



UNIVERSITY OF
OXFORD

SUPPORTING

A CLOSER LOOK AT
SUPPORT ROLES IN THE
CULTURAL SECTOR

LEADERSHIP

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SUPPORTING LEADERSHIP

[EXECUTIVE SUMMARY]

Support staff play a key role in enabling dynamic cultural sector leadership. They provide a vital service to leaders: organising their diaries and offices, project managing, problem solving, maintaining communications, and building and nurturing relationships across and beyond their institutions.

At an individual level support staff can be highly valued, however, as a collective this staff group has been overlooked. They have been absent from specific studies on cultural sector leadership and underrepresented in broader sectoral research, resources and initiatives. A better understanding of these roles is needed, to fill this gap in our knowledge of the cultural sector workforce but also to help **maximise the potential of administrative colleagues** and to support the **creation of more productive working relationships** that will bring benefits to both leaders and support staff alike.

This report brings together findings from the Supporting Leadership project, a research and knowledge exchange project examining the role of executive and administrative support staff in the cultural sector. **The project used a digital consultation to engage directly with 124 individuals in leadership and leadership support roles.** It has drawn on their experiences in order to define and describe the nature of support roles and to provide recommendations and resources to promote best practice in this area of work.

The responses to the consultation were insightful and carefully considered, with both leaders and support staff alike taking time to share detailed reflections on individual successes and challenges. Participants identified a myriad of different ways in which **support staff carry out, facilitate, or enhance essential work** taking place across the organisation. There was a consensus, however, that the **majority of this work goes unseen** and can be unappreciated even by those it most greatly impacts. Support roles are **not well understood**, and are sometimes **not well respected**, and there are a number of problems that can arise from the uncertainty surrounding their position – both practical, through the creation of barriers to the fulfilment of the roles, and personal, through the impact on the wellbeing of the staff who occupy them.

The project findings point towards **a need for greater clarity** and for leaders and support staff to work together to **shape and define** individual roles, to **raise awareness** across their institutions, and to create a culture where staff feel empowered to **take ownership** of their work and **celebrate** their contributions. The report sets out six key recommendations around the themes of definition, information, awareness, empowerment, mutual benefit, and room for growth, and provides practical advice through a series of four tools focusing on role descriptions, working environments, recruitment processes, and development pathways.

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The recommendations have been drawn out from the consultation responses and anonymised quotations have been used throughout the report, allowing issues and possible solutions to be described and defined through the survey participants' own words.

Administration underpins every aspect of working life and there are many benefits to be gained at both individual and institutional levels from ensuring that we value and take time to strengthen these foundations.

Across both leaders and support staff there was a shared understanding of the challenges and a shared enthusiasm for exploring the possibilities for change. Our hope is that this report can be used as inspiration for the start of a longer journey through which **better working practices** and **greater recognition** for these roles can be achieved.

A CLOSER LOOK AT A CRITICAL ROLE

[INTRODUCTION]
[KEY FINDINGS]

A CLOSER LOOK AT A CRITICAL ROLE

[INTRODUCTION]

Cultural institutions are under increasing pressure to deliver on multiple missions and to answer to multiple stakeholder communities. The burden of this pressure falls heavily on individuals – the leaders of these organisations who are tasked with balancing competing demands, overcoming challenges, and defining, sharing and implementing a vision that will drive their organisations forward.

Leaders do not face these pressures alone. They rely on support from many different sources, and executive and administrative support staff should not be neglected when considering the range of individuals who can help to shape and facilitate their leadership.

"It is the closest relationship one has as a director, so getting someone you can work with, who is also good at the job in the way you want it, is the most important thing." Leader

Support staff have a direct impact on the leaders they work with but their influence also reaches out much further, across and beyond their institutions.

"The ability and inclination to run an effective, dynamic project with a decent measure of pace and urgency is rather rare, and so I am pleased to have that, in a role than is pan-organisation rather than in a single team." Leader

Whilst there would be few leaders who would deny the importance of support staff, the nature of these roles and the value that they bring can often be difficult to quantify. There is a need for both leaders and support staff to gain a better understanding and to find ways of sharing and embedding understanding across their organisations, to encourage the development of more productive working relationships and practices that will bring benefits at both individual and institutional levels.

A QUESTION OF VALUE

"I think support staff are the unsung heroes of our institutions."

Leader

[KEY FINDINGS]

Support staff bring value in many different ways but this value is not always easy to quantify, and therefore is not easy to describe or celebrate.

The consultation revealed that both support staff and leaders believe that there is an issue in the way that support roles are perceived; that these roles are not well understood and are sometimes not well respected. This can create practical barriers to the fulfilment of the role, as support staff are misused or struggle to work with colleagues who see their needs and requests as low priority, but also has a significant impact on staff at a personal level.

"I think the role isn't well understood, it can be abused and used as a dogsbody role."

Leader

"I think the best recognition people in admin support roles get is that they are "good at their jobs", rather than being professionals in their own right."

Support staff

"I think they are generally appreciated for the help and support they give others, but undervalued as a type of role."

Former support staff

"I have always felt very valued, throughout my career in both the private and public sector - I don't think this is the norm."

Support staff

"We can be invisible and only thought of when things go wrong."

Support staff

"Often taken for granted"

Leader

"A dumping ground."

Support staff

"People often underestimate administrative support roles, but they're the madly paddling feet underneath the gliding swan."

Former support staff

"I think the role is seen as unskilled as there isn't a qualification for it but in truth administrators are multi-skilled in a wide variety of areas."

Support staff

"I feel admin support is sometimes viewed as a job anyone can do and not on which is exceptionally skilled."

Support staff

"I don't think support roles get the recognition they deserve. They are not seen to own specific measurable outputs and thus are often seen as less skilled or more junior."

Leader

"I sometimes feel (though not in my team) that admin colleagues are seen as 'less important' and not part of the core function."

Leader

"[Support staff are] at worst, undervalued and almost invisible. At best, probably under-appreciated (particularly in terms of remuneration)"

Leader

"We are viewed as the people who do all the crap jobs that no-one else wants to do."

Support staff

"I think they are viewed as helpful and necessary, but undervalued in terms of expertise."

Support staff

"Often administrators are seen as less intelligent, and the role as menial."

Support staff

"Others do not always realise the complexity of the role"

Leader

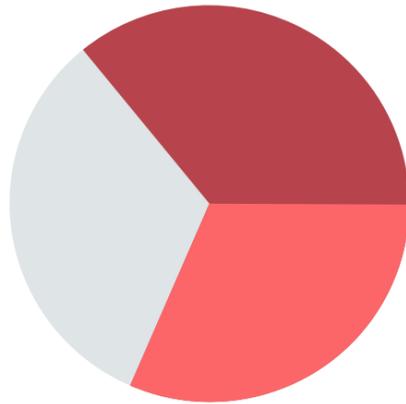
"Many still view support roles as typists and tea-makers."

Support staff

A QUESTION OF RISK

How much movement is healthy? How much is too much? The majority of the survey participants did not see themselves in the same role in 3 years time.

- 36%** "I am currently looking for other opportunities" and "I am likely to start looking for other opportunities within the next 6-12 months"
- 33%** "I can see myself staying in my current role for more than 1 year"
- 31%** "I can see myself staying in my current role for more than 3 years"



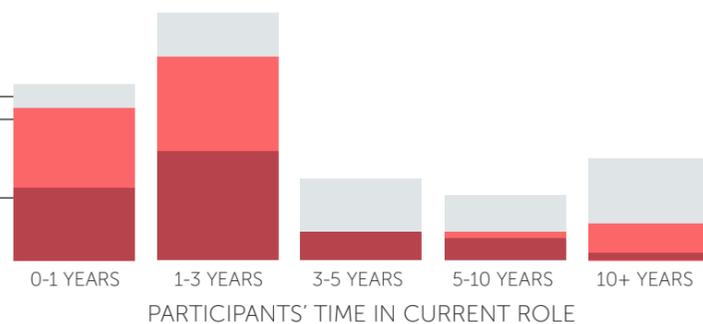
[KEY FINDINGS]

A high level of discontent experienced by current support staff may be fuelling a high rate of turnover within this area of work.

Whilst it is important for organisations to be dynamic and be open to bringing in new ideas and approaches, rates of change should be carefully managed to ensure stability overall, and the strong desire for movement should be a cause for concern. The underlying driving factors require consideration and mediation to ensure the retention of skilled staff in order to hold on to and build upon levels of valuable professional expertise.

Only a small proportion of the consultation participants who stated they had only recently taken up a new post (within the last 12 months) could see themselves committing to the role in the long-term (more than 3 years).

Most of this group were already thinking about moving on.



THE WORK OR THE WORKPLACE?

The issues can be attributed to the nature of the roles rather than to the sector in which they operate.

