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Focus
A re-evaluation of vision and purpose is compelling museums to be creative to stay in business and engage with previously overlooked audiences. By Toby Louch and Julie Nightingale

Museums need you

Resilience has been a watchword in museums over the past decade, as funding cuts prompted restructures, streamlining and, for staff, job insecurity in the form of short-term contracts.

Yet a focus on social justice – promoting a fairer, more-inclusive and equitable society – has widened the scope of work undertaken and given fresh impetus to efforts to expand the workforce to better reflect the communities museums serve.

Initiatives such as the Museums Association’s (MA) Museums Change Lives flagship campaign – with its themes of promoting health and wellbeing, creating better places and inspiring engagement, reflection and debate – has highlighted those whose work serves the public directly.

In 2020, the campaign’s awards focused on the people and organisations that had made a genuine difference to their communities during the pandemic. The winners included the staff at Seven Stories, the National Centre for Children’s Books in Newcastle upon Tyne, who – armed with snacks, puzzles and much-loved literature – took reading sessions to the front gardens of youngsters forced to stay at home.

Last year, the Museums Change Lives Awards digital engagement category was won by the Mixed Museum for its Brown Babies exhibition, which tells the stories of the British children born to Black US servicemen and white mothers during world war two.

Meanwhile, work on decolonising collections has become a strategic priority for many institutions. At the end of last year, a Decolonising Working Group convened by the MA published guidance to help people across the sector engage with decolonising practice.

For the past two years, the Powell-Cotton Museum in...
‘Matching your values with where you work is a force of good’

Leah Dungay, learning officer, National Videogame Museum, Sheffield

“Make the most of your transferable skills. My route into the museum sector involved a combination of my education, part-time jobs and volunteering opportunities – many of which were unrelated to museums and heritage. It can often feel like your experience is not relevant to a job application, but highlighting the skills you’ve developed in other roles is vital, particularly when you are able to connect them to roles in the museum sector.

Remember you are always more experienced than you think you are.”

Sahar Beyad, press and communications officer, National Museums Liverpool

“Museums can change us but we can also change them. If you come from a marginalised community, a lower socio-economic background or a different religion or gender to the mainstream, this is your superpower – and the sector needs you. Matching your values with where you work is a force of good. Apply for a role in which you can make a difference. Research the museum's mission, vision, and values, and if you get a vibe of belonging, go for it.”

David C Weinczok, digital media content producer, National Museums Scotland

“My background is freelance writing and presenting, and I almost didn’t apply for the role, as I was sure I would not make the cut. It turned out that my unconventional path gave me the skills to approach projects with an unusual perspective. If you think your experience is too ‘out there’, it might be exactly what a museum is after.”

Kayleigh Bryant-Greenwell, community engagement specialist, Smithsonian American Art Museum and Renwick Gallery, Washington DC

“Learn to focus on activities that amplify your values and relationships with leaders in those areas. Values-driven leaders recognise leadership at all levels of experience. You will likely need to get involved in opportunities outside of your full-time and paid labour – but be strategic about your efforts.”

Ken has been working on reinterpreting its programme to address its image as a museum named after the explorer and hunter Percy Powel Cotton. It launched a social media campaign to explore what decolonising the museum actually meant and to challenge the myths of what is involved. Like many others, the Powel-Cotton is also undertaking work to become actively anti-racist.

Digital focus
The pandemic may have closed physical doors but museums have doubled down on their digital offerings, enabling people trapped at home to explore collections virtually, attend talks and take part in online workshops and conferences.

Climate change and the existential threat it poses has also forced museums to rethink how they operate, as well as how they tell the story of the battle for the planet.

The challenges these issues continue to raise require different skills from those sought by the sector even a decade ago. There is now a variety of roles that are as creatively and intellectually stimulating as ever, but are also underpinned by a deep sense of mission in education and social justice, and real urgency in the context of the climate crisis.

This is sometimes a shock to those unfamiliar with the sector or aspiring to enter it who may still think in terms of traditional curatorial roles.

“I prefer to think about what I call ‘job families’, says Tamsin Russell, the MA’s workforce development officer. “You might have a job family that is associated with collections, another that targets audiences and one that acts as an enabling function.”

“There are community roles, individuals who tend to work in a learning capacity, who could be responsible for running workshops for schools, visitors or external audiences.”

That variety makes museums dynamic places to work, says Catherine Doran, learning facilitator at the Northern Ireland War Memorial Museum and the MA’s Northern Ireland representative.

“One day you could be working with the collection, the next day you could be dealing with a moth infestation,” she says.

