

The parable of the irreplaceable person: on mental health for cultural workers

Foreword

This article is the second in a two-part-series about mental health and human resource strategies for cultural centres and other cultural organisations. When the ENCC office set out to write the [first one](#), we planned mainly to report on the mental health of cultural workers across our network after the COVID-19 pandemic. The question soon expanded to address

the broader structural factors that were creating exhaustion and other issues for culture professionals.

During the investigation phase, while we were gathering data, something striking happened: we were told an almost-identical story twice, by two unrelated organisations. Let's call it:

The parable of the irreplaceable person

A person works in project management in a small-to-medium-sized cultural organisation. She is a woman (like the overwhelming majority of persons occupying operational and administrative roles in cultural organisations), an experienced professional who has been working in this particular organisation for four or five

years. She juggles a number of tasks and responsibilities and has earned the esteem of her colleagues – but, when this story starts, she is diagnosed with burnout and exits the workplace on sick leave, with no predictable return date.

A second person is recruited to replace her on a temporary basis. Let's suppose that she is also a woman. She is qualified and filled with energy, but it soon becomes clear that she will not be able to carry the full workload of the Unreplaceable Person. The organisation decides to hire a third person to support the second one. The third person is equally competent

and invested (though equally linked to the organisation through a precarious contract). However, it turns out that these two efficient professionals put together still can't handle the tasks and responsibilities of the original Unreplaceable Person. Time passes. The organisation begins to understand that something is wrong.

Variations

This story has many possible spin-offs and variations. Perhaps the Third Person suddenly quits because of a continuous, muted sense of failure, or accepts a more stable and attractive opportunity in another sector. The Second Person now finds herself overwhelmed and losing energy, especially when she realises that in addition to her initial tasks she will now need to train a newly-recruited Fourth Person (the well-known domino effect, which quite a few cultural centres reported experiencing during and right after the height of the pandemic). Perhaps the Unreplaceable Person does not originally

suffer from burnout, but simply takes a few months leave, during which she misses the chance to get promoted to the more prominent position she should logically be offered, and her morale spirals downward, causing her to slide into burnout a few months later. Perhaps, returning to her job after a year, she finds her work environment unrecognisable because of the chain of events set off by her departure - a transformation which was not decided upon and desired by the organisation, but unintentionally caused by the human resource situation.

An attempt at interpretation

As we tried to unwrap these issues, with the help of practitioners from our network and existing research, and elucidate detailed points of attention for mental health in cultural workplaces (see part one), we began to perceive Unreplaceable People as magnets attracting and densely intertwining a number of well-identified issues (see part one). Under-funding, the project economy, hyperactivity of organisations in survival mode, a business model of 'passion as fuel', an internalised need by staff to justify the value of cultural organisations in general and theirs in particular, lack of clear job descriptions, a culture of multitasking, a lack of workload monitoring by the coordination and executive levels, and, last but not least, societal pressure for individuals to over-identify with their work, bring some

professionals to cumulate over the years an exponential variety of tasks, informal knowledge and ad hoc methods that are not only unsustainable for them, but also practically impossible to hand over to newcomers.

This story also reveals how a lack of explicit transparent human resource policies can create dysfunction for staff but also for the whole organisation, going well beyond the aforementioned "domino effect" to affect the actual capacity of the organisation to fulfil its mission and have impact on its users and community. We could say, perhaps self-evidently: The mental health benefits your organisation provides to its community depend heavily, if not entirely, on the mental health of its staff and of the artists working with them.

Mental health in cultural organisations: how to look at it from different perspectives at the same time

In the first article in this series, we outlined a few tools and levers that can be used at the executive level of cultural organisations and by policymakers.

In this second episode, we asked two practitioners from our network to go deeper in describing approaches.

First, we interviewed Heather O'Donnell, a psychologist specialised in supporting performing artists. Then we asked Nicolas Combes, vice-director of a large cultural centre, to share a short list of human resource practices he uses to support the staff of his organisation.

