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“Getting your foot in the door”

Challenges and opportunities facing artists and arts graduates in non-arts jobs

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Introduction

As tuition costs and college debt rise, students, educators, and workforce stakeholders need to be more cognizant than ever of the need for career-focused training opportunities for artists and arts graduates seeking well paid, secure, and growth-oriented employment opportunities within and beyond the arts. Research has shown that many creatives already work in non-arts jobs[1] (Motlani, 2024a; Wasser and Alper, 2018) and factors such as college debt are more likely to drive arts graduates to work outside their field in the future (Frenette & Dowd, 2020; Paulsen, 2024). The present report seeks to understand the challenges they have faced in securing and maintaining these jobs, and how they have overcome these challenges.

This report is the third installment of the **Branching Out Series**, which uses in-depth interviews and surveys to learn about the pathways and experiences of Illinois artists and arts graduates who are working in fields outside the arts. The first series report examined the push and pull factors prompting creatives to pursue non-arts occupations (Motlani, 2025a). The second report explored the value that creative workers bring to industries outside the arts in light of research that points to the growing importance of creative thinking and other soft skills in the future of work (Motlani, 2025b). Future reports will examine employer perspectives on what these workers bring to the job over and above workers with more "traditional" credentials. The present study asks:

1. **What are some of the challenges artists have faced in securing and maintaining non-arts jobs?**
2. **What opportunities or experiences have helped them to overcome these challenges?**

By addressing these questions this report contributes to a growing body of research that examines the diverse career pathways, work experiences, and employment arrangements of people with creative backgrounds or training (Brook and Comunian, 2018; Carey, 2015; Lindemann et al., 2017; Woronkowicz, 2025) and their perceptions of and satisfaction with their careers (Novak-Leonard, 2024). Yet it also fills a gap in our knowledge regarding some of the challenges facing artists who have sought pathways outside the arts and the circumstances or factors that have helped or hindered this process. Our hope is that this report will benefit early career artists and arts students, raising their awareness of systems and cultures they may end up working in and encouraging them to seek opportunities that will help them to understand and leverage the skills they gain from their artistic training. We also hope that learning about these experiences will help to inform education and workforce practices and policies geared towards the needs of this segment of the workforce. We realize there may be different barriers facing artists and arts graduates who have not been able to secure non-arts employment. Focusing on those who were ultimately successful in getting non-art jobs can help us to understand not only the barriers and challenges that artists and arts graduates face but also highlight the types of experiences and opportunities that can help others aspiring to apply their skills to non-arts roles.

Methods

Data Collection

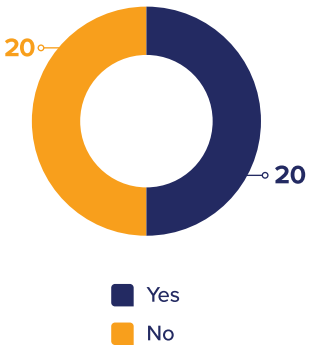
Participation in this study was open to any arts graduate or creative professional 18 years of age or older who was: a) working in a non-arts job; b) had a background or training in the arts; and c) either currently worked in Illinois or had completed their arts training in Illinois. No-one was excluded on the basis of race, ethnicity, gender, age, sexual orientation, disability, immigration status, education level, artistic discipline, or the non-creative job or industry in which they worked. Artists and arts alumni could self-select for the study by responding to recruitment materials distributed on social media. People were also invited to participate via email and word of mouth.

We interviewed 40 artists and arts graduates over a 10-week period. Prior to the interview participants filled out a brief online survey that included short answer, multiple-choice, and open-ended questions. The interviews lasted approximately one hour and followed a semi-structured format. We asked participants a range of questions, including their post-graduation experiences, how they ended up in their current non-arts occupation, and how they feel that artistic training can be improved to expand career pathways for artists and arts graduates. We used the cloud-based application Dedoose to analyze the interview and survey data, using both deductive and inductive coding for the interview transcripts and open-ended survey responses.

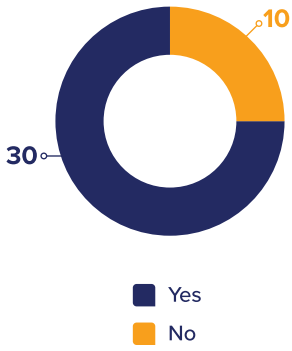
Interview Participant Information

We interviewed people from a wide variety of artistic disciplines and industries (see Appendix for information on the demographic characteristics, disciplinary backgrounds, and other characteristics of our interview pool). Our study sample is broadly reflective of the demographic trends we see in the Illinois arts workforce: The majority identify as White, are aged between 25 and 44, and have at least a bachelor's degree in the arts (Novak-Leonard & Banerjee, 2022). We have oversampled women as well as musicians and actors. That said, our previous research has shown that the majority of arts graduates in Illinois are women and a larger proportion of female arts graduates work in non-arts occupations (Motlani, 2024b). We have also seen that music and theater graduates are among the most likely to have primary jobs in non-arts fields (Motlani, 2024b). This aligns with national research that shows that musicians and actors are among the most likely to work part time in the arts and have arts jobs as their secondary occupations (NEA, 2022).