“Museums are no longer places that just look to the past. They must reflect what’s going on socially”

Tohy Louch and Julie Nightingale are freelance writers
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Focus
What skills will those working in the museums of tomorrow need?
By Toby Louch and Julie Nightingale

For future reference

Specialist skills and a passion for collections have long been prerequisites for aspiring museum professionals. But those qualities now need to be backed up by an understanding of the new roles and responsibilities expected of individuals, as well as the many functions that modern museums have in the wider world.

Digital
There’s an increasing need for digitally savvy practitioners with a wide range of skills and interests, from websites and app development to the possibilities of online learning and digital interactivity.

“The sector has been prioritising digital engagement for a long time but what’s happened over the past two years has obviously accelerated that change,” says Tamsin Russell, the Museums Association’s (MA) workforce development officer.

“An individual needs good digital knowhow across the board, whether that’s running a database or knowing how to make a mark across social media.”

Wellbeing
As a result of museum staff struggling during the pandemic, Victoria Ryves, the programme manager at Heritage Doncaster, started an online wellbeing group. She set up Glam Cares (Galleries, Libraries, Archives and Museums), a support network for sector professionals, which enabled staff to talk about their concerns and socialise through online events.

“In museums, we spend a lot of time looking after the people that come to our sessions, but we’re not always as good at looking after the people doing that work,” says Ryves. “We’re looking into skills development and working with counsellors to write a mental health first-aid kit with tips on mindfulness and mental resilience. We want to provide support that’s personal and professional.”

Decolonisation
In recent years, cultural sector organisations have made decolonisation a focus of policy and practice.

Understanding what this crucial issue means and how it plays out in terms of representation and audience development is as important for individuals as it is at an institutional level.

“Many museums are embarking on decolonising ‘Co-creation and facilitation are skills that entrants to the sector should develop’ work, but this needs to start here and now, with the quality and nature of the ways we work,” says Charlotte Holmes, a member of the Museum Detox committee, the network for museum and heritage workers of colour.

“We all need to do the work to understand and address the oppressive ideas we have internalised if we don’t want to repeat them.”

Climate crisis
There’s demand from museum audiences to act on climate change, says Sara Kassam, the sustainability lead at the Victoria and Albert Museum in London and an MA trustee. “They want to see how we engage with the issues and how we are thinking about sustainability,” she says.

Someone looking to enter the sector and interested in working in sustainability could usefully look to develop their understanding of systems and how they work, as well as behavioural and social change, adds Kassam. “Basic carbon literacy is important. Understanding the terminology and activities that emit more carbon than others means you have the analytical skills and baseline knowledge for your role.”

Social justice
Co-creation and facilitation are skills that entrants to the sector should look to develop, says Margaret Middleton, an independent exhibition designer based in Belfast.

“It’s important to know how to advocate for social justice work in museums,” they say. “Students learn about the opportunities for this work in museum studies classrooms, but museums are conservative workplaces and initiatives need to be championed.”

“You need to be savvy about money, partnerships and community relationships. Just be ready to be persistent.”

Disability rights
Sam Bowen, a museums development officer in Kent, is a campaigner and activist for the inclusion of children with special educational needs and disabilities (Send) in museums, work that was recognised by her winning last year’s MA Museums Change Lives Radical Changemaker award.

“Anyone wanting to enter the profession should learn more about this world,” she says. “Follow Send advocates, parents, teachers and young people themselves on social media to start understanding the realities of the pressures faced by this group.

“We are making slow progress and need to shed light on why that is.”

Toby Louch and Julie Nightingale are freelance writers
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You get your foot in the door

The museum sector has always been competitive. We’ve seen an explosion of postgraduate courses in recent years alongside vital work by museums to become more socially engaged, accessible and attractive to employees. But public funding cuts and the removal of the statutory retirement age have meant fewer vacancies and less turnover.

There are jobs in the sector, but the supply is outweighed by the demand to enter it. This reality check is critical. To focus attention and to help manage expectations, whether you are joining the sector at the beginning of your working life or moving into it from a different sector.

There is no silver bullet but there are things you can do to realise your ambition.

**Job searching**

Identify the museums you want to work in. This can be a function of geography – how far you can realistically commute, taking into account time, cost and convenience? Listing all the museums within a specific area can help provide focus and support organisational research, as well as relationship building. If you are willing to relocate, then apply a similar approach to other areas. You might also want to identify museums based on collection type, their values and programming.

**Networking**

Networking not only supports your career ambitions but is an important part of partnership and other engagement activities. When you’re new to a sector, it can be intimidating, so a good starting point is to list the relationships you already have in the sector. People you went to school or college with, those you have met at courses or events, friends or relatives and those more removed.

**CV and applications**

The first step to getting a job is to successfully present your experience. Invest time in creating a master CV from which you can cherry pick the evidence to best match a job description or person specification. Using evidence-based statements in applications will increase your attractiveness for the next stage. A powerful positioning statement or covering letter outlining your motivations, interests and most-salient experience will also ensure you contextualise your ambition and give a sense of who you are, what you stand for and what you could bring to the role.