1. Modelling against scarcity: an interview with Heather O'Donnell

Heather O'Donnell is a former concert pianist and a psychologist. She counsels individual performing artists and arts organisations on mental health, resiliency, health maintenance, and injury prevention and recovery. She also coordinates TGR The Green Room, a support centre for performing artists in Cologne, Germany, which is an associate member of the ENCC since 2022.

We talked to Heather soon after her organisation joined the network. She shared an article with us that she had recently written on the difficulties experienced by musicians after the pandemic, and how individual therapy alone would not be enough to solve them. We decided to start this conversation as a dialogue between [our article](#) and [hers](#).

Lucy Perineau: Heather, you have two practices, as a therapist for performing artists, and as the coordinator of your socio-cultural organisation. How do you view the question of mental health issues and of recovery for artistic and cultural professionals through this double lens?

Heather O'Donnell: In the article I shared with you, I was talking a lot about the mental health crisis, which was amplified by the pandemic. Naturally there is a vulnerability in performing arts professions stemming from many factors: perfectionism, absolute need for peak performance on a daily level, and a high level of competitiveness. These are a recipe for an inability to sustain long-term. In the research on artistic professions you see heightened vulnerability to mental health issues like burnout and depression, and simply falling out of the profession. It's difficult to track because a lot of musicians and other artists are very secretive about these processes and it's still quite taboo to speak openly about the mental health challenges one is confronting. So this is one of the missions of The Green Room, to normalise and create more openness about mental health challenges in performing arts communities.

I think sports medicine is always running about 20 to 30 years ahead of music medicine and in sports it's very common nowadays for a tennis player to talk about

encc.eu/sites/default/files/2022-07/bruised_and_burnt_out.pdf_hy-perlinks.pdf

iinterlude.hk/the-unseen-and-continuing-waves-of-the-pandemic-for-musicians

her mental health issues, or a soccer player to discuss a physical injury and the need for rehabilitation. But still with artistic communities you have this secrecy, a need to project invulnerability and strength. This is something that I'm trying to help influence through our organisation.

L: How to approach this on a more organisational, less individual level?

H: This is very important, because often a message comes through that if you are sensing or experiencing burnout, this is a personal failing or an individual issue. It is not a personal issue. All the research on burnout shows that it is an occupational hazard. It is like a factory where a faulty machine is cutting people's fingers off. If you have an organisation that doesn't have the capability of preserving people's mental health, well, of course there will be burnout. Individual factors interact with organisational cultures.

So, the first thing to mention is that prevention is easier than rehabilitation. You can address burnout after-the-fact through yoga, or meditation, or all of these types of interventions, but that's addressing it as if you would treat someone's cut-off finger by giving them occupational therapy. It's not as effective as preventing the injury in the first place. So, when you look at it as an organisational task, to provide a healthy environment, then you take a bit of emphasis off of individual responsibility. Of course, everyone carries an individual responsibility for taking care of their mental health, but when there's a system in place that actively and negatively impacts mental health, then it's very difficult to effectively carry out this personal responsibility.

L: What we often hear is: "The issue is that cultural and artistic professionals tend to be overinvested". And that factor does often seem to be present...

H: Well, why are they overinvested? Is it because they don't receive enough money to live well within the structure of the job? Is there a need to show that they're committed to their work in a way that goes beyond their professional responsibilities? Is there a culture that requires that? Why is that culture in place? What's causing that and how can that be challenged?

L: You could also say that this culture of overinvestment is overarching in many, many professional areas. It may not be just caused by the organisation, right?

H: Absolutely. I think you tend to see this overinvestment in organisations where there is a sense of resource scarcity. You have to overachieve in order to maintain your standing within the organisation. In artistic fields, we're conditioned to this. If you are a dancer, if you're a musician, you're conditioned from the first years of training to this sense of resource scarcity. This conditioning is not something you can just snap your fingers at and wish away. It exists and there are reasons for it to exist. You carry that with you. A lot of people who have been conditioned by their early training as artists and who might transition into operational functions in an arts and culture organisation will carry this kind of mentality into that. It influences the organisational culture.