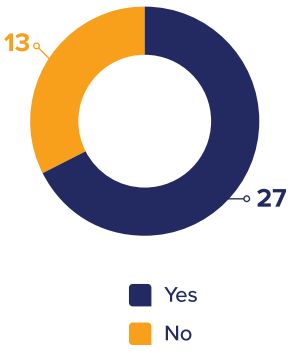
Have Post-Secondary Non-Arts Training



Would Work Full-Time In the Arts if They Could



Still Maintain a Creative Practice



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Findings

The interview protocol for this study included the following questions:

a. **What were some of the challenges or barriers you faced when trying to enter this job or industry, and how did you seek to overcome these challenges or barriers?**
b. **What were some of the challenges you faced in transitioning to your current work environment and what helped you to overcome them?**
c. **Were there professionalization opportunities and support networks that you were able to draw upon to transition to your current role?**

We coded responses to these questions into three categories: a) Barriers to entering non-arts work; b) Challenges transitioning to/adapting to non-arts work; c) Things that helped transition to non-arts work. Because we conducted 1-hour semi structured interviews, participants varied in what and how much time they spent answering each of our questions. Some dedicated most of the interview time to other questions and did not leave enough time to address the ones we explore in this report. In other words, non-response was a factor of time and the direction in which the interviews went rather than a conscious choice on the part of interviewees to withhold their response. We have noted the number of participant responses for each category:

1. **Barriers to entering non-arts work:** 21 participant responses.
2. **Challenges transitioning to/adapting to non-arts work:** 35 participant responses.
3. **Things that helped transition to non-arts work:** 31 participant responses.

Below we examine participant responses within each of these categories, exploring the relationship between responses and participant characteristics of our interview sample, where appropriate.

21
Barriers To Entering Non-Arts Work

35
Challenges Transitioning To/Adapting To Non-Arts Work

31
Things That Helped Transition To Non-Arts Work

A. **Barriers to Entering Non-Arts Work** (21 participants)

We asked interview participants to describe some of the challenges or barriers they faced when trying to enter a non-arts job or industry. Of the 21 participants that responded to the question, 11 cited Representing Transferrable Skills, Abilities, and Experiences During the Job Application Process as a major barrier; 10 cited Job Requirements; eight cited Narrow Conceptions About Arts Training; and three cited Exclusionary Practices. We found that participants who did not have non-arts training were at least twice as likely to cite these barriers as those who did have some non-arts training, with the exception of Exclusionary Practices. We also found that female participants were far more likely than male participants to cite Representing Transferrable Skills and Abilities During the Job Application Process (15 female vs 3 male) and Narrow Conceptions of Arts Training (8 female; 1 male). Below we elaborate on each of these subcategories, providing examples and quotes.

1. **Representing Transferrable Skills, Abilities, and Experiences During the Job Application Process** (11 Participants)

During the interview, 11 participants noted that the hardest part of getting a non-arts job is representing your skills and experiences in ways that resonate with employers. Elsa, a theater graduate who works in university constituent engagement, says it is difficult to describe the variety of skills that are required to maintain a creative career: “I can’t necessarily convey the fact that I also had to create my own website. I also had to film all these things, so I know how to work a lot of media and a lot of marketing. It’s hard to vocalize that in a resume.”

Victoria, an opera singer working in the finance industry, feels that you can only properly convey the value of your arts background and its applicability to non-arts jobs when speaking to someone face to face: “Once I have an interview with someone, I can very clearly outline why music and the arts in general make you a fabulous employee. Every person I know in the arts is like the best employee ever, but it’s getting from paper to the interview.” Gael, a graphic design graduate working in account management and operations, makes a similar point: “I know that I could do most of the jobs that I’m applying for, I know how responsible I am and how much acumen I need to [have] in order to do the jobs. It’s always been about accruing enough trust in a gatekeeper to do that.”

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The unique nature of creative work, including the prevalence of short-term contracts for performing artists, can also be difficult to explain on a resume. Talia, an actor and filmmaker working as a project manager for a DEI consulting firm, describes the feedback that she received from a recruiter concerning her work history: “He told me that my resume was confusing because he was like, ‘if you

had worked at a place for 5 years then that would be fine, but you've had all these different jobs.'" Talia nevertheless sees this as an advantage for employers rather than a drawback: "It's not a bad thing. Here's all these different skills I've taken from this thing, and here's everything I can give to you. Look at this beautiful sort of chaos and all the ways I can be a Jack of all trades."

2. **Job Requirements** (10 Participants)

When describing barriers to getting non-arts jobs, 10 out of 21 participants described a mismatch between their credentials, experiences, or skills and employer expectations. Dylan, a musician who works as an economic analyst, says, "I applied for some trading or quantitative analyst positions. I was lacking more the computer science and programming knowledge to really get there. I did manage [to get] through a couple rounds on some interviews, but once it got to the programming, that was out of my wheelhouse, and I couldn't go beyond that."

