

Connecting professionals: cooperation and peer learning

It is the professionals in museums and cultural heritage sites that deal with all the multiple challenges that affect the work such as attracting new audiences, ensuring that the museum is relevant in a societal sense, getting funding for exhibitions and project work, working with communities and other central stakeholders, working with collections and research, curating new exhibitions. During the ReInHerit primary research phase professionals expressed a need for authentic, hierarchy free connections between professionals. They frequently mentioned the need to create connections between professionals and sharing information and experiences. Professionals want to learn from each other, learn from mistakes and successes, but also get easily accessible information in a simple format. Expert interviews were conducted to get more in-depth insights on the issue of cooperation. Museum professionals that the ReInHerit project interviewed provided useful recommendations on how to support cooperation between museums and Cultural Heritage sites, as well as networking between museum professionals.

Why is connection and cooperation so important?

By working together it is possible to share resources, contacts, information on best practices, successful concepts that have been applied in museum work, as well as challenges faced in museum work. Cooperation enables you to find partners to cooperate with on projects, get information on funding possibilities, get information on innovations and trends in the museum sector and much more. Working together with others across disciplinary and geographical borders is also fun and enriching for your own practice. Connections between professionals has the potential to increase the innovation capacity of organisations. New ideas are born when new combinations of people come together to discuss and share experiences and ideas.

What types of needs were expressed by museum professionals on the issue of connection and cooperation?

The needs identified by the professionals interviewed were varied. Professionals wanted to:

- Have more mobility within and between organisations
- Share information, practices, ways of working, experiences, innovative approaches, and information on challenges faced
- Belong to a community
- Find partners that they could cooperate with when applying for project funding
- Get easily accessible information on the various funding schemes that are available
- Get easily accessible information on on-going projects in the sector
- Have a place to show case, pitch, test and review new ideas in the museum sector

What can be done to facilitate cooperation between and within organisations and individuals in the museum sector?

Recommendations:

- **Start at home. Build new connections within your organization.** Change roles within your organization so that you work with other professionals than the ones you regularly work with. This may lead to expanding your understanding of different professional skills in your organization and the role they play in the larger scheme of things.
- **Get new perspectives through networking.** Connect museum and cultural heritage site professionals to each other. This enables you to see your own heritage through the eyes of other professionals and audiences in other countries.
- **Be pro-active.** It is important to reach out actively, have a pro-active, open-minded mindset: openness to change has the potential to increase the relevance of a museum.
- **Change mindsets.** Cooperation depends on goodwill and on a change of mindset. Museums need to think bigger and think out of the box to find novel cooperation partners like for example linking street art and cultural heritage issues.
- **Break silos.** Get out of your comfort zone and seek out new, unexpected cooperation partners. Extend the sphere of your stakeholders, go outside of your institution, create events that link a wide range of stakeholders to help you include new stakeholders.
- **Find the right match.** It is a matter of finding the right match (having common interests, similar research interests), people with whom you develop a good chemistry/working relationship.
- **Cooperate in new ways.** Be ready to do things in a different way. Be relevant by expanding the stakeholder base - work across geographical boundaries and in cross-disciplinary teams.
- **Start with small steps.** You do not always need to spend money to initiate cooperation or shared projects. Engage in joint activities such as doing a social media campaign together with another museum or CHS. From these small initial steps the cooperation can evolve into a more developed form of cooperation. It allows you to test the cooperation and gives you an idea of how the cooperation works.
- **Have a particular kind of leadership.** Cooperation needs a particular kind of leadership in your organisation. Slow and non-transparent decision-making structures are a hindrance to the development and implementation of innovative ideas. For change to happen on an institutional level you need a holistic approach to bring about change on an organizational level. You need a change of mindset among the leadership - open-minded museum/CHS directors is key to starting to work in new ways. Perhaps the organizational structure needs to be revised for it to answer to the needs of contemporary society. Allowing for teamwork and less hierarchical ways of working and decision making is a way to support innovation work. Teamwork provides employees with the power and space to explore. It means trusting the creativity of the team and its ability to get things done.
- **Cooperate with communities.** This requires a separate set of skills than when cooperating between specialists. What can you learn from other museums actively doing outreach work? Contact them and ask them for tips and advice. Perhaps they have a handbook or report to share. Organise a workshop or Zoom meeting to discuss these issues. Involve the community in novel ways- ask them to co-curate exhibitions. Go to where the people are to present what you can offer them.

- **Expand the definition of community.** what community means can be stretched, it's not even territorial. It can be the neighbourhood or the bigger picture or whatever, all those who acknowledge you and who come to you because they feel that there is a need for you and that you are helping them in some other way, that you are being of service to them.
- **Create synergies between academic researchers and museum professionals.** There is a lot of academic knowledge out there that museum professionals could tap into and that needs to be transformed into pedagogical terms. Find out about academic research being conducted in areas of relevance to your collections or themes you are interested in exploring in your audience work. Contact academics and ask them to join discussions organized at your museum. Organise workshops to explore issues that are of common interest to you and as a means of creating a shared understanding of central themes and concepts that are of interest to you. Museum professionals and academics can create outreach programmes together to communicate what is happening in research.
- **Engage in peer-to-peer learning.** If you have limited resources for up-skilling perhaps you can share the costs of an online course with other museums or engage in peer-to-peer learning. Do you have a skill that you can share with others? Could you in exchange get a skill from another professional that you do not have? Learn from each other – it is free and it creates contacts that can lead to other forms of cooperation.
- **Exchange experiences through virtual visits and tours.** Connect to other museum professionals through virtual visits, guided tours of professional contexts and work place exchanges & virtual guided tours of professional contexts.
- **Exchange curators.** Organise an exchange with another museum. A curator from another country will see your collections with new eyes and provide new perspectives.
- **Develop social and soft skills.** These are essential when engaging in cooperation. Skills such as listening empathy and cultural diplomacy need to be developed.
- **Create new opportunities for cooperation through digitalisation.** New products can be created such as joint digital exhibitions. Organising joint digital exhibitions opens up new perspectives on your collections.