This is probably an area where the management level could do a lot of self-reflection on the kinds of messages that are implicitly and explicitly sent out on overachieving, overspending of finite psychological resources, multitasking, taking on too many projects in order to keep the organisation afloat... really identifying how much one is sending out, how much one is dispersing these limited psychological resources. Can that be streamlined? Can that be focused? Can that be maintained within a sustainable model?

L: What else could the management level of cultural organisations be attentive to?

H: One thing I wanted to mention about that is the power of modelling from the top down...

L: I guess you mean showing by example?

H: Yes. And for a lot of people in the arts, there's a strong need, for many reasons, to display yourself as a workaholic. To display your ability to take on enormous workloads. You see this in conductors, in theatre directors, in so many people... You have to ask yourself, what is the value of overwork, of the kind of punishing spending of one's own psychological resources? Why is that such an assumed value within the profession? You addressed this within your first article, I think that it comes back to a sense of scarcity, that you need to signal that overinvestment to justify your position in the world of culture. But it's really something that can backfire so quickly. If a person in the administrative upper echelon is modelling care for their own mental health resources, for psychological resilience and longevity, this can help people in lower ranks, who might otherwise feel that it's a necessity to overspend your psychological resources.

L: As a related example, I've noticed cases of dedicated directors or managers who actually perceive their job as facilitating and totally supporting the work of the staff. It's good for the staff's mental health, but then these executives just end up appearing as very tired superwomen, and one of the results is that no one in the staff will be willing to take on their position in due time, because it seems too daunting.

H: Yes. It's interesting that you gendered that because there is definitely a gender component. I don't have any data to back this up, but in my observations, I've noticed that women feel

compelled to take on a lot, too much. It may be derived from the historical cultures of unpaid domestic work, and the assumption that women simply take care of all loose ends. Most people don't notice, because they're accustomed to the unpaid domestic labor culture. In professional settings (and probably also domestic ones), this is not something that can be sustained for many years.

L: Circling back, you were saying that it is the task of the organisation to create a structure that allows for mental health. What preventive measures are key?

H: I think that one of the keys is hands-on management, which means really getting to know the individual needs of each staff member, understanding the tasks and work plans of individuals and creating individualised plans for each worker. So you have a toolbox at your disposal, and you take each individual and try to find what will be the most helpful, whether it's psychoeducation, or realigning their work structures to fit their life needs, or addressing the amount of work they're doing, the amount of multitasking, whether they need more focused work or more diverse work. Perhaps you have, for example, a mother who needs a bit more flexibility in the working structure, as opposed to a young person who has just graduated and has very little family responsibilities. So you're really taking each individual and their situation and designing a programme to help them as individuals, not engaging in one-size-fits-all interventions. This is what we call in the psychological community a "client-centred approach", and in organisational psychology MBWA (Management by Walking Around).

And then there is the aspect of normalising mental health issues. I had the cultural experience of moving back and forth between continents in the last few years and I was really interested in the differences. When I left the United States as a young person

in the early 2000s, you wouldn't talk about certain things like mental health. And when I returned to teach at a conservatory in 2015, people were regularly talking about "taking a mental health day". In the US this has become so normalised that some people say it has really gone too far.

- L. This is not really in the vocabulary here, in any case I am not aware of it.
- H. Yes, I can imagine that if you would, as a worker in a European cultural organisation, indicate that you needed to take a "mental health day", that that would be a professional liability. If there's a way to change the culture in the upper levels of management, where perhaps that kind of language could be modelled, then all levels of staff would be more willing to share their mental health needs. Of course, you have to find balance so that it's not abused, balance in which one can openly discuss the need for maintaining mental health, within a context that doesn't derail the organisation or give it a lack of professionalism or make people lose motivation to be there.
- L. You mention motivation...
- H. Yes. I was thinking about a researcher, Frederick Herzberg, who talks about 'motivation factors' versus 'hygiene factors' in organisational mental health. I'm not sure if this is a familiar concept, but 'hygiene' in this context is simply: how much are people paid, what are their working conditions, how much flexibility do they have, and so on. These mental health hygiene factors are, of course, very important, but it's also important to consider motivational factors. Is the work challenging, in a productive way? Is there recognition of achievement, do people have a balanced amount of personal responsibility, not too much and not too little? Are there opportunities for advancement? These kinds of issues. So it's important, in management, to balance 'hygiene' and 'motivation'.