Instead of a gap in technical skills, Wenhua, a fine arts graduate working for a tech innovation hub, felt she lacked career or professional skills or training that other job applicants seemed to demonstrate: "I didn't fit in: How to think professionally going through an interview, what outfit to wear, what are some of the courtesies...That makes me feel like, compared to my peers in the program, [I'm a] less desirable candidate because I've never been in the professional setting." Like most participants, she also felt hampered by the absence of certified credentials or requisite experience: "If I'm applying to a marketing assistant [job], very entry level position, I'm like, 'oh, I can figure that out, and I know how to do social media.' But it's because I didn't take the classes, and there are other people who spent 4 years in school learning all of this stuff about marketing that I have no experience in. I was never going to get those jobs."

Rory, an IT support specialist trained in theater and lighting design, describes a shortage of credentials or experience that made it difficult to break into the tech industry, despite his conversancy with IT: "I could talk with [recruiters] about the computers, [but] I didn't have the skills on paper. I wasn't a computer science major. I didn't have previous experience with IT ... I didn't have a computer science major; I didn't have certifications. I had a couple of interviews [and] one of them was actually nice and he was very frank with me. He's like, 'I like you as a person. I think you have some of the knowledge, but not all the knowledge that you might need for this job. And the reason why we're not hiring you is because you don't have a documented work history with this.'"

These experiences belie notions about access to tech jobs. Blake, a musician working as a software developer, says: "People talk about tech being sort of like, 'oh, you don't need a degree to get started in tech.' Which, is true to a certain extent, but as the entry level roles become more and more competitive in the field, I think that is one of the ways that I have not made myself a strong candidate as other people." He has a point. Bureau of Labor statistics employment characteristics show that while some tech jobs, namely computer network support specialists and computer user support specialists, have relatively high percentages of people with some college but no degree (23.5%), all other tech jobs have high proportions of people with at least a bachelor's degree[2] and typically require one.[3]

3. **Narrow Conceptions About Arts Training** (8 Participants)

As noted in our previous reports, most of the artists and arts graduates we interviewed for this study (39 out of 40) answered "Yes" when asked whether the skills they had acquired through their arts training were applicable to their non-arts work (Motlani, 2025b). Nevertheless, eight out of 21 participants had trouble getting employers to understand the value of these skills, noting that their creative background ruled them out for many jobs. Says Ciara, a vocal performance graduate working in finance, "It took a lot of grit and perseverance because there were many times I would apply to a financial institution and I would be met with, 'What do you think you're doing?' I had one person say, 'You'll never work in finance with a degree in music,' and that's such close-minded thinking."

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Other participants felt their arts background is belittled or essentialized by employers or fellow workers. Maria, a systems trainer for a marketing logistics company who has a background in acting and fine art, says, "When I was an insurance claims agent, I felt like people were like, 'Oh, you have an art degree. That's cute." She adds, "There was something awkward or infantilizing about that … it felt uncomfortable." Charlotte, a dancer who works in trauma therapy, describes a similar experience in the medical field: "The underlying story from folks is I'm doing something 'cool' that isn't actually as important as what they do. It's not really the main thing that people need…It is harder to provide evidence-based research for the kind of work that creative clinicians do because it is unfolding, it is a process that is implicit a lot of the times. It is not something we can write easily [or] put numbers on."

Victoria describes the need for intermediaries to help translate the value of her degree: "The only way I've gotten my job or other interviews in the past has been through recruiters who can say, 'We talked to Victoria. Here's what we think she's good at. Here's why music is good.' It always has to be from another person." Indeed, Sarah, a fine arts graduate working in academic operations, was concerned that her arts degree was a disadvantage when she started applying for tech jobs during the pandemic: "I really think… the reason I couldn't get my foot in the door was because I have creative degrees." She adds: "I've even omitted the word art from my master's in education," admitting, "I don't think it made a difference."

Victoria's and Sarah's comments speak to the need for workforce intermediation organizations suited to the needs of artists. There are numerous workforce intermediaries across the United States who serve as brokers between job seekers and employers by taking a "dual customer" approach that sometimes includes mentoring, training, and job placement (Giloth, 2004). Some arise from industry partnerships, serving sectors such as healthcare or IT, while others are part of workforce investment boards, nonprofits, labor unions, or community colleges. While these intermediaries often focus on traditional full-time workers, researchers have highlighted the need for more workforce intermediation services for the growing class of nontraditional contingent workers or gig workers – a population to which many artists belong (Subout et al., 2023).

4. **Exclusionary Practices** (3 Participants)

Finally, three interview participants discussed feeling excluded from non-arts jobs and opportunities due to their race, gender, socio-economic background, or the fact that they have a degree in the arts. Juliet, an opera singer working in finance, describes making it to the final stages of a rigorous and competitive interview process only to be "ghosted" at the end for reasons that she believes are rooted in her disciplinary background (music) and her gender: "There's a reason that all the guys that I interviewed with were men. And they were all white guys, and their associates were from Stanford."

Blake describes some of the barriers to entering the tech industry, including tech job events which, in his experience, often take place at bars or restaurants where there is an expectation of spending money on food and drink that might be out of reach to many applicants. He also notes that Black job aspirants like himself are underrepresented in these spaces: "There's really not much of a presence for folks that look like us…It can be very intimidating to roll up to an event, and it's just like 16-20 guys who look exactly the same, and they all seem to be very familiar with each other."