Support staff noted the variety of work available, and the stimulating nature of the settings in which it takes place, as key to their enjoyment of their roles.

"Though I have routine tasks which must be completed, I am pretty much guaranteed to be dropped something important and random to complete which flexes multiple skills both transferable and specialised." Support staff

"[I enjoy] the people and interactions. I thoroughly enjoy organising events and conferences and learning new things in such a spectacular setting." Support staff

In relation to future plans, there was a high level of commitment to the sector and to individual organisations (64% overall wanted to remain within their current organisation) but much less to commitment to the type of role (only 42% overall wanted to remain in administration).

"I don't want to leave but don't see any pay or career progression in my current role." Support staff

"Having several years' experience working on administrative roles within various sectors, I feel these type of roles do not provide a lot of career development opportunities and are often used as stepping stones to get foot in the door, so I am more interested in pursuing different roles." Support staff

The level of dedication to individual organisations is inspiring but it is clear that the nature of support roles needs to be explored and improved to ensure the retention of skilled staff so that organisations, and the sector as a whole, can continue to thrive.

Through this consultation we sought answers to important questions about the nature of support roles in the cultural sector. In order to fully understand these roles we need to look at where they have come from, where they are now, and where they are going. Whilst all areas are important, the latter, has perhaps produced the most significant finding as it has called into question the stability and security of these roles moving forwards.

LOOKING TO THE FUTURE

When asked about their future plans, one third of the support staff surveyed (36% of participants, 33 out of 92 individuals) expressed a desire to move on from their current roles, noting that they were either actively looking for other opportunities or saw themselves looking within the next 6-12 months. Around one third of this group (10 out of 33 individuals) had tired of their role within the first year of taking it up.

Within the two thirds of the group who did not see themselves leaving their roles in the immediate future: half (31% of participants, 29 individuals) saw themselves staying between 1-3 years and half (33% of participants, 30 individuals) saw themselves making a longer term commitment of potentially 3 years or more.

There are natural tendencies for staff early in their careers to move more frequently than those at later stages in their careers. These were reflected to some extent in the survey findings as almost all of the third who were committed to staying longest were over the age of 35. Amongst those keenest to leave, however, there were a range of ages represented, showing there is not a clear link between career stages and the frequency of movement between roles.

The drivers for change were often related to the lack of respect for the role but participants also cited a lack of progression opportunities – in terms of skills development but also with direct reference to status and pay – as key frustrations.

"Administrative support roles are often viewed as subordinate to other career paths and with limited options for career development." Support staff

"I feel my work is valued by my manager and team but I do not feel this transfers into being recognised financially for the work I undertake." Support staff

Within a sector that is characterised by project work and precarious employment, high turnover is not necessarily unusual but the majority of the staff surveyed (90% of participants, 83 out of 92 individuals) held permanent contracts. The persistence of a strong desire for movement, despite the level of security on offer, should be a cause for concern and for further investigation.

*Why are support roles important?
What value do they bring?
How can we improve the way we
understand and describe this value?*

QUANTIFY AND QUALIFY

The first step in defining a role is often related to the outcomes that it needs to achieve; a task or a problem is identified and a role is created to complete or solve it. Support roles, by their nature, do not have outcomes of their own, they have an enabling function in relation to outcomes that belong to others or more broadly to organisations as a whole. This can make it difficult to describe the work that they do and the benefits that they bring.

Opening up conversations around value, it is possible to gain a more tangible sense of intangible benefits – this section looks ways of describing and talking about these benefits.

[RESULTS AND RESOURCES]

QUANTIFY AND QUALIFY

In fast-paced working environments the opportunity to reflect is rare, and it can be difficult for individuals to separate themselves from the realities of immediate tasks in order to see the bigger picture. Within the digital consultation, participants were prompted, and given the opportunity to reflect on, the skills and the value that support staff bring and to consider both what is easily missed as well as what is easily seen.

“By the time my manager had a chance to talk to me about an issue, I’d have already either done it or have a plan for how to do it.”

Former support staff

Collating the thoughts of both leaders and support staff, it was possible to identify nine distinct benefits: Time, Action, Organisation, Foresight, Memory, Consistency, Mediation, Honesty, and Insight.

TIME

Support staff are creators of time: by taking away the responsibility for administrative tasks they allow leaders to dedicate time to the bigger picture for the organisation and to more strategic matters.

“Even though I often just asked someone else, what people valued most was the fact that I took the responsibility away from them, I somehow freed them from having to worry about things.” Former support staff

This benefit is most keenly felt in relation to paperwork and many leaders noted the importance of being relieved of this burden.

ACTION

Support staff have the ability to make things happen: they have a willingness to do whatever is needed to find a solution and often go above and beyond in order to ensure success.

“He can ask me anything and I’ll either have an answer or get him one very quickly.” Support staff

“There is a huge volume of work to get through all the time, so [I believe my manager values] the energy and commitment I bring to keeping the flow of work moving in the right direction.” Support staff

ORGANISATION

Support staff create order: through a process of continual assessment and adjustment they ensure that competing demands can be comfortably aligned and fulfilled. Diary management is often a central part of the roles and leaders noted the importance of having someone to protect time in both their professional and personal lives and prevent work from spilling too often across the boundary between the two.

“I have ten direct reports and a lot of sideways and upwards relationships to manage, so having support to help manage my diary is crucial.” Leader

FORESIGHT

Support staff are always one step ahead: planning and prioritising is essential, they are always horizon scanning to head off problems before they happen.

“I try to think one step ahead regarding what is needed and I feel that they trust when something has been done, every detail is catered to and thought of.” Support staff

MEMORY

Support staff manage the details: they have high levels of attention to detail and are often relied upon by colleagues to keep track of information. This responsibility often applies to both individual memory and institutional memory and support staff are expected to retain and recall many different forms of knowledge.

“My failure to pay close enough attention to health and safety, and to budgets, due to being spread too thin due to administrative tasks could have severe consequences for the organisation, reputationally and legally.”

Leader

CONSISTENCY

Support staff maintain standards: they are often regarded as a ‘safe pair of hands’ and are relied upon by peers and colleagues to deliver.

“They know that I will help out, show up and get things done on time and accurately.” Support staff

“Even though diary management and other routine tasks can be monotonous, I do get satisfaction from knowing they’ve been done to a consistently high standard, and that others rely on this.” Support staff

MEDIATION

Support staff build relationships: they are responsible for maintaining channels of communication across and beyond the organisation.

“I have very strong diplomacy skills so I’m able to speak to and work with anyone and everyone to get things done.” Support staff

Due to their wide-ranging interactions, support staff are often tasked with navigating office politics and need to draw on skills in persuading and influencing.

HONESTY

Support staff can be sounding boards: they give constructive feedback to the leaders they support.

“I have a close relationship with both assistant directors, acting as confidant and advisor. They speak to me and seek my advice on most of their confidential projects.” Support staff

“I will challenge them when necessary, and they take on board my advice and suggestions. I think they value that I don’t pander to them because they are higher than me, but genuinely respect my understanding and ability.” Support staff

INSIGHT

Support staff are agents on the ground: they can assess and influence across the organisation in ways leaders and members of executive teams, due to their seniority, sometimes cannot.

“I was in a position to listen and observe, which could prove useful as ‘eyes and ears’ on the ground for her.” Former support staff

“As Director, I would say my job is helping others do theirs, but the authority of the role can – no matter how I behave – sometimes be unwieldy. Having an ‘agent’ to help deliver the kind of improvements I see are important makes my role more effective.” Leader

The importance of these key benefits should not be underestimated. They enable the completion of individual tasks but more broadly they enable organisations as a whole to function and appear at their best. Support staff free up leaders to lead and workers to work, without their input the level and standard of activity across the whole organisation would decline.

“Financial procedures and HR paperwork are time consuming for colleagues whose primary role lays elsewhere. Not having this support would diminish the ability to deliver core functions.” Leader

When the day-to-day operation and activity within an organisation becomes inefficient or dysfunctional, first its reputation and then its very existence can be put at risk.

*What do support roles look like?
What do they do?
How can we define a scope with
boundaries and limits?*

MAKING IT WORK: ROLES AND REMITS

Support roles must be tailored to individual requirements and in theory should be as unique and diverse as the individual leaders who are being supported. There is a remarkable amount of common ground, however, seen across different types of roles and different types of institutions. This consistency can be attributed to some extent to the extreme breadth of these roles; with a remit that encompasses a little bit of everything, there is a lot of opportunity for overlap.

More focused remits would help support staff to feel more confident in the scope and position of their roles – this section sets out to clarify the practical aspects of support roles and explore where it may be possible to set clearer boundaries.

[RESULTS AND RESOURCES]

ROLES AND REMITS

The nature of a role is defined not just by the tasks it entails but also by the way it is referred to and the way it is connected with other staff roles in the organisation. Exploring these aspects in turn and in isolation it is possible to begin unpicking assumptions about what support roles are for.

