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ARTISTIC LICENCE GIVES FIRMS INNOVATION EDGE



Consultants at Accenture's Dublin office, which initiated a programme in which art was used to help it build a truer identity that is now being used in the company's distinct Irish communications strategy.

Photograph: Marcus Tate

USING ART IN BUSINESS : The notion of introducing artists into the corporate process is catching on fast, writes **Haydn Shaughnessy** .

In San Sebastian in the Basque region of Spain, staff at the Disonancias Art project are getting ready to launch their third international search for artists.

Only this is not a fine art exhibition. The artists must be interested in co-operating with the research, development and innovation departments of local companies.

"The main objective is to find new ways to innovate," explains project leader Arantxa Mendiharat. Here is the artist as chief industrial innovator. Increasingly, companies are turning not to consultants for insights into new working techniques, products or concepts, but to the only profession that innovates out of habit.

Now in its third year, the Disonancias project has attracted artists from all over the world, including Saoirse Higgins from Ireland, who worked with the European Virtual Engineering Centre, and artists from Australia, New York, and Sweden. In last year's programme only one of the 10 artists chosen to work in Spanish organisations came from Spain.

The idea of introducing artists into the corporate innovation process is catching on. In Ireland Dublin-based Business2Arts, which has been a mediator of business sponsorship of the arts, has begun targeting the more practical use of artists in a corporate setting.

"The old-fashioned model of art and business interaction was sponsorship," says chief executive Stuart McLaughlin, "or business as a patron of the arts. We are starting to work with organisations where artists can engage in strategic challenges."

The issues that artists are helping companies to address don't necessarily focus on the creativity part of the organisational process.

In this year's Disonancias programme an engineering company, Lanik, is looking for an artist to help its staff understand the changing landscape of architectural practice. The hope is that an artist can interpret the latest concept of transformable architecture in new ways and provide

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Lanik with insights into how it will affect the products and services the company offers to architects, as well as provide a novel concept or two that the company can develop for its portfolio.

Closer to home, McLaughlin gives the example of the consultancy Accenture, which has grown rapidly from 200 to 1,500 employees in Dublin. Growth created distance and disaffection. Corporate values handed down from the company's Chicago headquarters didn't necessarily inspire the employees in the Dublin office. McLaughlin hired an arts director from Britain who then commissioned a range of arts projects to help draw out employee values.

"One installation we did at Accenture was called: What Makes You Cry? Managers could sit around for 10 years without thinking of asking that question. But when you ask that kind of question you see there is a relationship between people and an organisation and that it can be rediscovered, from the ground up," says McLaughlin. In the Accenture project the role of art was to help the company build a truer identity that is now being used in the company's distinct Irish communications strategy.

Both Mendiharath and McLaughlin stress the process is novel to companies, but also to artists. "It is a different definition of art," says Mendiharath, "more to do with thinking of the world rather than thinking of an object." McLaughlin has a slightly different take. "First, it's brave of a company to go this route but you need also to find artists who are comfortable in a business setting and not many of them are. You need to help artists understand they have a value."

An upcoming project for Business2Arts is to take IT project managers into a theatre setting. On the face of it the objective is to have professional project managers assist the theatre as part of a corporate outreach programme. But the underlying motive is to show managers how creative people manage projects on minimal resources and deliver their project night after night.

The artist is beginning to displace organisations such as consultancies that would previously have been the first port of call for a company seeking external inspiration.

"Businesses are saying we're stuck and we need a different way of thinking," says McLaughlin, who points out that managers are judged by their ability to deliver on day-to-day tasks. That attention to routine can kill creativity. Disonancias is about to work with French artist Francois Deck to help redefine organisational processes in creative ways and Business2Arts has its sights on a wider role for artists across industry and commerce.

"Some of the people who work in creative industry, for example advertising, haven't had to be that creative," argues McLaughlin, "particularly in a growing economy. They deal in variations on a theme. Once ideas are there it becomes easier. Artists are the ones who work in ideas."

Remarkably, even though this is not a role that arts administrators or artists have sought out, it looks as though artists have the opportunity to redraw the rules of business with themselves somewhere near the centre, symbolising the relentless rise of the nascent creative economy.