These observations and experiences are consistent with research showing that Black, Latine, and female workers are underrepresented in tech jobs and also have less access to career advancement opportunities, despite the growth of high tech occupations (U.S. EEOC, 2024). Indeed, there are persisting gender, racial, and social inequities surrounding access to high-paying and high growth jobs more broadly. White males are more likely to have access to these jobs than Black or Latino men, and women across all racial and ethnic groups are less likely to have access to good jobs than their male counterparts (Carnevale et al., 2022).

Blake feels that Diversity Equity and Inclusion (DEI) policies have helped to break down some of these barriers, but he also notes pushback against these efforts: "It is something that has been threatened more and more by a sort of reactionary mindset against it." It is important to note that this interview was conducted before President Donald Trump took office and issued executive orders targeting DEI efforts in the public and private sectors (White House, 2025). Even before the order, DEI policies have faced an increasing backlash, with many high profile U.S. employers abandoning DEI programs and letting go of DEI workers (Cerullo, 2025).

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B. **Challenges of Working in Non-Arts Jobs** (35 Participants)

When asked about the challenges they faced in making the transition to their non-arts occupation, 18 participants said Adjusting to Workplace Culture, Environment or Values was a major challenge; 16 said Bridging a Skills/Knowledge Gap; 15 said Balancing Arts and Non-Arts Work; and 15 said Reconciling Creative Identity with Non-Arts Work. Female participants were twice as likely to cite Reconciling Creative Identity with Non-Arts Work as a challenge than male participants (10 female; 5 male). Participant responses are examined in the following pages.

1. **Adjusting to Workplace Culture, Environment or Values** (18 Participants)

Of the 36 participants that responded to the question about the challenges they have faced working in non-arts jobs, 18 said they have found it difficult to adjust to the culture, environment or values in their non-arts work. This includes adjusting to management and communications styles that are substantially different to what they are used to in creative spaces. Maria says, "The way people communicate [in corporate settings] is a little more brusque … they're used to more of top down rather than collaborative feeling. In an art class where you're doing a critique, there's this general feeling … like we're all in this together. We're all learning together. Like a growth mindset. But then when I go into corporate environments …it's competitive." Fitting into this environment requires a degree of social masking, says Ciara. "I haven't been able to be myself at this firm. I am not Ciara when I am here. I am a function and I'm a role in a career. I am not a person in a role."

> **"I haven't been able to be myself at this firm. I am not Ciara when I am here. I am a function and I'm a role in a career. I am not a person in a role."**

Rory says adjusting to a 9-to-5 job or working around someone else's schedule rather than having the flexibility and autonomy to prioritize your own deadlines posed a challenge: "In the theater world, I do have certain deadlines. I have to get my initial cue sheets in. I have to get initial drafts and soundscapes done to send over for review. But if I want to work on that at one in the morning—great, I work on it. I send you everything when I'm done. Whereas [in the corporate world] it's someone else's plan for you. It's working within that team to figure out how you fit in best. It's set hours."

Participants also felt the profit-driven values of corporate America are misaligned with their personal values. Alice, a dancer who works in marketing for a tech firm, says, "Working in financial services [and] serving the wealthiest people in serving these wealthy institutions just hurt me as an artist and as someone who's trying to fight against that in art." John, a computer science and music graduate working for a major tech company, expresses similar sentiments: "It can definitely be a culture shock when I hear executives talking about profits above everything… that's something that I've learned to hate. It doesn't feel too good being [in] that extremely money-driven capitalist environment."

Alice and John's comments align with the importance of mission and values revealed in our previous Branching Out report (Motlani, 2025a). While acclimating to corporate settings and work expectations

can impact workers from a variety of backgrounds, it may be especially challenging for those from arts and humanities backgrounds where values are often less positivistic and work practices can be more collaborative. Compounding this issue is a conventional understanding of the artist as a critic of consumer-driven and output-focused capitalist values (Chiapello, 2006). While discussing the challenges of working in a corporate setting, Alice states: "One of the things I love about being an artist is [that] I don't love capitalism." She and others we interviewed admit that this opposition between art and capitalism or art and consumer culture is undermined by the historical imbrications of these spheres. Yet Alice's comment reveals that the humanistic ideal that the arts have their own value system that exists outside external demands such as profitability and consumer demand still holds currency (Baldini, 2022).

> **"One of the things I love about being an artist is [that] I don't love capitalism."**

2. Bridging Skills/Knowledge Gap (16 Participants)

Out of the 36 participants who responded to questions about challenges and barriers to entering non-arts work, 16 cited bridging a skill or knowledge gap as a challenge. Nathan's job involved developing a mastery of manufacturing processes for which there were few existing learning resources. "There's no literature out there. There's nobody teaching this. And at the time that I started, there were only a few other places in the country that even did it. Everything was self-taught, and everything was done by experimentation." Aleksandr, a film graduate, described having to develop a more "algorithmic thinking" for his job as a software developer. Miles, an actor, described the steep learning curve when he began working as an executive assistant for a non-profit. "Because the nonprofit is stretched to capacity, you're having to take on responsibilities for those other departments and suddenly I have to make myself adept at some things that I have no idea [such as] nonprofit tax code, compliance reporting … that is a really big learning curve that a corporate job might set you up for—the channels and pathways and language—whereas a creative career is way more empathic, intuitive, collaborative, informal, embodied."