- L. Could you tell me a bit about the work you do specifically in your organisation, and how it could be applied to organisational strategies?

H. I try to focus most of my energy on injury and illness prevention, because when you think of the clearest examples of disruption in an artist's career, for instance a dancer who is injured, rehabilitation is fraught and the possibilities for really coming back to full capabilities are limited. It's very, very difficult. Obviously the best is to prevent the injury from happening in the first place, rather than to start addressing it after it's already occurred. So we have structures in place in TGR The Green Room to help artists with prevention – which is difficult, because no one really wants to think about preventative issues. So it's kind of this missionary work of going out and addressing the importance of prevention, and also having enough space to really help people who are already deeply entrenched in a crisis.

- L. What approaches do you not recommend?
- H. I'm torn on the issue of psychoeducation. I think there is value in educating professionals about what burnout is, how does it feel, how to notice signs that forecast it... but I think when you want to do something productive in an organisation, so much energy and resources can be funnelled into things like psychoeducative seminars on mental health. And it can potentially backfire, because when I speak to people in organisations, they don't want seminars on mental health, they want to be adequately paid for their work! So these kinds of educational approaches are very easy ways for organisations to approach issues and to project that they are doing something, but I think that one has to be careful about how much of the resources are going into this exclusively, without addressing the structural issues.

There is another thing I find within organisations. Very often when I'm pitching these ideas about mental health to funders or to partners, it's important to embed it in language that's appealing. No one wants to talk about 'depressing things' like injuries and crises, so very often I have to really adjust how I'm talking about it. I tend to start more in terms of artistic growth and artistic excellence, and balance that with these 'more depressing' issues, like risk, burnout, depression, frustration. Privately, the work I'm doing is mostly with artists in high-risk situations, either preventing disasters or helping them recover from disasters, but on the public side, sometimes I feel the need to focus more on artistic excellence and growth and potential for artistic research and so on.

or in giving someone more resources than another person? If one has a baseline of human resources that are available to employees, I think you sense where these resources are being drawn from. If the organisation has the space for discussions on mental health and how it can assist in mental health, and staff have certain options, such as taking mental health days, or things like this, if that pot is the same for each worker, you probably will have a lot of diversity in how much the resources are drawn on. So making ample resources available is something that can be seen as equitable and how much the people draw on them is then a question of individual needs and situations.

- L. I guess that that could be an issue for individual professionals as well.
- H. In terms of mental health, there still is a need for varying degrees of privacy. Some people will only interact with my centre in very private settings. At the same time it's important to encourage people to participate in more open, collective forums and discussions. That's something that can really change the general culture, to encourage people to come in, to participate in whatever mental health or other health and professional issues are being openly discussed, with an openness to exposing vulnerabilities. But it's something that one has to address very sensitively, how much one protects and honours the need for privacy.
- L. I would like to come back to this individual-centred approach that you recommend, how does that fit with the need for equality? How can one still treat all staff according to a set of standards?
- H. It's a very pertinent issue. When someone needs more support, how do you offer that support without appearing to engage in favouritism

L. Any last comments?

H. As I was saying, I have two functions. I'm working with artists and arts organisations, engaging in these questions about prevention and rehabilitation. At the same time, I'm running an organisation. Reading your article about administrative work in culture, I can relate so strongly to the dangers, especially since at the moment I'm responsible for most of the administrative duties. As the

director of a new organisation, I'm needing to take on most of the management responsibilities. So, I can really relate when people speak of burnout in cultural organisations. It's so important for management of cultural institutions to thoughtfully choose to model an approach to mental health that encourages sustainability and longevity, and doesn't give into the work exhibitionist model that artistic people so often feel the need to project.