“My title was changed and my role was regraded to reflect what I actually did as it was a lot wider than the role I was employed to do.”

Support staff

ROLE TITLES

The key feature of support roles is their definition in relation to someone, or something, else.

Role titles are diverse: 25 different titles were observed across the 92 current support staff who participated in the consultation. The strongest trend, however, was towards variants of ‘assistant’. This word was present in the titles of 52% of the survey participants – 29% as Executive Assistants, 19% as Personal Assistants, and the remainder as assistants to named people, groups, departments, or projects.

Job titles provided the first evidence for a need to clarify and have greater certainty about the remit of support roles. Some titles comprised of multiple components and many support staff felt the need to expand on their titles and to describe additional areas of work, suggesting that they did not feel their title sufficiently communicated the extent of their responsibilities.

There were several instances of retitling to reflect the changing nature of support roles but some participants also expressed concern over dramatic changes. They noted that, whilst this approach may be relevant and beneficial to individuals, as a broader directive for the sector there would be a risk of further entrenching negative perceptions around standard titles that are likely to persist.

“Some organisations have played around with job titles to try and break stereotypes. I think this has only been partially successful - in my experience it often just serves to denigrate the role of PA further. It would be better to promote knowledge and information about what a PA actually does and the validity of the role rather than use the gesture of an unconvincing title change to fix the problem...”
Support staff

A lack of confidence in job titles should be seen as a symptom, rather than the cause of, wider issues with the way that support roles are perceived.

“...it’s the attitudes that need fixing, not the job title.” ***Support staff***

ROLE SETUPS

Support roles have evolved away from the model of a traditional secretary and, contrary to possible perceptions, only around a third of the staff surveyed (31% of participants, 29 out of 92 individuals) were dedicated staff in a 1:1 support relationship. The majority of the participants were supporting more than one senior staff member, indicating an increasing pressure to do more, for more people, with the same amount of resource.

“My workload has always been unmanageable and team support has only decreased.” ***Support staff***

Around half were working alone and half were in a team of support staff (typically between 1-3 staff) and the majority worked onsite with the leaders they supported, either in the same or adjacent offices.

Many roles involve diverse interactions with large groups of people, however, the complexity in the immediate working relationships and dependencies of support staff – as they support and report to multiple individuals or teams – already sets these roles apart as potentially more challenging than many may perceive.

ADMINISTRATOR

CHIEF ADMINISTRATOR

EXECUTIVE SUPPORT ADMINISTRATOR

THEATRE ADMINISTRATOR

PROJECT ADMINISTRATOR

ADMINISTRATION MANAGER

ADMINISTRATIVE ASSISTANT

ADMINISTRATIVE OFFICER

OFFICER

DIRECTORATE SUPPORT OFFICER

MANAGEMENT SUPPORT OFFICER

PROJECT SUPPORT OFFICER

ASSISTANT

PERSONAL ASSISTANT

DIRECTORS’ ASSISTANT

EXECUTIVE ASSISTANT

SENIOR EXECUTIVE ASSISTANT

EXECUTIVE & GOVERNANCE ASSISTANT

COORDINATOR

BUSINESS SUPPORT COORDINATOR

SENIOR BUSINESS SUPPORT COORDINATOR

MUSEUM MANAGEMENT COORDINATOR

OFFICE MANAGER

PROJECT MANAGER



TASKS

Support roles are fragmented and complex, they can expand to encompass almost any task.

"In general terms the tasks that fall into the role are any that I need to make me more effective - subject to my EA having the necessary skills to deliver them and the time to do them." Leader

There was a strong sense from the current and former support staff surveyed that there was a need know a little about everything, both in relation to the specific tasks carried out within their organisation but also in relation to context and history. The importance of institutional knowledge was noted by many participants.

"I'm frequently consulted by many members of staff for information on a wide range of topics, as I seem to have gathered a lot of insight on a broad range of subjects due to the nature and position of the role." Support staff

A CORE REMIT?

Many participants described the role in relation to a 'core remit' and 'additional' duties.

"We have set tasks that form part of the core remit. Tasks outside of that we discuss and agree before assigning, including a commitment on my part to provide training if necessary." Leader

When rating the frequency of specific tasks, the top rated tasks (see overleaf for the full results) were carried out by almost all staff:

TOP 10 TASKS ¹

1. Diary management for the director
2. Booking rooms
3. Meeting support and minuting
4. General enquiries
5. Meeting and greeting
6. Communicating for the director
7. Booking travel
8. Filing responsibility
9. Financial administration
10. Internal updates and info

99%-100% of the staff surveyed reported responsibility for diary management for the director, providing logistical support for meetings (for example, by booking venues and rooms and sourcing equipment), and providing administrative support for meetings (for example, by preparing papers and taking minutes).

The task list used in the surveys was defined through engagement with a focus group of support staff, with the expectation that through the wider digital consultation the list could be narrowed as common themes emerged. All of the tasks were of relevance, however, as even the lowest ranked tasks were still significant for a sizable group of staff – 30% contributed to their organisation's social media accounts, 23% held responsibility for departmental first aid, and 20% processed payroll claims.

"I think a lot of people view administrative support roles as low level entry roles, but administrative support roles can involve complex financial analysis, IT, social media, design skills, facilities, event management and strong communication skills. They are the people that are called to sort out a wide range of issues that others either do not have time or knowledge to resolve." Support staff

AN ENDLESS REMIT?

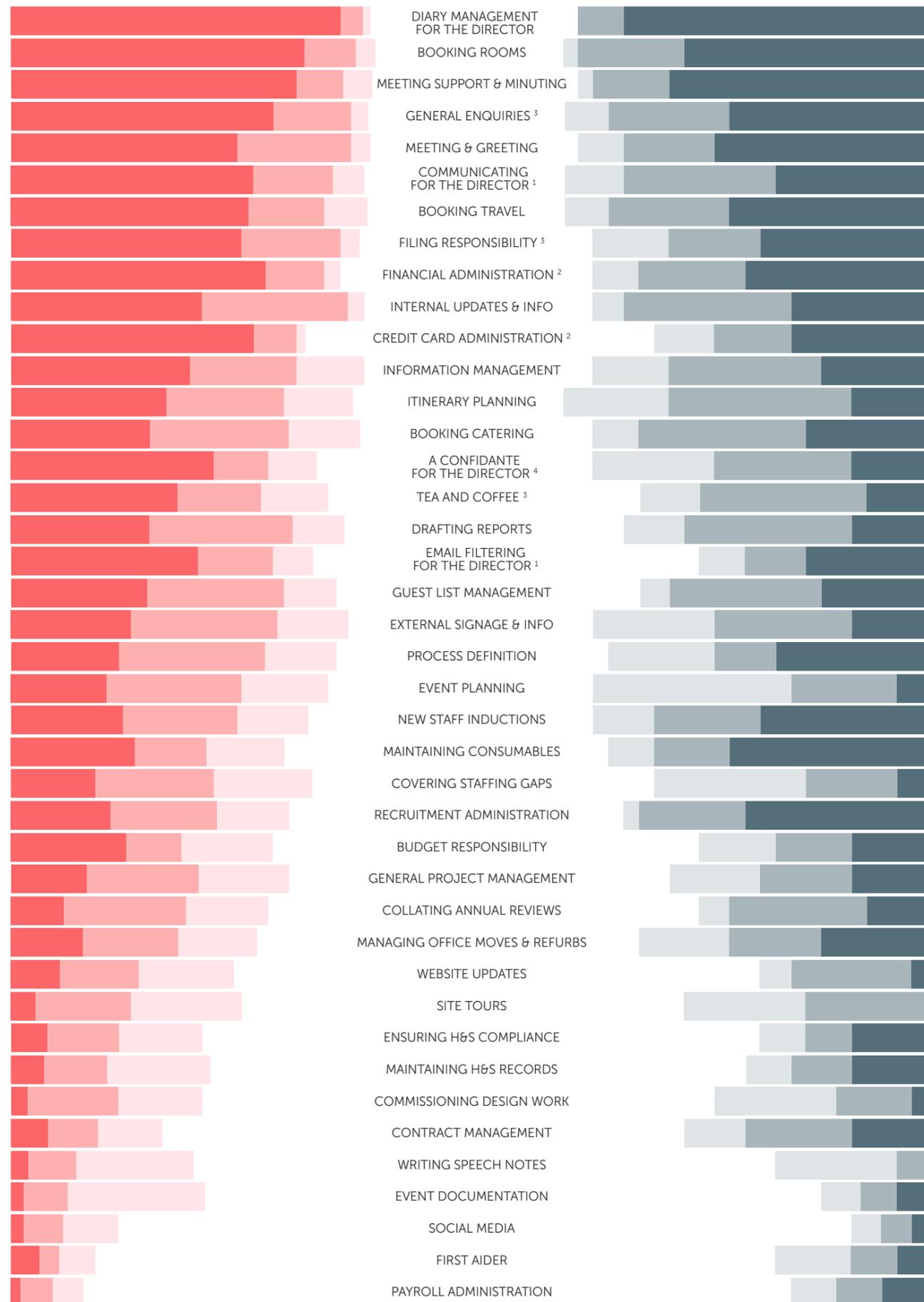
Many staff, both support staff and leaders alike, felt the task list provided was not comprehensive enough and used the free text box to detail extra duties. The most significant assertion was that engagement with Boards and Trusts should be noted as a separate piece of work – the activities involved may already be in the task list but, in this context, hold an extra level of responsibility which should be acknowledged. Other additions that were raised by multiple participants included providing IT support for colleagues and holding responsibility for data protection.