For other study participants, the hardest part of entering a new industry or occupation was having to start from scratch and developing the same or similar levels of confidence they have in their arts and culture work. Rory says, "Coming in from where you are like almost the final word on a lot of things, to now you're kind of low on the totem pole, was a big mental adjustment for me. I respected that [others] knew more but I also wanted to voice my opinion. I had to learn to bite my tongue a little bit and see how they were doing their processes and then eventually, once I had proven myself, that's when I started speaking up a little bit more. But it was a big transition."

In some cases, the challenge is not an actual skills gap but a perceived one. Three participants described feeling a sense of imposter syndrome entering fields in which they don't have the same experience and training as their peers. Brady, a fine artist now working in data analytics, says, "Coming from our background and ending up in a job like this when you're surrounded by people who've taken economics, business, computer science, math…there's this imposter syndrome that I felt for some time." Daniel, a musician who has a doctoral degree and works in recruitment, ascribes this to "the respect culture that has been hammered in academia." He says, "I never see myself as an equal to a lot of the peers in this corporate world, even if we are literally contemporaries, either in title or work or pay."

3. **Balancing Arts and Non-Arts Work** (15 Participants)

As previously noted, the majority of the artists and arts graduates we interviewed (27 / 40) maintain a creative practice in addition to their non-arts work. Sixteen participants said that balancing these pursuits was a major challenge. For Alice, part of the problem is a misalignment of schedules: "Often professional dance companies rehearse during the day because traditionally, people are service workers and so they work at nighttime. … I think that's also a huge blocker and one of the hardest things about having a full-time job and having to constantly communicate, 'I can't do that because I have this job that's not flexible.'" She notes that "people are trying to be more realistic and shift out of that traditional setup, but the traditional setup still means a lot of people working 9-5 have little time or energy to devote to arts jobs."

Ciara says her non-arts work does not just deny her the time but also saps her of the energy she needs to maintain a creative career: "If you are an artist that's working in a corporate setting, how can you continually feed that part of you while also spending Monday through Friday in a machine that kind of takes that away from you, that robs you of your energy?.... How do you protect your joy? How do you keep that creative spirit alive?" For Dylan, striking that balance involves making significant sacrifices in other areas of your life. "There's always this idea in college that you can have 2 of 3 things, the 3 things being social life, good grades, sleep. The things I have are music and work: those are the 2 things. I don't have too much of a social life." For Daniel, balancing non-arts work with parental duties and a creative career has had a detrimental impact on his well-being: "I'm at the risk of burnout more often than not … when on a contract I'm working 80-90 hours a week. You're essentially working 2 full time jobs – plus managing being a parent – so it doesn't leave much time for anything. If it's a thermometer, I'm hovering around the 90% mark most days."

4. **Reconciling Creative Identity With Non-Arts Work** (15 Participants)

Out of the 40 artists and arts graduates working in non-arts jobs that we interviewed, 39 said they still see themselves as creatives. Yet 15 participants described the challenges of reconciling their artistic identity with their non-arts work. For Jennifer, a graphic designer now working as an event planner, this means contending with the feeling of failure. "It took a long time to come to terms [with it], to be able to say, 'Yeah, that's not what I do anymore, and part of it felt like I had failed.'" She says, "When I finally decided I was ready to let go of that it was big relief. I didn't fail at that. I just don't want to do it anymore and that's okay. I found something that I enjoy, and I am good at, and I think I'm better at it than I was at being a designer and that's okay."

For Victoria, these feelings of failure are rooted in narrow ideas of what it means to be a successful artist: "No one really says it out loud but it is implied [that] if you are making all of your money from performing, that is success: If you are constantly only singing and you don't have a day job, you don't have a side gig, you're just performing. And I don't think that's realistic for anyone, frankly, unless you're a big star… and it's so easy to get discouraged in the arts." She feels these narrow ideas of success invalidate other ways in which artists continue to pursue their creative practice: "If you're working at a church choir job as a singer, that doesn't mean you aren't succeeding. That's what I'm doing. I'm working a regular day job and then I have a very consistent, well-paid job at a church in the suburbs, and I sing in small productions in Chicago, which I don't think is failing at the arts. But it's hard to have that nagging in your brain saying, 'I'm not making all of my money from [this].'"

Others find it hard to convey their creative identity to those with narrow conceptions of what it means to be an artist. Alice says, “It is difficult to explain to people at work that you are a dancer when you are working full time in another job…people are like, ‘Well, what does that mean?’ It’s like trying to validate the art space to people that don’t understand it.” Khadija, a musician who works as an education administration professor, describes a similar experience of battling incomprehension: “Because I’m not actively making music, no one sees me as musical or a musician, even though that’s how I see myself… It doesn’t matter if I’m making music. I’m hearing it and sensing it and feeling it every day, and when I wake up I dream about songs, I have dreams about music. …music is literally the way that I interpret the world.”