2. Explicit structuring as care: key tools for cultural organisations to support their workers

We talked to Nicolas Combes during two online meetings during the winter 2022. Nicolas is vice-director of cultural centre and World Heritage site La Saline Royale, in France. He also teaches in the cultural management MFA of the University of Lyon, and is the regional head of a French network of human resource directors.

Nicolas' diverse experiences were very helpful in identifying underlying structural issues for professionals working in cultural organisations (see for instance "the skewed trade-off" in the first article of the series). Here, we asked him to help us create a concise list of practices that managers of cultural organisations can use to start supporting the (mental) health of their staff.

Equity of treatment (≠ piecemeal responses to individual issues that create incoherent precedents)

Culture of solidarity: ability of co-workers to count on one another, particularly for organising events

Vision/ambition sharing: what kind of future does the direction see as desirable for the organisation? How can staff project themselves in this future in terms of personal evolution?

Space for all employees to contribute and participate (≠ complete horizontality where staff find themselves over-responsibilised and overinvested)

I. Preliminary principles

Transparency: where does money come from, where does it go, how are strategic decisions made (≠ gossip, rumours, mistrust)

II. Approaches

Be concrete and pragmatic about human resources and working conditions (≠ excessive conceptualisation of issues which is a common tendency in cultural organisations)

Do not rely only on sympathy and listening. Coordination also needs to be able to understand, actively support, reassure, accept fragilities, put its trust in staff, and openly demonstrate this trust (this is not so easy to do BTW).

Reflect about timing

- Work rhythms are much more intense today than just 5 or 10 years ago
- Care is needed for the rhythms of each and every staff member
- Priority should be on mission rather than calendar
- Staff should be able to build their own calendar
- A key to better quality of life during bursts of work: anticipate them, communicate about deadlines well in advance, have a realistic evaluation of time necessary to prepare for them

Evaluate psycho-social risk with a unique document of risk evaluation for each staff member, which includes measures to attenuate risks.

Create a clear organisational chart so that each staff member can visualise themselves in the workplace ecosystem

Write clear job descriptions. Make them short and clear, one page maximum, so that important points do not get drowned. They should include profile, qualities and competences needed for the position, tasks, but also: who does the worker report to? Who is she responsible for?

Anticipate training needs to create adequation between the cultural centre's needs and the competences of its staff. This requires anticipative planning to figure out specific needs for the activities of the coming two years.

Practice foresight. Cultural orgs with over 50 employees should go further and create a previsional training plan over 3 to 5 years to align competences with needs.

Create opportunities to travel and exchange competences : offer your staff an opportunity to spend a few days in a partner organisation, to exchange with peers according to their professional speciality. This is not just for cultural managers but also technicians, gardeners, security staff, cleaners and care providers and everyone else.

Consider individual interviews with staff as vital. These interviews should be formalised: the ability to do so is part of professional hygiene.

Schedule one yearly interview to evaluate and plan ahead

- Schedule one interview every two years about professional evolution and future. (Even more crucial for staff who have been with the same organisation for 15-20 years, to anticipate changes and transitions.)
- Make sure that coordinators have acceptable workloads and are getting enough rest and holidays. Watch out for them.

3. An attempt to conclude

This publication aims to support both management and workers of cultural organisations, by offering them conceptual and practical tools gleaned from the ENCC coordination office and from practitioners inside the network.

Most of these tools can only be activated by the management level. Normalising mental health issues; prioritizing prevention rather than rehabilitation; refusing a work culture that values overinvestment, overachievement and overspending of finite psychological resources; encouraging sustainability and longevity in the workplace; monitoring workloads; recognizing that work rhythms are constantly intensifying; focusing on the organisation's mission rather than the staff's calendar; evaluating psycho-social risk; practicing anticipative planning and training as well as foresight; and formalising individual interviews and career-pathing all need to be reflected on by the executive level, related to the scale and specificities of the organisation, and integrated to its human resource strategy.

