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Geek in Residence Overview, November 30th 2011.

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Document Purpose

Between 2009-2011 I designed and produced the Geek in Residence pilot program for the Australia Council for the Arts. This document serves to outline some of the key elements of the first two years of the program.

This document is not a how-to guide and does not form an agreement to license the Geek in Residence model. Any action taken by the reader to adopt the systems or processes mentioned here do so entirely at their own risk.

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Introduction

“The Geek in Residence pilot program connects ‘geeks’ (by which we mean technically confident artists and creatively confident technicians) with arts organisations through a temporary subsidised secondment scheme.

The purpose of this fund is for the Australia Council to enable digital artists and technicians to share their skills and experiences with arts workers. Geeks will be able to share their passion for solving unknown technological problems in creative situations, and arts workers will feel better equipped to work in digital spaces.

Both will ultimately initiate ‘digital innovation’.”

<http://artsdigitalera.com> description of program

In 2009 I created the Geek in Residence pilot program as part of the "[Arts content for the digital era](#)" strategic priority for the [Australia Council for the Arts](#). It was designed in response to requests from arts organisations seeking help to build skills and confidence to equip them for the digital era. The common statement was “we know we need to get more digital in everything we do, we just don't know where to start”.

Typically a 'sticking-plaster solution' might have been applied, sending individual staff on training courses, or sending one person in to deal with each circumstance on a case-by-case basis. Instead we aimed to create legacy by encouraging a cultural shift across the whole of the Host arts organisation through subsidised, residential secondments lasting up to twelve months.

Essentially we were asking an arts organisation to let a total stranger enter their private domain. Not only to watch and ask questions, but to actively make changes in areas that were completely unusual by 'traditional' perspectives. The organisations might not know what they needed technically, but they certainly knew they would have to trust someone to take them on this learning curve. The model was therefore a facilitated process, where I essentially acted as an agent, matchmaking the right shortlist of Geeks to the needs of each arts organisation.

The program has been viewed extremely favourably by the Hosts, the Geeks and the Australia Council equally. Now in its second year, it has been augmented with a specialised '[NBN Geeks](#)' pilot, designed to support artists as well as organisations, and to coincide with the installation of a [national broadband network](#).

There has been much internal Australia Council discussion about future directions for both models. However none of these discussions are yet confirmed by the Council and so cannot be discussed publicly.

Application Process

The Hosts applied for a grant of up to AU\$25,000 toward the salary of the Geek, with the remaining salary provided as matched funding by the Host (two \$50,000 unmatched grants were awarded in year 2). Their proposals outlined the needs, gaps, ideas, opportunities etc arising from three areas of their organisation: artistic programming, general operations and audience development. I discussed the intentions of the program with each applicant prior to the deadline date to make sure they understood this was not simply a project fund, or something just to 'fix their digital marketing'.

The Geeks in turn proposed their skills, experiences and what interested them about working with arts organisations in this way. Many declared an enthusiasm to 'officially become a Geek' by outside recognition. Some came from the arts world and of those most were practicing media artists (which come under the abstract heading of 'Visual Arts' or 'Interdisciplinary Arts' in Australian funding terms). Others came from an IT or the digital design industries like film, animation and web (typically outside the arts funding system) with a pre-requisite that they defined their experience/engagement with the arts.

Selection Process

The selection committee for the Hosts was made up from the Directors of [artforms](#) across the Australia Council. These Directors knew the organisations extremely well so their key involvement from the beginning enabled a strategic approach to professional development for the sector and helped spread the word when the call went out. It also helped that the Directors and each artform team knew about the project in detail and were able to help encourage applications from more cautious organisations.

I have naturally fallen in to becoming a geek in residence at almost every job I've had, and running the-phone-book Limited provided a wealth of experience brokering creative/digital innovation and literacy. As I had been visiting Australia with the-phone-book since 2003 I already had a strong geek network there, so promoting the scheme was not hard. All processes at the Council must be fair and transparent so I had to develop a selection system that maximised my understanding of the needs of the Hosts and the skills and temperament of the Geeks, while being entirely fair and open. It was agreed that I would create a shortlist and facilitate interviews, with the final decision made by the Host.

The matchmaking process was more like introducing potential lovers than running a typical job search. A list of programming languages or 'websites I have worked on' meant little without a genuine feel for the person who would generate the most trust on a day to day basis.

Typical characteristics I wanted for the Geeks included generosity, humour, openness and collaboration; an ability to problem-solve, think outside the box and improvise; patience with non-technical people; some workshop/training experience; a good communicator.

Inevitably finding all those characteristics in just one person isn't easy. In some cases the best person for the job was a team of two or sometimes three Geeks to cover a variety of approaches and skillsets.

Incentives for the Hosts

- gaining a subsidised new member of staff for up to a year
- receiving bespoke problem solving from people who understood the needs of artists and arts audiences
- direct attention to extremely neglected old systems and processes
- NBN readiness
- new promotion/attention for being the inaugural Hosts in an experimental national program.