> **“ Because I’m not actively making music, no one sees me as musical or a musician, even though that’s how I see myself…It doesn’t matter if I’m making music. I’m hearing it and sensing it and feeling it every day, and when I wake up I dream about songs, I have dreams about music. …music is literally the way that I interpret the world. ”**

Khadija and our other interview participants are not alone in feeling that their artistic identity is misunderstood or undermined by the fact that they do not work full time in the arts. Researchers have highlighted the psychological and professional ramifications for artists working in other contexts, including the negative impact of judgement of the artistic community itself (Hennekam & Bennet, 2016; Lehikoinen et al., 2022).

Other Challenges

Other challenges that our participants have faced in their non-arts work include a lack of fulfilment, particularly due to the absence of creative opportunities within their current job (8 participants). John says, “I’m making way more money but it’s definitely not a creatively fulfilling profession. There’s very little art or creativity involved. It’s 100% fill the tickets, write the code.” Victoria feels this lack of creative fulfilment is not restricted to artists working in non-arts jobs but is a broader symptom of corporate standards: “Corporate America is very like, ‘This is how we do it; this is how we have always done it.’ But there have to be ways where you can creatively fulfill people because I can’t be the only one feeling this way….I talk to people and they’re like, ‘Yeah, it’s just my job. I do it and I leave.’ But that is not sustainable for anyone.”

Participants also said that managing demands or expectations, their own or those of others, was a challenge they face in their non-arts work (7 participants). Charlotte says, “Probably the biggest barrier for me in the work is burnout and compassion fatigue. We know from research that even if we aren’t experiencing the trauma ourselves, when we are holding it and witnessing it from folks, especially all day long, it affects our nervous system.” She adds, “In helping fields there’s not enough people to do too much work with not enough pay, not enough support.”

Charlotte’s comments speak to challenges facing health workers more broadly, not only those with a background in the arts. Research has indicated the prevalence of secondary trauma among medical personnel working directly with trauma victims such as therapists and social workers and has also revealed that high work demands and a depletion of resources exacerbate work-related stress among this segment of the workforce (Ogińska-Bulik et al, 2021).

C. **Things that Helped Transition to Non-Arts Work** (31 Participants)

We asked interview participants what helped them to make the transition to non-arts work and recorded responses from 31 participants. Eighteen participants said their Non-Arts Training helped them; 17 benefited from relevant Work Experience; and 10 cited Connections And Networks. Those working in IT and Education were more likely than other participants to cite Non-Arts Training as something that helped them transition to a non-arts career (8 IT and 6 Education out of 18 participants). Participant responses are discussed below.

1. **Non-Arts Training** (18 Participants)

Half of our interview participants (20 out of 40) have formal post-secondary education in non-arts subjects, including majors, minors, and dual bachelor's degrees. It stands to reason, therefore, that having some type of training in non-arts subjects ranked high in things that helped (18 out of 31). For instance, two of the people we interviewed had completed dual degrees in art and computer science. Both now work for a major global tech company. Ella, a musician, says that this helped her get her foot in the door: "[Employers] perceive me as a double major... it's always a point of conversation because I think everyone just finds it interesting and different from what they typically get. There's always lots of questions and people are very curious, which in my opinion is a very good thing." Other participants have completed postgraduate degrees in education, psychology, or nursing. Amber, a fine arts graduate who works as chief of staff for a university research unit, did not feel she could progress in her career without seeking further education. "I realized to go any further at the university I needed to have more credentials—business credentials," she says. "So, I got I enrolled in the master's degree in public administration."

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For Amelia, enrolling in the McNair Scholars Program played an instrumental role in her change of direction from music education to social science research: "That kind of shifted my goals." The federally funded program aims to increase access to graduate degrees for students from underrepresented communities by involving them in research and other scholarly activities. As a first-generation college student with financial need, Amelia was eligible for the program. "I pursued it because I wanted structure and support in my life, especially over the summers. It was a research opportunity, but they paid you a stipend and they provided for you during the summer. I was like, 'Wow, this is a great opportunity for me, it will open up so many pathways,'" she says. "I received a lot of intensive training in McNair about graduate school, what it's going to be like, the possibilities for me and lots of workshops and I felt really well supported and well prepared to be able to transition into grad school."

Not all participants we interviewed had formal non-arts training. Some were self-taught. For example, Rory says his university didn't have courses on computer system design, so he taught himself and

ended up doing an independent study that consisted of overhauling his university theater sound system. “I’m thankful that I did that,” he says. “I learned almost more in that class about how to work outside of college than I did for most other classes in college.” He also benefitted from on-the-job training while working at a consumer electronics chain. “They invested a lot of time in training. In each role, they have very good courses on what you need to learn….They also had one-on-one training… it was a nice support structure.”

Brady used online tutorials to expand his skill set. “During the pandemic, when everything kind of shut down, I just spent a lot of time at home watching YouTube videos on how to use Excel. I built my confidence with that program and it sort of naturally introduced me to other important technical skills like SQL and data visualization. I guess in a way it [worked] well with me since I already had an understanding of design and aesthetics. Those two paired well and have brought me to where I am now.”