**‘Apprenticeships are a win-win: you learn far more at work than in a classroom’**

Stacey Anne Bagdi,
collections and exhibitions officer (curator),
Headstone Manor & Museum, Harrow Council

“Try your hand at everything, so that you know what you like and what you don’t. Talk to as many people in the sector as you can, and join or start a network. Volunteering or working in different roles in diverse museums helped me find my path.”

Calum Pearce, senior content producer,
Imperial War Museums

“Apprenticeships are a win-win for those involved. You get your foot in the door and the museum gets you on the cheap. I had a degree but did an apprenticeship because it got me working where I wanted to be. Apprenticeship courses vary, but you learn far more at work than in a classroom.”

Tom Hopkins, curator (aircraft and exhibits),
Royal Air Force Museum

“When you are unsuccessful at an interview, it’s important not to treat it as a failure, but as a networking opportunity. Connect with the panel on LinkedIn or Twitter. You never know when a job may come up again, so building such relationships can be valuable. Check on LinkedIn who got the job that you didn’t. This will help you identify your skills gaps.”

Verity Smith, freelance curator, consultant and writer

“Volunteer at a museum or heritage site, even if it’s only a few hours a month. This will help to build your skill set and experiences. You never know when a chat with another volunteer or member of staff might lead to an opportunity. Don’t underestimate the value of your experience from other jobs. Experience in office admin or customer service, and proficiency in IT systems, will help you stand out on applications and in interviews.”

Rebecca Hossain, director of commercial and operations, Sir John Soane’s Museum, London

“A willingness to start in a field that may not be your ultimate destination is a huge benefit. Be open to opportunities when they arise and expose yourself to variety – if antiquity is your thing, try contemporary museums. This keeps your options open and equips you with transferable skills and broad knowledge of the riches that the museum world offers.”

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In Practice

CM Passport’s task-based methodology shared their feedback: “I loved the task-based shortlisting – I felt this allowed me to immediately play to my strengths, rather than my weaknesses. It was reassuring that my disability wouldn’t be taken into consideration. The process couldn’t have given me a better introduction to the values of CMP – a great first impression of an organisation and what it stands for.”

Time is another area where employers can demonstrate that they value and respect applicants. For example, for applicants who work full-time and/or have caring responsibilities, a job application closing date at 5pm on a Friday is difficult to meet – extending it to a

Interviews

Enjoy the success of being shortlisted for a role and use that confidence to fuel your preparation for the interview stage. Prepare evidence, examples and opinions relating to the requirements of the job. You should be able to talk about your achievements, but also the achievements of others in the field. This demonstrates your knowledge and awareness of the sector – and highlights crucial critical-thinking skills. Practising the interview alone or with support will help you talk more readily and instil confidence. Consider asking for as much detail about the interview and selection process as possible.

Professional development

Unless you are applying for an apprenticeship or traineeship, it is likely that the museum is selecting for competence, not potential. This means you will need to demonstrate awareness, understanding and experience in the sector or in the tasks related to the job. Gaining these takes time and money, so having a focused and targeted approach will help. Read books and articles, visit museums and their websites, watch recordings from conferences, listen to podcasts, and join groups and events to support your development. Volunteering can provide opportunities to develop skills. The key is to ensure that you are learning and growing on your terms – and moving on when a job no longer meets your needs.

Tamsin Russell is the Museums Association’s workforce development officer. For more information, visit museumsassociation.org/careers

Trendswatch

Campaigning groups are helping to stamp out bad practice in recruitment. By Deborah Mulhearn

Recruitment fair

Bad practice in recruitment is as much a problem in the museum sector as in any other. But reform is happening, thanks to campaigning groups that advocate more equitable practices, including the Museums Association and Fair Museum Jobs.

One development that has helped to level the playing field has been anonymising applications. Stripping a job application of any data that can imply certain characteristics of a candidate (such as their name, address, years in education and the names of educational establishments attended) can help remove sources of bias by which the interview panel could consciously or subconsciously discriminate.

Cornwall Museums Partnership (CMP) supports a network of more than 70 museums across Cornwall and the Isles of Scilly. The organisation has started recruiting on a value-led basis and uses a task-based methodology.

“We ask questions designed to help us understand applicants’ values, as well as their skills and experience,” says Charlotte Morgan, collaborative programmes manager at CMP. “Most recently, we didn’t ask any questions at application stage – except those needed for right-to-work checks – and set a task to complete, which was presented to the interview panel anonymously.”