Support roles are extremely broad and there is a need for them to be flexible and to respond to changing requirements, however, whilst an endless remit may work in theory it is not sensible in practice. More focused remits would help support staff to feel more secure in their roles, and establishing boundaries for regular work can help us to see when and where we need to go beyond this and be confident in doing so.

¹ Full descriptions of the tasks, as used in the surveys, are detailed in the appendices

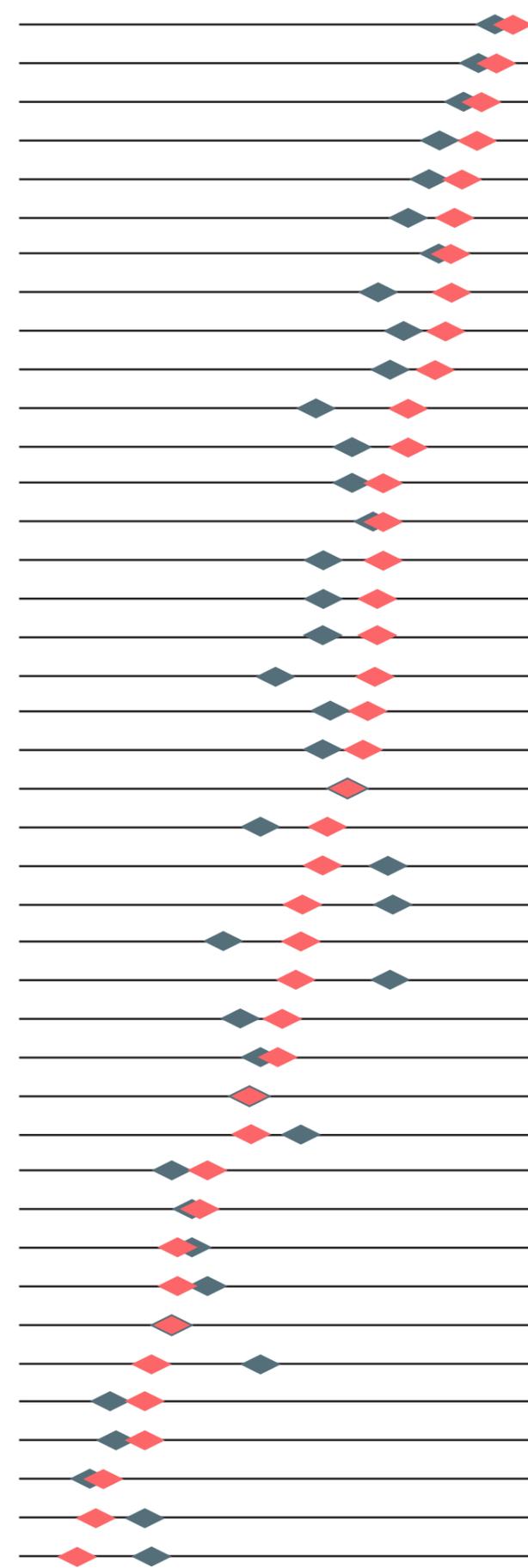
SUPPORT STAFF

LEADERS



LOW SIGNIFICANCE

HIGH SIGNIFICANCE



[OPPOSITE] SUPPORT TASKS: INDIVIDUAL REPORTING

Leaders and support staff were asked to rate the significance of different tasks within the support role by reporting on the frequency of the task.



The results showed a strong alignment between leaders and support staff.

Examining the detail and focusing on the tasks that were 'frequently undertaken', across most of the tasks support staff were more likely than leaders to rate tasks as 'frequent' (and therefore a significant part of the role). As would be expected, there is variation across all of the tasks between leaders and support staff. It is still possible, however, to identify some areas of substantial difference:

1. Tasks completed by support staff on behalf of leaders were reported as more significant by support staff than by leaders:

Communicating for the director: 66% support staff compared to 42% of leaders rated this as significant

Email filtering for the director: 52% support staff compared to 33% of leaders rated this as significant

2. Financial tasks were likely to be reported as more significant by support staff than by leaders

Financial administration: 70% support staff compared to 50% of leaders rated this as significant

Credit card administration: 67% support staff compared to 38% of leaders rated this as significant

3. Tasks that could be considered as unskilled were likely to be reported as more significant by support staff than by leaders

Filing: 63% support staff compared to 46% of leaders rated this as significant

Responding to general enquiries: 73% support staff compared to 54% of leaders rated this as significant

Tea and coffee making: 46% support staff compared to 17% of leaders rated this as significant

These variances indicate a difference in the understanding of the nature of the tasks. There were also variances that could reflect a difference in understanding of the relationship:

4. Direct interactions were likely to be reported as more significant by support staff than by leaders

A confidante for the director: 55% support staff compared to 21% of leaders rated this as significant

Leaders' attention must necessarily be widely spread across staff teams however support staff are focused on the individual they support and their working interactions may therefore have more significance

[ADJACENT] SUPPORT TASKS: COMPARED REPORTING

Each task was given an overall significance value based on weighted scores. The overall significance values as given by support staff and leaders are compared against each other.

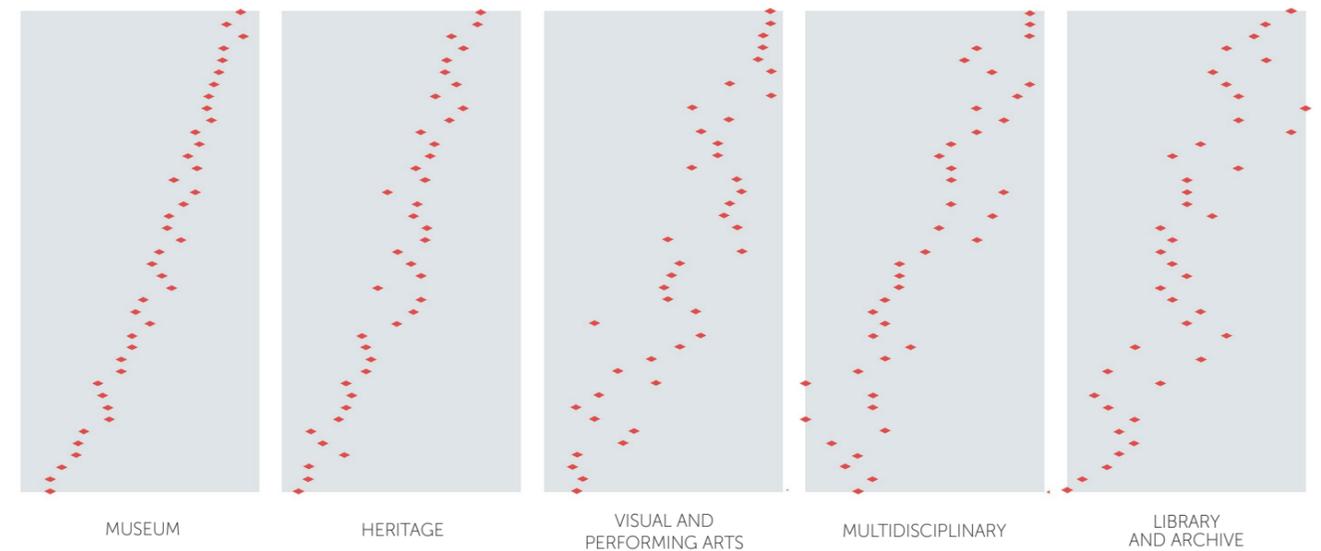


The largest variances occurred against very specific tasks like 'contract management' and 'recruitment administration' which are likely to be subject to differences between the approaches of individual institutions.

"It would be good to learn how things are done in different organisations and to learn from each other."

Support staff

*Across the sector:
how do different types
of institutions vary?*



The consultation responses were separated out by institution type in order to identify trends that are unique to specific types of organisation. Surprisingly, however, there was a very high level of similarity across the sector. Most of the minor variations that can be seen can be attributed to practical factors rather than to differences in organisational culture.