Past research has shown that expanding your college credentials through dual degrees and double majors can lead to earnings increases in college graduates, particularly those who combine degrees in the arts and humanities with STEM and business majors (Del Rossi & Hersch, 2008). Yet the reported experiences of our interview participants also reveal the variety of ways in which people get the training they need and find ways to prepare for work in fields they do not have a background in.

2. **Work Experience** (17 Participants)

Seventeen participants said that some type of related work experience helped them transition to non-arts work, whether that was an entry level job acquired through friends or family connections, pro bono or volunteer work, hands on experience acquired during undergraduate programs, graduate student jobs, or internships.

Gael described a business incubation program offered by his undergraduate institution that provided valuable experience working with businesses and helped him to identify and hone the skills that would later be useful in his non-arts career: “We would have a consultation with [our clients] to hear what they wanted, and then sort of fulfill that over several revisions under a contract. I was the most proficient at doing the business kind of stuff so I handled the negotiations and writing the contracts and business. I sort of have a knack for that, which led me, a year later, to actually landing this non-art job completely outside of design.”

Half of the interview participants for the Branching Out Series said they had done some type of internship, whether arts or non-arts related. It therefore stands to reason that participants cited internships as a helpful way to develop skills and build up their resumes when applying for non-arts jobs. Priya, who now works in the finance industry, talks about an internship she had in the media department of an opera house while pursuing a master’s degree in vocal performance. Aside from providing her with insights into media production, the experience opened her eyes to the challenges facing the industry: “It was really fun, and I got to watch a lot of opera, but it was also very discouraging because they were just talking about how they’re not hitting their fundraising goals. They’re going deeper and deeper into deficit. They’re pulling from the endowment. I was like, ‘Okay, this is a lot of red flags.’” She says, “It was a really very hard pill for me to swallow because I just saw all of these people who were so passionate about what they did and then this disconnect for the audience that was willing to hear and listen. That was really when I switched gears because I thought maybe I just want to go into arts advocacy and advocate for why this art form is so important and is still relevant.”

3. **Connections and Networks** (10 Participants)

10 participants said that connections and networks have played a significant role in their non-arts work. This includes participants who found help from friends, family, or other intermediaries such as recruiters or professional networks in securing entry into new fields or to help them move up within a company. Participants also stressed the importance of mentors and role models who have helped them see new possibilities for applying their skills to other industries or have provided guidance and support along the way. For example, Wenhua talked about attending a mentorship program where they met a ceramicist who got a job at a major U.S. software company: "Seeing people that made that happen was really inspiring and helpful. I feel like the reason I didn't fall off after the job searching process…is listening to this talk. It really helped me to see myself in there."

Maya, an actress and singer who works as an event planner, describes the importance of having a friend who is also her "creative accountability partner;" someone who, like her, is balancing a creative and non-arts career. "We just navigate these spaces together, we share info, we share resources, we talk about our challenges, we encourage each other, and we pray for each other," says Maya. "I have lots of friends like that, that coach me and just walk with me or spend time with me. So that's been helpful."

> **"We just navigate these spaces together, we share info, we share resources, we talk about our challenges, we encourage each other, and we pray for each other."**

Other things that participants found helpful included working with career coaches and talking to people in the industry. Jennifer says: "Find out how your skills could be applied and find out what skills you're lacking. That's what I did prior to taking this job. The person that I talked to [for] the job that I didn't get, I sat down with her, and I just said, 'Tell me about this job. Look over my resume, if you will, and tell me what I'm missing. Where are the gaps that am I not seeing?'"

The measures Jennifer describes can benefit workers more broadly, not only those with arts backgrounds. Research points to the positive impact of mentor career support for student career planning across majors (Renn et al, 2014). Yet surveys conducted by the Strategic National Arts Alumni Project (SNAAP) specifically underscore the importance of networking and relationship building for artists (Novak-Leonard, 2024).

Conclusion

This study has highlighted some of the challenges facing artists working in non-arts jobs and how they have sought to overcome these challenges. Some of these experiences our interview participants related might be felt more broadly across the workforce, such as overcoming barriers based on race, gender, or socio-economic background. Other challenges seem unique to artists. These include the need to demonstrate to employers how your artistic skills translate to non-arts jobs and explaining the prevalence of contract-based or gig work within many artist resumes to recruiters who are more accustomed to traditional full time work arrangements. They also include balancing non-arts work with a creative career without experiencing burnout, as well as overcoming narrow conceptions of what an art degree is "good for." Related to this last point are conflicts around professional identities for artists working in non-arts jobs, including the question: What does it mean to call yourself an artist when your artistic work is not your main source of income (or the source of any income, for that matter)?

There are limitations to the kinds of inferences that we draw from these findings. The first is that by focusing only on those who have been "successful" in getting non arts jobs, we cannot account for the experiences of those who have not been able to secure work outside the arts. The second is that the self-selected recruitment process for this study means that our interview sample does not necessarily represent the full range of non-arts jobs that artists have. As such, there are limits to what this study can tell us about the kinds of jobs that seem to be a "good match" for artists and those that are not. That said, the findings from this study do provide insights that may be useful to artists, arts students, educators, and workforce stakeholders. Based on our interviews we have developed the following takeaways.