Incentives for the Geeks

- getting paid to do the things they enjoy (troubleshooting, playing with creative technology, working with artists, etc)
- being able to say "I'm a Geek" with pride
- building a portfolio of partnership projects with Hosts
- become known for helping Hosts become NBN ready
- new promotion/attention for being the inaugural Geeks in an experimental national program.

In year one there were nine hosts and thirteen geeks. In year two there are twelve hosts and fifteen geeks, plus two NBN Geeks at two sites.

Monitoring Program Delivery

While obviously working in similar areas, each team (the Host and their Geek/s) had a set of unique 'problems' to face. We anticipated the original project intentions were extremely likely to change as the teams talked more about their respective contexts and learned more about each other. Project planning was therefore via an agile development model. Each team submitted key roles and responsibilities over an employment timeline to include certain priorities that worked as a benchmark but could be renegotiated as required. This enabled us to keep a loose watch over the progress of the placements and help warn when they tried to take on too much (a common desire!).

The Geeks were largely self-directed, spending the first few weeks listening, observing and reflecting. This put them in the best position to make clear, logical proposals and negotiate how such outcomes might be delivered with their key contact at the organisation. Once internal approval was granted from senior management or the Board (dependent on each arts org's

circumstances), then research, costing and more detailed planning could take place before making those concepts a reality.

As the Council facilitator, I was on-hand at all stages to talk through any questions with either the Host or the Geek and we established a platform for the Geeks to chat informally as a support network for each other. We also provided backup so that if at any stage any Geek felt out of their depth, we could source someone to act as a mentor for them.

Through the first year I received emails of glee from a Host when a moment of realisation had occurred, or an informal update on how things were going from the Geeks. The program also received a lot of [media attention](#); often our favourite anecdotal quotes came from reading interviews between journalists and the teams. I would frequently involve the teams in my national tours (promoting the rest of the digital program) so that the learning going on internally could be shared with the sector. Things like the [Geek Speed Dating](#) side event often tagged on to the digital program's tweetups, and have since been adopted by the teams themselves.

In terms of official monitoring, we worked with an independent evaluation agency to produce a two-stage survey. The first stage was designed to act as a benchmark of 'pre-Geek' and the second held later (but not at the end) to gauge impact. Staff from the Host organisations and the Geeks were both interviewed. The summarised (anonymous) results were presented to the Council as advocacy for future rounds of the program.

Impact

A report from the two years of program evaluation should be made available through the Australia Council next year. This will include statistical analysis from the two years, plus quotations from the Hosts and Geeks (from their acquittals and any comments they made in the evaluation surveys that they deemed public).

At the second round of selections for Hosts, I asked the Directors if they felt the project was something they felt had merit and should be pursued for future years. The feedback I received was "Yes, although the impact from a project like this won't really be visible until five or ten years time. It won't be easy or really appropriate to quantify in just one or two years". One artform Director said the change they had observed in their Hosts had been so dramatic that they would fund the program from their own artform budget if they could.

Beyond that, it is extremely tricky defining impact for a project like this, especially at this early stage. Every Host from the first pilot year asked if they could re-apply, which does say that one year (typically part time) is not enough, but also that they felt enough good work was being done that they wanted to continue. In some cases more permanent staff positions have been created now that the Host recognises the real benefits of such a specific role.

Having said that, here are a few anonymous scenarios to give a taste of some tangible outcomes:

- One organisation discovered they had been leasing a dual line broadband connection but only using one of the lines. No one had even considered what the information in the bill meant. Once their Geek had made sure the second line was not in use or would be required, they automatically halved their annual telecommunications budget in one phone call.
- A company with an old, ignored and abused intranet system initially wanted some coordination with file naming conventions so they could handle shared drives more efficiently. Eventually they ended up with an updated intranet system, a full training program for all staff (existing and new) to work with the new shared drive management systems and a secure, offsite backup. All this was negotiated by the Geek and provided as an ongoing sponsorship deal from the provider, in return for a testimonial.
- An artist-run organisation has progressed from occasional project grants to an emerging Key Organisation (in receipt of triennial funding and more focused professional development support). It has moved to a larger venue and has a website that not only promotes the exhibitions but is a curated program in itself.
- A contemporary dance organisation who had struggled to provide access to abstract choreography found a new means to create discussion around the productions through documentary films. These films are now an ongoing part of the company's devising process for all new productions. They are currently working on methods of using technology within the performances themselves.
- One team is using data visualisation to explore future audience development, mapping the types of performances produced to the numbers of audiences generated.
- A project inspired by the potential of the NBN has prototyped a live, real-time, high speed/low latency connection between an orchestra and regional schools to enable live, interactive workshops across large distances. It is currently waiting State funding confirmation to move from prototype to realisation. In the process, the Geek has been working directly with the NBN management to recommend certain design features (especially symmetrical, low-latency tweaks) for the national system.
- All Hosts have (or are developing) a new (or better functioning) website and/or a wider variety of more actively engaged social media communities. The latter has also been helped along by another strategic development area I was involved with, [ConnectArts](#).