Participants in the 'Museums' category (including a number of large-scale institutions) reported a greater emphasis on paperwork and office management than participants from other types of institutions. Participants in the 'Visual arts' and 'Performing arts' categories (comprising mostly small-scale institutions) noted higher levels of responsibility for defining and refining processes, as might be expected when working in smaller teams. Unsurprisingly, tea and coffee making was less frequent in the 'Heritage' and 'Library and archive' categories where building and collection constraints may prohibit this.

The high level of transferability shows that there is great potential for collective advances in the sector within this area of work, and support staff were strongly in favour of opportunities for knowledge sharing across the sector.

"Local sector contacts have always been invaluable in respect of sharing best practice and support."
Support staff

"I think being able to share ideas on things that we all do could be of benefit." *Support staff*

[ABOVE] SUPPORT TASKS: REPORTING BY INSTITUTION TYPE

The results from support staff on the significance of different tasks within the support role have been separated out by institution type to create institutional 'footprints'. A large proportion of the support staff surveyed (40% of participants, 37 out of 92 individuals) worked in museums so this category is most closely aligned to the overall average.

There are variations across different types of institutions but the overall trends are very similar.

A full comparison by institution type is included in the appendices. The 'Other' category has been omitted from this analysis due to the diversity of the institutions within this category.

DEFINING THE ROLE AND REMIT

[TOOL 1]

[RECOMMENDATIONS]

DEFINITION

CREATE A CLEARLY DEFINED ROLE

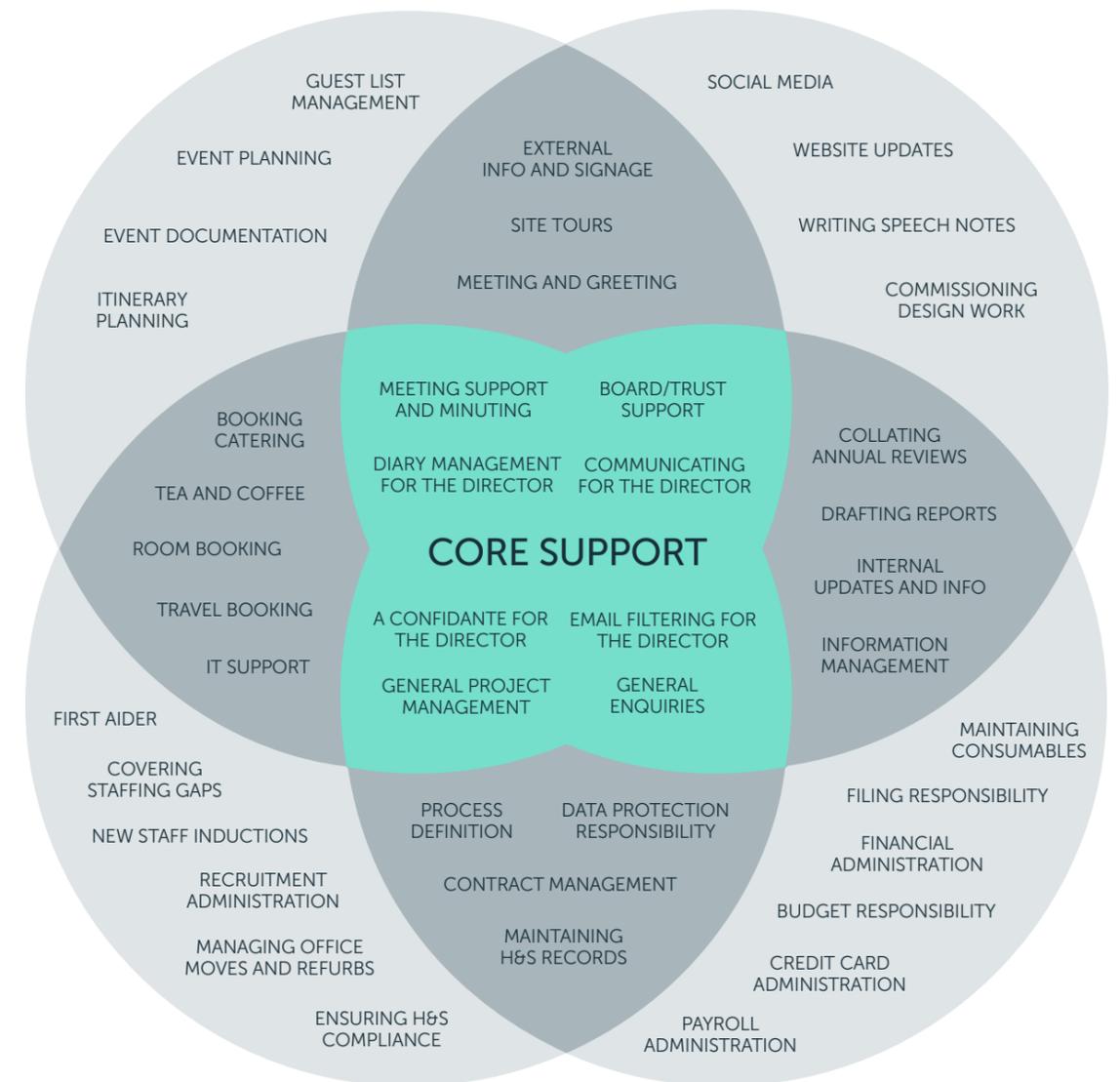
Support staff can be all things to all people. Decide what the role needs to be for your staff and for your institution.

It can be challenging to set boundaries for roles with broad remits but with a greater understanding of the interrelation of tasks it may be possible to more easily identify where to draw the lines.

The diagram opposite places all of the potential tasks within a framework of overlapping spheres of work. There are core secretarial tasks – the top rated tasks, as defined by survey participants – which are likely to be common across all support roles, however, within different institutions there may be different levels of focus on the peripheral spheres.

EVENT MANAGEMENT

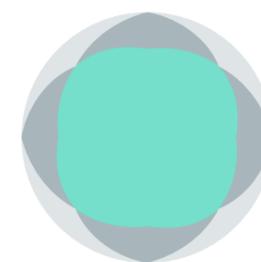
COMMUNICATIONS



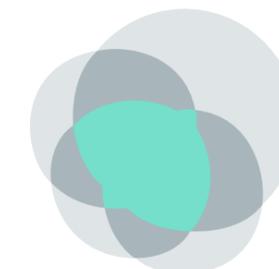
OPERATIONS

OFFICE MANAGEMENT

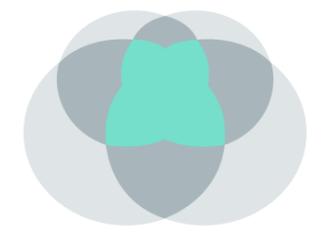
Defining and understanding the nature of a role can help to identify where time and effort should be focused, and where outlier tasks may be in a competitive position and benefit from reconsideration or reallocation amongst wider teams.



A role supporting more than one member of staff is likely to have more focus on diary management and core secretarial duties.



A role in an organisation that is heavily focused on partnership working may have more emphasis on communications.



A role supporting a large organisation may involve greater responsibility for the management of spaces and processes.

*What do support roles feel like?
What are the challenges?
How can we work smarter
and better?*

MAKING IT WORK: RELATIONSHIPS

Support roles are front line roles. The staff who fulfil them are gatekeepers, first responders and firefighters who help to ensure the smooth running of day-to-day operations within their institutions. There is much to enjoy about such an active role, however, there can also be aspects of the work that are draining and demoralising.

Support roles often comprise many different tasks and interactions so there are many different opportunities to change the experience of these roles – this section looks at working relationships and the small adjustments that can add up to a transformative effect.

[RESULTS AND RESOURCES]

RELATIONSHIPS

Support roles revolve around relationships. Interactions with other staff members can have a significant impact on the experience of these roles and can sometimes be the defining experience of these roles. The support tasks themselves can be less important than the way that the support is conceived or received.

“I had a fantastic working relationship with the director I supported - he was an amazing line manager who often asked me for my input and valued my support.”
Former Support staff

When asked about their experiences of their roles, reporting on close working relationships was generally positive, with many staff stating that they had good working relationships with the individuals they directly supported and that gaining satisfaction from helping others was a key motivator.

These generally positive experiences, however, were counterbalanced and sometimes overshadowed by individual negative experiences. Many participants struggled to reconcile experiences from both ends of the scale to come to a singular view overall.

THE HIGHS

VARIED WORK

Every day is different and support staff often have the opportunity to get involved with different types of work and gain experience in different disciplines.

Opportunities in the cultural sector are particularly diverse and many participants noted their interest in sector-specific work, for example with collections.

BUILDING RELATIONSHIPS

Interpersonal relationships are key and support staff are often responsible for developing and maintaining many different types of relationships.

