other industry.

This article will examine three key aspects of this new work landscape that have affected the way people are employed and, as a consequence, the way we regard, manage and deploy our talents and skills. Firstly, the softening and decentralising of the command and control workplace, secondly, the concept of a portfolio career, and finally, the importance of identifying and using particular transferable skills — especially creative skills.

The change in 'career' has not only provided an environment of multiple employment opportunities, it has enabled people to explore their work possibilities in ways that are compatible with the various stages of their life. While there are clearly several dance-specific issues that impact uniquely on the management of careers within and beyond the dance environment, the changes in the work systems are nevertheless extremely relevant and opportune to benefit the dance artists of today. Dance, unlike some other sectors, is well poised and in a unique position to take advantage and benefit from this new world of work.

In his book *The Future of Work*, Thomas W Malone describes today's economy as one based on knowledge and innovation. This new economy is enabled primarily by the technological advances in communication and work mobility. The old 'command and control' system has been replaced by 'coordinate and cultivate', as workers are delegated more autonomy and responsibility to deliver on their tasks. With easy access to information and instant messaging, the cost of communication decreases as the electronic workspace reduces the limitations on when and where people can work.<sup>1</sup> While all industries are now benefiting from this decentralised communication and work environment, it is the human benefits — freedom, motivation, creativity and flexibility — that are making positive impacts on people's lives.

Meredith Brooks, sequentially an actuary, investment banker, financial services executive, non-executive director, corporate mentor and Pilates teacher during her career to date, has a personal perspective of this trend. 'Adaptability is essential to ensure what you have to offer remains relevant amid rapid technology, and social and economic change,' she notes. 'Maintaining a high level of self awareness — I like this, I don't like that, I'm good at this, not that — and being prepared to take risks gives you the best chance to realise your full potential.'

<sup>1</sup> Malone TW 2004, *The Future of Work: How the new order of business will shape your organization, your management style and your life*, Harvard Business School Press

The term 'portfolio career' describes the collection of skills, talents and experience of an individual that are cross-fertilised and reapplied in a variety of ways in a number of roles and often across industries. Thus, rather than having a linear career, an individual may seek to have a collection of roles or occupations, linked by threads of transferable competence where multiple incomes can be earned from multiple streams. In the developed world, the average twenty-something will expect to change jobs nine to 13 times in a working lifetime, and in many instances those jobs will be conducted simultaneously. The vocational self is open to redefinition by recognising that the skills and experiences of one profession are valuable to other professions, or other sectors of their own industry. Brooks comments: 'The skills I relied on in my corporate life are easily recycled in my current roles. For example, techniques for interpreting and influencing human behaviour are essential for management and selling and are equally useful in Pilates teaching. Running a business involves managing limited resources, improvising to cope with the unexpected, engaging multiple stakeholders in your vision and goals, and so on. Once you see them as generic capabilities, and learn how to recognise unfamiliar versions of problems you've seen before, you can apply them to radically different situations.'

We are now in an age where fewer people have permanent employment. Workers contract themselves to a range of employers, because of the specialty skill they offer and the trend to outsource specific tasks. Dance artists are familiar with this pattern. The performing arts are a complex of organisations, small and large, and varying performing situations. Resources are limited, and often the dance artist is forced to create their own opportunities through self-promotion and the willingness to collaborate. As well, the process of creating artistic productions is one of evolution, organisation, evaluation and development, and the skills required to commence a project and carry it out are central to the end result. Such experience and skills are similarly required for many other professional tasks within the arts — the management and staging of events, public relations activities regarding the arts, the advisory requirements of arts boards and government agencies, the health and welfare of dance artists, and so forth. Beyond the arts industries, the management of people, projects and bringing conceptual ideas to fruition are potential employment fields for individuals with dance backgrounds. The possibilities are endless and exciting.

In 2006, architect David Rockwell was hired to design the interior experience of the new Jetblue Airways Terminal at Kennedy International Airport in New York. An essential part of the brief was to create efficient and comfortable flow patterns for the thousands of people who needed to move around this extremely busy public space. Rockwell hired choreographer Jerry Mitchell to collaborate and advise on these issues. Mitchell looked at the initial design and immediately saw the problems. 'The original design made it hard to understand where you were supposed to go, either entering or leaving,' Mitchell said. 'Traffic diagrams showed a huge amount of path-crossing. I started to think it would be fabulous to eliminate all this criss-crossing and straight edges, which cause anxiety when they go on too long. David asked me what dance patterns I would use, and I said, "People move easiest in circles — off and on the merry-go-round".' Mitchell also directed the design to accommodate the emotional distinctions of departure and arrival — the experience of anticipation and waiting to leave, in contrast to the urge to get out of the airport as soon as possible once the journey is over.<sup>2</sup> This is but one example of the skills and knowledge of the dance artist being specifically transferable and of high value to other professions.

In sum, dance artists have a proven sense of discipline and determination, and are thus well equipped to exploit this changing world of work. With the support of a career management program, dance artists are in an excellent position to utilise the different opportunities within industries to transfer their skills and increase their employment prospects.

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<sup>2</sup> *New York Times*, 28. May 2006, [www.nytimes.com](http://www.nytimes.com)