Indeed, as we have underlined, research shows that mental health problems such as burnout are just as much occupational hazards as severed fingers or the damage created by constant exposure to noise. Nevertheless, awareness of this research can be useful for employees to avoid internalising and carrying the weight of these issues as if they were personal weaknesses or failures. Knowledge of best practices and research-based inputs can also allow workers to envision a set of norms that they can expect from their organisation, or lobby their management for.

The opening parable about "irreplaceable people" may shed light on ways to change a familiar, detrimental dynamic. On one hand, it may be advisable for cultural centres and other cultural organisations to build work environments where irreplaceable people are perceived as liabilities. On the other, the parable might serve as a warning for employees who risk

getting caught in this role, and help them recognize it as a trap. It might even lead us to consider irreplaceable people as counterparts to the artist as solitary genius figure, which has been questioned by some since the beginning of the 20th century, and more massively since the beginning of this one.

On a less cautionary tone, we'd like to invite cultural organisations to perceive that in terms of care for human resources, the divergent interests of executive management and workers can be seen as asymmetrical rather than opposite.

Indeed, any measure taken to improve the quality of professional life in the cultural workplace will have a different value for staff and for management. Staff exchanges with similar organisations, for instance, can give employees an opportunity to have fun at work, travel, enrich personal contacts and networks, pass on good practices, take pride in their work and develop new skills. Whereas for managers of cultural centres, the exchange of skills, renewed motivation and solidarity inside the team may serve a related but different purpose: reinforcing the staff's commitment and on the medium-to-long-term, retaining them in the organisation.

In this light, actions and structures to support workers' health, mental health and wellbeing no longer appear as an undue effort on behalf of organisations, an optional privilege that workers might take advantage of, or a detriment to efficiency, but as keys to sustain the most valuable asset and richness of any cultural organisation: its humans.

This article was written by Lucy Perineau for the ENCC office, with support and editing from Heather O'Donnell and Nicolas Combes, who also both participated in shaping its conclusions.

We worked on it in small instalments between autumn 2022 and summer 2023. It relies on mixed sources, including direct observation of the ENCC office and member workplaces, testimonies from member organisations, online interviews and email exchanges with Heather and Nicolas, a live workshop ([For an ecology of human resources and mental health in culture](#)) led by Heather at the ENCC's 2022 annual meeting, and a freewheeling talk at breakfast with her during the same event.

Although this article does not respond to the requirements of academic research, and is also not a proper autoethnographic study, while drafting it we read with great interest [A Manifesto for Patchwork Ethnography](#) by Günel Gökçe, Saiba Varma, and Chika Watanaben (see Member Voices, Fieldsights, June 9, 2020). They articulate fragmented fieldwork, slowness and autoethnography inside an innovative, inclusive and feminist framework for research - which is also highly relevant for the mental health of researchers.

The license of this document is dual, despite the distortions that may appear to attentive readers between the two licenses. We consider them to be interesting tools for reflection.

Creative Commons Attribution-ShareAlike (CC BY-SA 4.0). "You are free to share, copy and redistribute the material in any medium or format, and adapt, remix, transform, and build upon the material for any purpose, even commercially"

→ creativecommons.org/licenses/by-sa/4.0

CC4r, Collective conditions for re-use.
"The authored work released under the CC4r was never yours to begin with. The CC4r considers authorship to be part of a collective cultural effort and rejects authorship as ownership derived from individual genius. This means to recognize that it is situated in social and historical-conditions and that there may be reasons to refrain from release and re-use."

→ constantvzw.org/wefts/cc4r.en.html

European
Network
of  Cultural
Centres

Cellebroersstraat 16 B
1000, Brussels, Belgium

encc.eu