“My manager is amazing. I feel that I can always talk to her about anything and she's willing to listen and consider my views. She makes me feel that we are a great team together and she always has my back.”
Support staff

SOLVING PROBLEMS

Support staff are likely to see themselves as natural organisers, they gain great satisfaction from creating order from disorder by defining systems and solving problems.

“Organising information so it's accessible, useful and helpful is probably my absolute favourite thing to do.” **Support staff**

ORGANISATIONAL INSIGHTS

Support staff are in a very privileged position, they have access to information that is not available to other staff and are often able to see their institution from a different perspective.

“It made me sympathise with decisions that I would have otherwise perceived entirely negatively, because I was able to put them into context.” **Former support staff**

HELPING OTHERS

Support staff are likely to gain fulfilment from seeing others succeed, they enjoy making a difference.

“[I enjoy] the feeling that what I do genuinely makes a difference to someone else's quality of life.” **Support staff**

“[I enjoy] helping out others, learning how to solve problems, learning new processes. I get satisfaction from these and I like showing people how they can do tasks for themselves.” **Support staff**

STRONGLY DISAGREE STRONGLY AGREE



[ADJACENT] EXPERIENCES: COMPARED REPORTING

Support staff were asked about their experiences of their roles by selecting their level of agreement with a series of statements. The options were 'strongly agree', 'agree', 'neither agree nor disagree', 'disagree', 'strongly disagree'. The responses were given weighted numerical scores and have been collated to give an overall score.

Where appropriate, leaders were also asked about their agreement with related statements.

Statement viewed by support staff
 Statement viewed by leaders

Support staff
 Leaders

Experiences were generally positive, but leaders consistently agreed more strongly with statements than support staff.

Support staff and leaders agreed very strongly with statements relating to their direct working relationships, however, support staff sought to clarify on their ratings and explain that these positive experiences often did not extend out into interactions with colleagues.

The greatest variances between support staff and leaders are seen in relation to value - both in terms of appreciation and remuneration - and in relation to agency, with support staff reporting they did not feel strongly that they are able to change how they are currently working or develop their skills. A perceived inability to make changes may also have influenced less positive reporting on system efficiency.

"I don't enjoy when people defer tasks to me out of laziness, rather than out of need or because they see that I can add value."

Support staff

THE LOWS

LACKING OWNERSHIP

Support staff rarely have ownership over the projects they work on, they contribute in many small ways but can often miss out on the sense of achievement associated with larger, more sustained commitments.

"The flip-side of having an overview of the whole organisation means that I don't feel I specialise in anything, or have any particular specialist knowledge. Because so much of my role is co-ordinating and facilitating work for others, I don't have time to form an opinion on any particular issues or think strategically." Support staff

"More recently I have taken responsibility for the IT provision in the organisation, I didn't expect to enjoy this but I do, I appreciate having ownership over a task." Support staff

COVERING FOR OTHERS

Support staff can be misused, they can find themselves responsible for tasks due to others' disorganisation or disengagement.

"Me and my team have written guidance notes, flow charts, 'how to' documents and have made these very accessible to all staff but are still constantly bombarded with questions... 'how do I do this, how do I do that, can you do it for me' etc.....it's enormously frustrating but we are helpful people so spend a great deal of our time doing stuff for people that we really shouldn't be!" Support staff

WASTED EFFORT

Sometimes it can seem that the ends do not justify the effort, particularly for regular administrative tasks which can be tedious and time-consuming.

This was most keenly felt in relation to typing up minutes from meetings, a task which can seem like work for work's sake if it is perceived that there is little engagement with the end product.

"I usually always leave minutes until the last moment, as it's such a heavy task to get out the way. I also feel like people don't look at them, which makes it feel like a pointless endeavour." Support staff

"Minute taking and diary management. They are time consuming and tedious for what you get back, and as the sole member of executive support it is relentless." Support staff

CONSTANTLY ON CALL

Support staff can be expected to be always available and immediately responsive, their workload is not afforded the same respect as that of their colleagues.

"Sometimes I feel that they think I am sitting waiting for them to give me stuff to do, when actually I am run off my feet!" Support staff

"My boss doesn't always understand that I need to leave my desk occasionally - including for a lunch break. If he needs to get in touch with me, he expects me to be there." Support staff

"My manager loans me out to people to work on projects not realising that supporting her is a full time job." Support staff

LOW STATUS

Support roles can be viewed as low skilled, in some cases this perception can lead to staff experiencing belittlement and scorn from colleagues.

"I think people have the tendency to think that it is the type of role that anyone could do....It has always irked me somewhat when I've heard people say that they "can always be a PA" without really knowing the levels of judgement, tact, communication skills, organisational ability and so on that are needed." Support staff

This perception by colleagues of the role being low skilled was, in many cases, felt to be contrarily accompanied by an expectation that the staff who fulfil it can complete tasks without any training.

EMOTIONAL ISOLATION

Support staff often have access to sensitive or confidential information and this knowledge can be a burden that is stressful to bear, particularly as support staff, unlike leaders, have no distance from the people the knowledge might effect.

"Things that you see and hear that you would like to discuss or 'offload' that you really cannot without breaking that confidence." Support staff

"I struggled with questions of loyalty and allegiance - I was one of the employees, yet I felt closer to the managers and sympathised with them... I felt sometimes like a 'traitor to my kind'" Former support staff

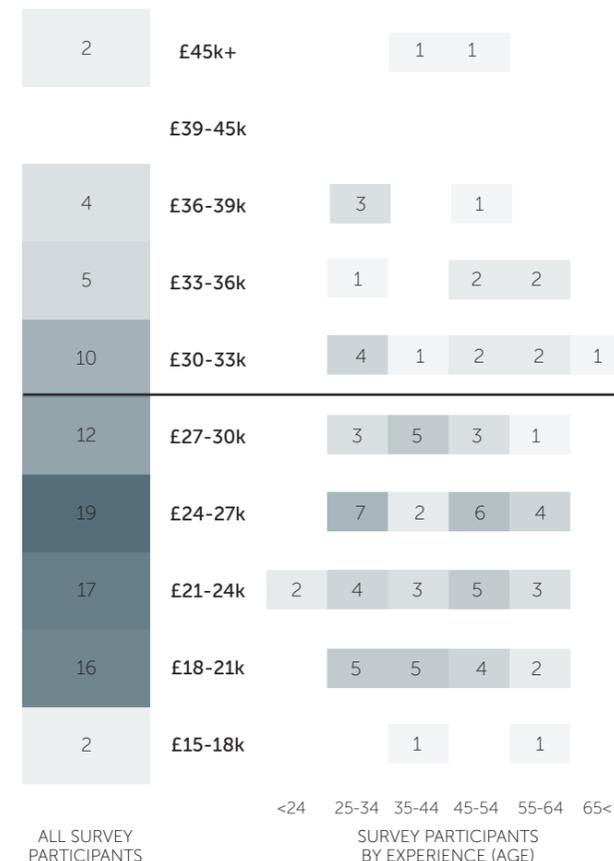
POOR REMUNERATION

Salaries are often at the lower levels within an organisation with little opportunity for progression regardless of increasing levels of experience or lengths of service.

"Unfortunately pay levels mean that this job is not sustainable despite my enjoying it. I will have to transfer out of the sector soon and am actively seeking other roles." Support staff

"I feel the pay is the most demotivating aspect of my job and don't feel it is sustainable long term."