As you can see from the above, the easiest impacts to define come from practical problems/solutions around audience development and general operations. Much harder to engender and grow are the artistic programming issues. Partly this is because of a lack of awareness about media arts as a practice; there is some uncertainty that a digitally mediated experience can be as rewarding as a 'physical' one. Additionally, time is a big factor here since inevitably some organisations have pre-determined their schedules long before our Geek arrives.

In these cases the Geeks have been working to show potential areas of inspiration and get the ball rolling on new processes using technology. These are typically only fruitful if either the senior management/board are enthusiastic about research, experimentation and risk taking, or have the resources to maintain a relationship with the Geek after the end of their Geek in Residence contract.

In the long-term, this program will certainly have created new digital literacy in twenty one organisations, each with anywhere from three to over a hundred staff, plus the multiple partners, collaborators, artists, participants and audiences that they will encounter during and after the Geek's residency. Because the nature of creative technology is viral, it really is as simple as helping just one person understand the potential. They will then pass on their new-found enthusiasm to the next person, and so it continues. The dedicated passion of the Geeks we have been fortunate to work with in the last two years has done wonders for the 'geek brand' in Australia in general. The digital future for Australian creativity looks extremely bright.

NBN Geeks

It is worth a brief mention that two trial NBN sites (Brunswick in Melbourne and Armidale in New South Wales) have received a local Geek placement. Where the above model is one or more Geeks in one Host organisation for up to a year, this version offers a few months of dedicated access to geek knowledge for all artists and organisations in that locality. Here the Geeks provide a program of workshops, one-to-one consultations and networking events to raise awareness of the potential for the NBN and help agitate new digital creativity. The NBN Geeks pilot closes in mid-December this year.

Thoughts from the last two years

- Twelve months is just never going to be enough, but then neither would two years; this program really just scratched the surface. Most placements are part time and it can easily take three months for the context and trust to build enough to take action on suggestions.
- Adding a budget for hardware/software upgrades and new toys for research use would be a massive bonus. Additional equipment budgets would enable faster adoption of new systems/processes, rather than workshoping new skills but having to wait for sponsorship/fundraising before you can implement the changes across the board.
- Make absolutely sure the Host's senior management and Board are open to the experimental nature of the program and don't see it as an 'invasion'. If one enthusiastic staff member drives an application through to gain a Geek, but then can't actually get any approval for any of the Geek's suggestions to go through, then you've wasted everyone's time.

- Invariably Hosts don't know what they don't know, but they know what works for the audience they have. Asking them to propose what they think they need is one thing, but the Geeks should be proactive in seeing gaps or opportunities that the Hosts might not be aware of. I call this the 'water cooler' conversation.
- Some Geeks lack project management skills and might need more regular observation than others. If you assign a team of Geeks, it can help to make one the 'lead Geek' so they can take responsibility to drive the overall program.
- While there is some space for the media artist type of Geek to develop their own creative ambitions within this program, it was important to distinguish this model as being very different to a traditional 'artist in residence' scheme. The intention here was to facilitate the development of the organisation as the key priority. Some Geek applicants struggled to accept they wouldn't get carte blanche to do what they wanted with the Host.
- The Hosts will always need more done than there is time to do, and there will always be tangents. Be open, flexible and agile about the 'deliverables' so that the real outcomes can be highlighted and redirected as required. Make sure all parties log any changes to the original plan so they are always aware that a new idea coming in means an old idea must go - the last thing you want is for the twelve months to pass and there are lots of open ended projects with no resources to complete any of them.
- "Progress" for an ARI (artist run initiative) requires entirely different measures and management than "progress" for an MPA (major performing arts) company; don't evaluate their outcomes along the same lines.
- With an eye on new innovative solutions being generated for complex problems, we highlighted an IP share relationship potential between Host and Geek early on. This proved hard to conceptualise at the first pilot, but with a more proven model this would be easier in future rounds.

Relevant links

Australia Council for the Arts: <http://australiacouncil.gov.au>

Application guidelines for Hosts: <http://artsdigitalera.com/host>

Application guidelines for Geeks: <http://artsdigitalera.com/geek>

FAQ for applicants: <http://artsdigitalera.com/girv2>

Summary of Host needs: <http://artsdigitalera.com/geekhosts>

Geek teams yr1 announcement: <http://artsdigitalera.com/geekteams>

Geek teams yr2 announcement: <http://artsdigitalera.com/geekteamsv2>

Media coverage around the program: <http://artsdigitalera.com/News%20Archive>

Geek Speed Dating: <http://artsdigitalera.com/geekspeeddating>

Geek in Residence blog: <http://www.residentgeeks.net>

NBN Geeks blog: <http://www.nbngeeks.net>

ConnectArts, arts audiences online: <http://connectarts.australiacouncil.gov.au>