

FEATURE: Starting late but going great: how to get a new career in the arts

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So you want to break into the creative arts? Maybe you've been working in another field, in another job, or perhaps you've been bringing up a family. Changing your life is quite a challenge – we tell you how.

One of the main challenges of the creative arts is that it's a very young sector. Fifty-six per cent of the sector's workforce is under 40 (compared with 51% of the overall UK workforce) and a quarter is under 30. And for many sub-sectors there's a culture of long hours and low pay with people expected to learn on the job after college. This sort of setup is often more accessible to younger people.

It's also a fast-moving sector; if you trained years ago and then did something different, you may well find that things have moved on. This is true in many sectors but is particularly true in the arts.

The sector is characterised by strong networks and it can seem daunting to try to break in – especially if you're older. However Annie Warburton, chief executive of [ArtsMatrix](#), the skills and enterprise development agency for creative practitioners in the South West, has this to say: "Networking might *feel* harder if you're older," she explains. "But it's not necessarily true. Networking is possible at any age. And of course the mature person brings a lot of advantages. In order to be successful at networking you need to develop strategies."

The crucial thing about networking, she explains, is that it's about finding points of connection; about listening, and learning about the person you're talking to. It's about asking yourself what you or your organisation can bring. "It's a different attitude," says Annie. "It's about what people can create together. Curiosity is important."

[Jane Jermyn](#) is a great enthusiast of networking. A ceramic artist, she completed her degree in 2001, having spent her earlier life bringing up her children. "I spent a lot of time when I was learning, volunteering and helping others," she says. "It's all ways of learning. I was paid in work, which means I've a great collection of ceramics. I built up a lot of contacts with established artists – these were people my age, but established. The fact that I was older helped because they felt they could trust me. Another advantage was that my children

were grown up so I didn't have to think about childcare.”

So what are the top tips for making a start on that new career?

- **Know yourself:** ask yourself why you want a job in the creative sector. Do you have a real interest in your chosen field or is it just the idea of ‘doing something creative’? Ask yourself if you’d still want to do the work if you weren’t paid. Are you prepared to put up with the downsides like long hours? And what are your skills – are any transferable? Where do you need to build more expertise?
- **Ask yourself if you have not just talent but tenacity.** As Annie Warburton says, “You need that passion and that curiosity about your practice and what’s happening in your area. The creative industries are a very competitive area and you need to be driven and passionate to succeed.”
- **Know the field:** find out as much as possible about what’s happening in your artform. Spend time in galleries, theatres or wherever is appropriate. See if you can shadow someone, do some voluntary work, get some experience.
- **Look at the practical issues: training and funding.** Ask yourself where the income’s going to come from, especially in the early stages when you’re learning or not earning very much. Jane Jermyn says, “Before I went to college I went to craft school. There were a number of different crafts available but ceramics was the one for me. Also, I could see it had a practical value, I could earn a living with it.”
- **You could change your career in stages –** for example, working part-time while studying, or taking other jobs to support your art. Annie Warburton adds a warning note here: “Lots of people in the arts have a portfolio career,” she says. “They might be working on an installation, doing art-in-education work and also undertaking freelance commissions. In the short term, that’s fine. But in the long term, you need to be careful that demand in one area doesn’t take over the time you have for your chosen specialism.”
- **Don’t be afraid to seek help –** from those in the sector, from colleagues and former colleagues, from careers professionals. And if you have family or personal commitments, you’ll want to take these into account and involve the relevant people.
- **Don’t ignore any gut feelings or concerns –** it’s better to deal with uncomfortable issues now rather than later when you’re further down the line.

One of the particular issues that the older person faces is less time - not just the time needed to make their mark, but time to devote to the other aspects of the work. “A lot of the world runs on social networking – face to face – not Facebook!” says Annie. “The older person with other responsibilities may not be able to take advantage of these opportunities and so end up out of the loop.” She stresses that it’s important to be creative and flexible in using your time, to prioritise.

And speaking of Facebook, Jane has found the social networking site quite useful for gaining ceramics contacts. “You can promote your work and look at other people’s work,” she explains. “It’s a good source of contacts and great for crossing national boundaries.” She also advocates using the internet and email. “Of course, this can be hard for the older person,” she says. “When I went to Wales I didn’t know how to turn a computer on. But now I use one fairly regularly. There are some great ceramic websites out there.”

Of course, some of the attributes you need when starting out in the creative arts apply at any age – enthusiasm, focus, discipline and dedication are just some of these. “Ideas are not enough,” says Annie. “You need to be able to apply those ideas, either alone or working with others.”

At ArtsMatrix they see a lot of people who have changed careers. “People need to be very realistic about their ability and the opportunities,” says Annie. “They need to be prepared to deal with the competitiveness of the sector. And to believe in themselves. Having confidence is the number one ingredient.” But confidence can be developed, through identifying gaps in knowledge and skills and deciding how to deal with this. By getting the skills yourself, or by working with others.

Jane Jermyn concurs: “Just get out there,” she says. “Take the opportunities and meet people. Then if people ask about your work or are interested, then you have the opportunity to tell them.” Early on in her career, Jane had an exhibition. She was given a small amount of funding towards it and managed to win some more. And a contact she knew from a former role opened the event for her. “I sold almost everything,” she says. “But most of all, I proved to myself that I could do it.”

Sources

Creative & Cultural Skills, The Footprint 2006-07: a baseline survey of the creative and cultural sector