Support staff



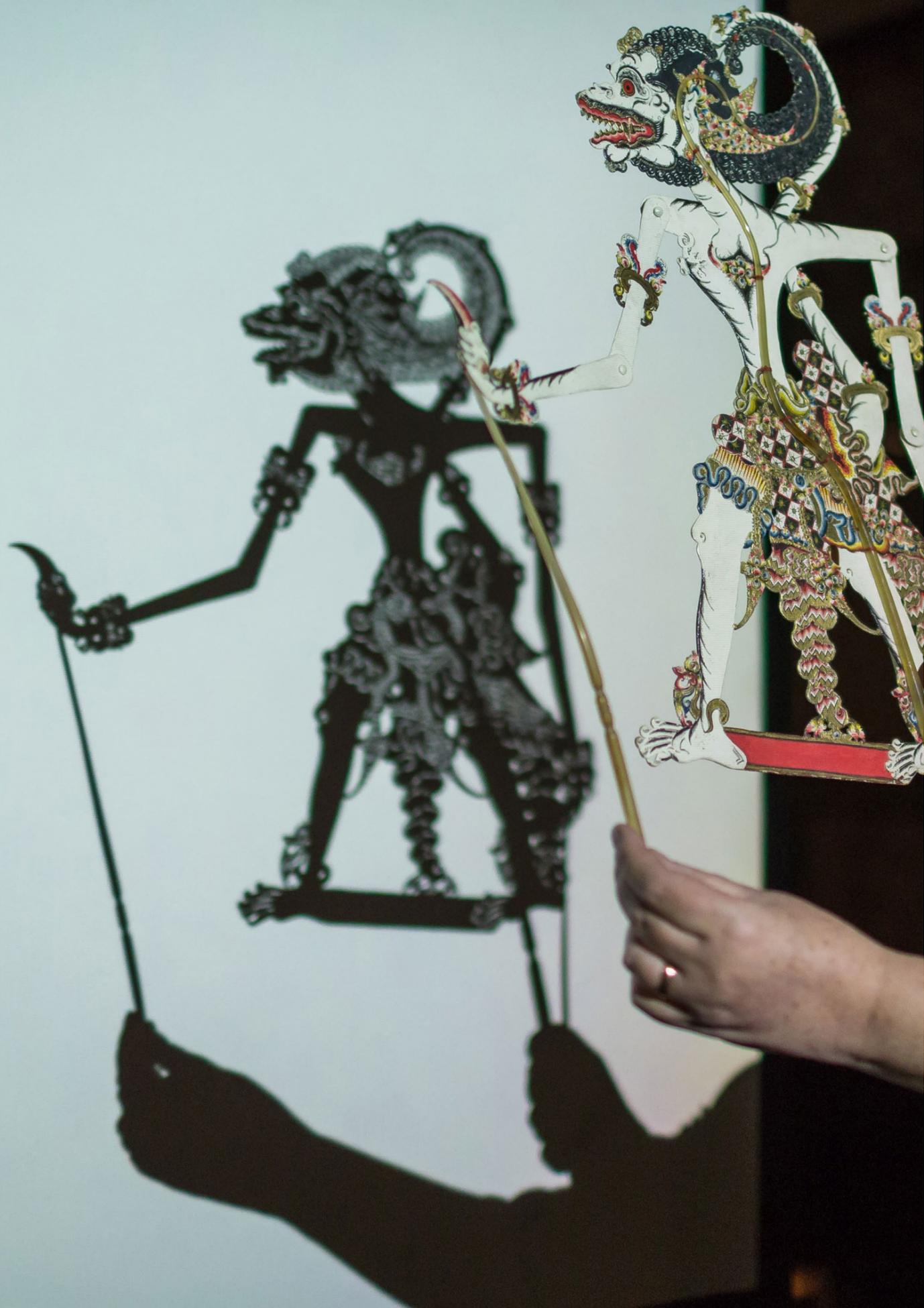
[ADJACENT] REMUNERATION:

Information provided by current support staff has been plotted onto a heat map to show the proportion of staff in each salary bracket.



75% of the survey participants who provided this information (66 out of 87 individuals) earned less than £30,000 per annum.

Examining the information in relation to the age of participants, with age used as a proxy to indicate levels of experience, there are no discernable trends. It was not possible to see pay increasing with experience, as may be expected in many professions and the data supports commentary from support staff on the lack of pay progression within these types of roles.



“My manager could promote my role and skillset to a greater extent, so others understand the full range of my role and level of responsibility.”

Support staff

“I don’t think we value the profession as well as we should, but it’s partly due to the fact that the staff don’t value themselves and talk about it enough, and what they bring, and could bring if given the opportunity.”

Leader

INVISIBLE ADMIN

Leaders demonstrated a clear understanding, well aligned with reporting from supporting staff, of the tasks involved with support work. It is possible, however, that there may still be a lack of understanding in relation to exactly what it takes to complete all of these tasks.

Support staff reported strongly that they felt a lot of the work they do is hidden – dealt with behind the scenes, often before anyone even knows that the work is even there at all.

“My manager has a pretty good understanding of most aspects of my work but I suspect even he isn’t totally aware of the sheer number of moving parts that are involved in PA work.” Support staff

“You know you’ve done your job well when people comment on how smoothly things are going - but that conversely means that you’re not being recognised for the enormous amount of behind-the-scenes work.” Former support staff

They reported misconceptions around the volume of work but also around the level of the work, with long-term staff in particular noting the frequency at which they found themselves deputising and managing high-profile relationships.

“My manager trusts me to make decisions to keep the office running smoothly when they are not around.” Support staff

“I think like her and can help to resolve people’s queries from the point of view she would take... having known and worked with her for so long. I often write responses to many things as her, knowing that it’s how she would deal with it.” Support staff

The very nature of support roles creates and perpetuates the issue of invisibility.

Role remits stretch across the full breadth of institutions and most staff, including line managers, only see small parts of the role in isolation and cannot comprehend its scope beyond this. They are also roles whose purpose does not have its own identity – their purpose is a part of, and subsumed within, the purpose of the executive. The actions taken by support staff are on behalf of the executive and therefore cannot be known in their own right.

“The nature of my job means that not many people should recognise the extent to which I act as the executive.... I wouldn’t be doing my job properly if colleagues realised they are usually speaking to me instead of the executive, but it can be frustrating.” Support staff

This presents a significant challenge, but there does not need to be conflict between the performance of the role and the promotion of its value. It is possible to acknowledge contributions to activities in a broader sense, and both leaders and support staff can take on the responsibility of raising awareness.

Beyond the sector: how might other sectors be different?

“My contribution in other, commercial (private sector) businesses was more valued and more highly regarded.”

Support staff

There was a sense from both leaders and support staff that the cultural sector is unique and stands apart from other sectors. It is perceived to be more creative and dynamic but there was also a keen awareness that this comes hand in hand with higher levels of unpredictability and stress.

“People tend to be passionate about the subject matter - that’s why they are here.” Leader

“Culture and the arts are fundamental to my life, so I have never wished to work in any other sector - indeed, it’s a huge privilege to be able to work in a field which you love anyway.” Support staff

In relation to the day-to-day experience of employees, the defining factor for many was finance. In this sense the distinction should not be between the cultural sector and other sectors but between non-profit sectors and commercial sectors.

A lack of sufficient and consistent funding can have an impact in many ways:

DIVERSIFICATION

There is a greater need in the cultural sector for staff to have diverse skillsets and to be able to take responsibility for many different work areas, this need is only increasing as funding becomes ever tighter.

“A large number of areas and skills have to be covered by a smaller number of people.” Leader

DEDICATION

There is a greater reliance on staff dedication and commitment to achieve results.

“Delivering feast from famine... a great deal of goodwill and interest inherent in working in the sector has been extensively (and possibly cynically) mined.” Support staff

RESOURCEFULNESS

Support staff need to be open minded, resourceful, and resilient when faced with lack of investment in equipment, programs, and systems. There is a need to think creatively in order to find solutions.

ACCOUNTABILITY

Attention to detail is essential to make the most of stretched resources and ensure the best possible results are achieved, this is particularly important when spending public money.

PERSUASION

There is a greater reliance on strong relationships to achieve results.

“I think support roles in the cultural sector have to rely heavily on persuasion and relationships rather than on the ‘power’ of the post holder to just do something.” Leader

Crucially for support staff, there was a distinct feeling that support roles are more valued outside of the cultural sector and that they are seen as fulfilling career options in themselves rather than just routes to other roles.

““It often seems that others believe that the role is a route to working in another discipline, and not a career in itself. I have often been asked which area I would like to work in or offered opportunities in other areas. One of the reasons I feel that I have succeeded where I am is because this is actually where I want to be and I want to do what I do really well.” Support staff

The lack of respect for the role, coupled with a lack of financial resource, can mean that support roles are given low priority in organisational planning and restructuring.

“The roles feel like an afterthought. I suspect they’ve been reduced as a way of “protecting the professionals” without realising that the “professionals” can’t do the expert work that you’re paying them to do if they’re spending all of their time doing admin!” Former support staff

Leaders and support staff alike noted an interest in learning from other sectors and expressed a desire to improve professionalism, there was a focus on techniques and processes but this should also be coupled with a change in attitudes to improve the professional recognition.

WORKING TOGETHER

There are many different types of working relationships and survey participants were divided over whether leaders and their support staff should have the same working style. Complimentary styles can ease the flow of work as support staff can anticipate thinking. Contrasting styles can inject energy as support staff can bring new thinking.

The key to success is understanding and respecting each other's styles and learning to work together.

"I think it is important for the supporting role to adapt to the style of the CEO but challenge where changes could help work smarter."

Support staff

"My current manager and I have similar working styles at present... I have enjoyed working with this manager more than others previously where our styles have been different."

Support staff

"I like to work with people whose style complements mine and who make up for the gaps in my own abilities."

Leader

"The professional chemistry is important... I want someone who will grow to anticipate what I would want to do and take the initiative to do or organise it without reference to me."

Leader

"I see my role as more of an interpreter of the executive's style to the wider institution."