1. We need to do a better job helping artists and art graduates to understand and communicate the transferability of the skills they have gained from their arts training to a variety of jobs within and outside the arts.

2. We need to help employers, recruiters, and the public at large to understand that an arts education can train people to be better learners who are able to adapt to and pick up the skills needed to work in different jobs and environments beyond the arts and humanities. One way to do this is by emphasizing the stories of artists who are already working in these roles, as these reports have done.

3. It is equally important to understand the reasons artists make these transitions and the challenges they have faced. In so doing, we can help future artists and arts graduates to be more aware of the measures they can take to expand employment opportunities within and beyond the arts.

Future reports will explore how much employers are attuned to the employment challenges and barriers facing arts workers, and how they perceive the value that the arts can bring to their industry. This includes not only the creative problem-solving and communication skills that artists possess but also the role creative opportunity can play in healing practices, self-care, and organizational team building. Additionally, we need to know more about artists' knowledge of and access to workforce intermediary services and the ways in which workforce systems currently address the needs of arts and culture workers that are part of the larger gig economy.

Notes

[1]By non arts jobs we are referring to occupations that do not directly involve the use of artistic expression. For this reason, arts educator jobs are not included in this category.

[2] https://www.bls.gov/emp/tables/educational-attainment.htm

[3] https://www.bls.gov/emp/tables/occupational-projections-and-characteristics.htm

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Appendix

From Illinois		
	Number of Participants	Percentage of Participants
No	21	52.5%
Yes	19	47.5%

Recieved Arts Training in Illinois		
	Number of Participants	Percentage of Participants
Yes	29	72.5%
No	11	27.5%

State of Residence		
	Number of Participants	Percentage of Participants
Illinois	34	85.0%
Washington	2	5.0%
California	2	5.0%
Arizona	1	2.5%
Missouri	1	2.5%

Age		
	Number of Participants	Percentage of Participants
18-24 years old	2	5.0%
25-34 years old	19	47.5%
35-44 years old	12	30.0%
45-54 years old	6	15.0%
55-64 years old	1	2.5%

Highest Level of Arts Education		
	Number of Participants	Percentage of Participants
Some college credit, no degree	4	10.0%
Associate's degree	1	2.5%
Bachelor's degree	23	57.5%
Master's degree	11	27.5%
Doctorate degree	1	2.5%

Race & Ethnicity		
	Number of Participants	Percentage of Participants
White	24	60.0%
Latino/Latina/ LatinX	4	10.0%
Black or African American	5	12.5%
Two or More Races	2	5.0%
Asian	5	12.5%

Gender		
	Number of Participants	Percentage of Participants
Male	14	35.0%
Female	25	62.5%
Non-binary/ third gender	1	2.5%

Were Planning to Work in Arts Prior to Graduating		
	Number of Participants	Percentage of Participants
Yes	28	70.0%
No	5	12.5%
Maybe	7	17.5%

Worked in Arts Prior to Non-Arts Job		
	Number of Participants	Percentage of Participants
Yes	28	70.0%
No	12	30.0%

Have Postsecondary Non-Arts Training		
	Number of Participants	Percentage of Participants
Yes	20	50.0%
No	20	50.0%

Would Work Full-time in Arts if They Could		
	Number of Participants	Percentage of Participants
Yes	30	75.0%
No	10	25.0%

Still Maintain a Creative Practice		
	Number of Participants	Percentage of Participants
Yes	27	67.5%
No	13	32.0%

Discipline			Non-Arts Sector		
	Number of Participants	Percentage of Participants		Number of Participants	Percentage of Participants
Acting	12	30.0%	Business and finance	10	25.0%
Art History	5	12.5%	Education	8	20.0%
Dance	5	12.5%	Information Technology	7	17.5%
Film	7	17.5%	Healthcare	4	10.0%
Fine and Studio Arts	11	27.5%	Non profit	3	7.5%
Graphic Design	8	20.0%	Advertising/ Marketing	2	5.0%
Literary Arts	4	10.0%	Staffing/ Recruitment	2	5.0%
Music	21	52.5%	Entertainment	1	2.5%
Photography	8	20.0%	Manufacture	1	2.5%
Set or Exhibition Design	5	12.5%	Service design and research	1	2.5%
Other	3	7.5%	Retail	1	2.5%
Interior Design	1	2.5%			
Musuem Work/ Conservation	1	2.5%			

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About the Illinois Creative Workforce Partnership

Guided by the vital role of art and artists to the health of our state, the Illinois Creative Workforce Partnership seeks to advance our understanding of the realities and needs of arts workers and the larger cultural ecosystem to which they belong. A collaboration between Discovery Partners Institute, Arts Alliance Illinois, the College of Fine and Applied Arts at the University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign, and the College of Architecture, Design, and the Arts at the University of Illinois Chicago, it funds research at the intersection of artistic labor, education, workforce development, government policy, and the social and economic impacts of the arts. The partnership's goal is to identify nation-leading and transformative improvements in how the state trains, educates, supports, and employs its creative workforce.