A recently appointed member of the team through CMP’s task-based methodology shared their feedback: “I loved the task-based shortlisting – I felt this allowed me to immediately play to my strengths, rather than my weaknesses. It was reassuring that my disability wouldn’t be taken into consideration. The process couldn’t have given me a better introduction to the values of CMP – a great first impression of an organisation and what it stands for.”

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Monday will rarely have an impact on an organisation’s processes.

“We’ve been grateful to our networks for making us aware of different biases – for example, moving applications away from platforms such as Microsoft that need subscriptions,” says Morgan.

CMP included a commitment to equity and inclusion at the start of application forms, published the interview dates, and provided choices for applying in written or video formats. It also made sure applicants were aware that they could claim expenses for travelling to interviews.

The interview stage is where unconscious bias can creep in. CMP is considering bias training for all interview panelists.

“Recognising assumptions you have as harmful to others is a long and difficult process,” says Morgan.

Zoom interviews may be the new norm but they are not a cure-all, and penalise the digitally excluded.

“We broadly support the rise in recruiters accepting video or audio applications, as it opens the field to candidates who might not have the same written communication skills as others,” says Tom Hopkins, one of the co-founders of Fair Museum Jobs.

“But video applications will be harder to anonymise. And Zoom interviews can also generate sources of bias absent from traditional on-site interviews’,” says Hopkins.

“During the development phase of Curating for Change, we consulted widely with deaf, disabled and neurodivergent people,” says Esther Fox, Curating for Change project leader.

“They sadly confirmed what we had suspected was the case – that the barriers for them in pursuing a career in museums were multiple and complex.”

But the outlook is positive. “The museums we are working with are going on a journey with us,” says Fox.

“The will is certainly there, and once the programme is up and running, there will be many good examples.”

Publishing guidelines and policies so that candidates can know what to expect from the recruitment process, is a good first step.

Deborah Mulhearn is a freelance journalist

**In Practice**

**Liz Power**, director, London Museum of Water & Steam

“Get your foot in the door! I had no idea that I wanted to work in museums, I was just dyslexic but new I didn’t work in an office like most of my friends did. I got a front-of-house job and then realised how much museums suited me. I took different jobs in museum learning, and learned about museums by working with great people and going on all the training I could. I am glad to have had front-of-house experience and can still work a till if needed.”

**Liz Johnson**, director of museums and cultural property (interim), Arts Council England

“Experience gained in unlikely places can be applied to museum jobs. My first job in a museum was as a security guard at the National Railway Museum in York, because I had been a door-person while I was at university. Aside from giving me a lifelong mistrust of museums maanqueens (they move when they think no one is watching), it gave me insight into museum operations. I subsequently took jobs in higher education and the third sector, before returning to a role linked to what I am passionate about – museums in society.”

**Ellie King**, doctoral researcher and exhibitions officer, Oxford University Museum of Natural History

“Practical experience is more important than studies. You should spend time building networks, relationships and contacts in the sector. Work out what your strengths are and where you can add value to an organisation – and emphasise that in your early career. This may be through specific volunteering projects or in a job role. It’s also crucial to log your experiences and keep reflecting on the skills and knowledge you have learned. Specific examples of your expertise are handy to have when applying for jobs.”

**Peter Fallon**, visitor team manager, Manchester Museum

“You will be competing with lots of applicants, so demonstrating knowledge of the organisation’s values and mission and how you can contribute to those is vital. For visitor-facing roles, experience and genuine enjoyment with working with people, evidence of great teamwork and a passion for the objects on display will go a long way. This experience doesn’t have to come from within the sector. Just be sure to evidence your experience and skills in applications and interviews.”

**Rachel Adams**, managing curator, the Firing Line Museum of The Queen’s Dragoon Guards and The Royal Welsh, Cardiff Castle

“Many jobs now involve roles where you’re not working in one area with specific collections, audiences or museums. Use volunteering to get experience of different aspects of heritage and to gain a more solid understanding of the nature of these careers. Investigate different types of organisations to discover the roles that you feel particularly connected to or passionate about. Don’t be scared to work on things that make you uncomfortable, as this will help you to become more adaptable to change and new ideas. Also don’t underestimate the transferable skills that you can gain from other sectors, as these often lead to positive innovation and change.”

**Alex Bird**, museum development officer: workforce and skills, Museum Development North West, and an MA board member

“The first job I applied for was in a museum shop. I was 16 and was told that I needed experience to gain even an entry-level job. Dismayed by this, I decided museums weren’t for me, as I couldn’t afford to volunteer. So I worked in visitor-facing roles in cinemas and chipperies, which gave me valuable transferable skills needed to get ahead in the sector. My advice is don’t be too dispirited if you’re told you need experience for an entry-level job. Relevant skills can be learned in a variety of places outside the sector.”

**Deborah Mulhearn is a freelance journalist**
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