Support staff

"Some of the best working relationships have been with support staff who have very contrasting personalities and working styles"

Leader

"They need to be complementary rather than the same."

Leader

"You need time (and willingness) to adapt to each other's working styles. As long as each person respects that the other has a different approach to things, it can be very beneficial."

Former support staff

"Our working styles do not have to be the same, but I think it is important that they complement and facilitate each other."

Support staff

"I think you have to believe in their vision and want to work with them to make it happen."

Support staff

"In terms of the smooth running of the office [having the same style] certainly helps."

Leader

"I think it is important that we are all open to adapting our working style."

Support staff



CREATING A PRODUCTIVE WORKING ENVIRONMENT

[TOOL 2]

[RECOMMENDATIONS]

INFORMATION

COMMUNICATE AND COLLABORATE

Knowledge is power. Establish clear communication systems to stay ahead of developments.

AWARENESS

RESPOND TO CHANGING ENVIRONMENTS BY CHANGING REQUIREMENTS

Flexibility is the key to managing the unmanageable. Set up systems for reviewing workloads and revising priorities on a regular basis.

EMPOWERMENT

CELEBRATE THE WORK THAT GOES ON BEHIND THE SCENES

It's everyone's responsibility to raise awareness. Create opportunities to talk about the value of hidden contributions.

Creating a productive working environment is about promoting confidence. It is about creating the conditions through which all parties feel able and trusted to fulfil their respective roles.

The action points opposite have been drawn out from the advice of both leaders and current and former support staff, some of the advice may seem obvious but the survey commentary highlighted how easy it can be to forget the essentials when you are under pressure.

INFORMATION

A CLEAR AND SHARED UNDERSTANDING OF REQUIREMENTS WILL ALLOW PRECISE AND EFFICIENT ACTION.

BOTH

- define tasks and workplans collaboratively, this is particularly important if support staff are responsive to more than one senior staff member
- schedule regular catch ups in a form and at a frequency that suits all parties
- share your preferred styles for ad-hoc communication (eg. email, phone, dropping by the desk)
- encourage copying in by colleagues so that support staff stay informed about wider organisational activity

LEADERS

- give clear and specific instructions, details matter
- note the difference between fixed and flexible requirements to enable support staff to work proactively where possible
- make decisions or, if this is not possible, give clarity on the factors or timeline affecting the decision
- give detailed feedback to allow improvements to be made
- allow support staff to attend meetings and training that will help them to stay informed about wider organisational activity

SUPPORT STAFF

- prompt for the information that you need to get tasks completed
- stay organised and collate queries for regular catch ups to avoid sending unnecessary emails
- ensure you have information at your fingertips, develop systems (eg. using email categorisation, folder systems) to suit your own working style
- find ways of recording institutional knowledge to create a resource for the future, for yourself and your organisation

AWARENESS

THE ABILITY TO BE SENSITIVE TO CHANGING SITUATIONS WILL ALLOW WORKLOADS TO BE MANAGED.

BOTH

- review and reassess work in hand as often as is needed to keep up with changing requirements
- share information about your preferred working styles and, if appropriate, discuss how you can align areas of potential conflict
- ensure 1:1s are balanced and allow time for discussion of the needs of support staff as well as of the leader
- make time to build on your personal relationship, this will strengthen your professional relationship too

LEADERS

- articulate and rearticulate priorities regularly, this is particularly important in rapidly changing situations
- be flexible on requirements to allow pressure to be reduced at busy periods
- consider the impact of last minute requests and how requirements can be modified to ensure feasibility
- keep track of schedules and ensure meetings run to time
- consult with your support staff before making commitments on their behalf

SUPPORT STAFF

- be open about your workload and challenges you are facing
- consider the pressures that your manager is experiencing and whether the timing of a request or conversation is appropriate
- prepare for known tasks in advance to create capacity to respond to last minute requests
- be proactive and look for areas where you can add value, by filling gaps or going a step beyond

EMPOWERMENT

THE PROMOTION AND CELEBRATION OF WORK WILL HELP TO ASSERT ITS VALUE AND SIGNIFICANCE.

BOTH

- share information about the support staff role amongst the wider organisation
- get to know each other's strengths and weaknesses and look for opportunities to provide a balance to these
- stay positive and make time to talk about successes as well as problems
- schedule opportunities to discuss training and development

LEADERS

- allow support staff freedom to work independently, avoid actioning aspects of tasks that they have been allocated
- promote respect for deadlines across the organisation to enable support staff to work effectively
- share contextual information to ensure your staff are as well equipped as possible to deal with situations
- remember to praise good work, especially if it is behind the scenes
- acknowledge and respond to feedback, be clear about both areas where it is and is not possible to action changes

SUPPORT STAFF

- be assertive with colleagues and clearly explain the necessity of tasks and deadlines
- allow yourself to say no to tasks but be prepared to clarify why they are inappropriate or unfeasible
- champion your work and make or take up opportunities to talk about what you do
- think about and take responsibility for your own development and be proactive in putting forward ideas

*What are leaders looking for?
What should leaders be looking for?
How can leaders and support staff
make more informed decisions?*

MOVING IN AND MOVING ON: RECRUITMENT

With a focus on attitude, experience, and transferrable skills, support roles should be accessible and attractive to a broad range of individuals and there should be many opportunities to find ideal working partnerships. The difficulty in creating accurate job descriptions and enabling open conversations, however, may be reducing the likelihood of making diverse and productive appointments.

Leaders may need to be more active if they wish to break out of ineffective cycles – this section looks at the reality of recruitment and opportunities to rethink the status quo.

[RESULTS AND RESOURCES]

RECRUITMENT

Recruitment is never easy but support roles can present a particular challenge due to the diversity in both the scope of the roles and the style of relationship that is desired. It can be difficult to match the right candidate to the right opportunity but the consultation has revealed a willingness from leaders to explore ways of improving this process. Successful recruitment practices will be key to stabilising the future workforce and to meeting ambitions for diverse recruitment.

“I think the role requires a level of intelligence and life experience that is not defined by qualifications.”

Leaders

MODELLING THE CURRENT WORKFORCE

Requirements for support roles can be examined through leaders’ descriptions of the skills and experience they look for when recruiting but also through analysis of the current workforce.

There was a general consensus from leaders that attitude and general competence were more important than specific skills or qualifications.

“I find that the right attitude and general competence speak much more strongly than assuming the right candidate fits a strict template of prior experience.” Leader

“We have seen people thrive in the role without [qualifications]. Willingness to learn, curiosity and enjoyment of working with and around people are more important.” Leader

Looking specifically at their rating of specific attributes, the highest rated requirement for prospective candidates for support roles was IT proficiency – unsurprisingly, an essential in our digital age. Previous experience as an executive assistant was also important, with 50% of leaders noting this as ‘essential’ and a further 46% noting this as ‘desirable’. Only 4% (1 out of 24 individuals) stated that this was ‘not important’. Beyond this, no requirements were noted as ‘essential’ by more than 50% of the leaders who participated.

At the opposite end of the scale, formal qualifications were not specifically sought out and leaders were similarly not prescriptive about sectoral experience. With an

openness around qualifications and experience, support roles should be accessible to a broad range of individuals. Despite the stated flexibility, however, an analysis of the current workforce showed that the reality is likely to be quite different, particularly in relation to qualifications. Of the current support staff surveyed, 92% (83 out of 90 individuals who provided this information) held qualifications at A-level or higher – with 79% (71 individuals) holding degrees, and 23% (21 individuals) also holding higher-level degrees.

In relation to experience, whilst leaders noted that previous experience in the sector was not essential, 92% of leaders (22 out of 24 individuals) stated an interest in the subject area was either ‘essential’ or ‘desirable’ and therefore candidates with this experience would be likely to have a significant advantage during recruitment.

More generally, the lack of diversity amongst this staff group becomes even more acute when personal demographics are taken into consideration. The current support staff surveyed were overwhelmingly female (97%)¹, white (97%)², British (89%)³, heterosexual (94%)⁴, non-disabled (98%)⁵, and were from middle or upper class backgrounds (76%)⁶.

Whilst there may be willingness from leaders to be open within recruitment, there is a need for more active consideration of how more diverse candidates may be reached and supported. It is vital that new talent can be attracted across all areas of the cultural sector workforce, and for support staff in particular there is a need for significant change.

1. 97% (88 out of 91 individuals who provided this data) of the support staff surveyed identified as female
 2. 97% (88 out of 92 individuals) were White
 3. 89% (82 out of 92 individuals) were British
 4. 94% (82 out of 87 individuals who provided this data) identified as heterosexual
 5. 98% (89 out of 91 individuals who provided this data) were non-disabled
 6. 76% (70 out of 92 individuals) were of social economic class ABC1



[ADJACENT] CANDIDATE REQUIREMENTS:

Leaders were asked about their requirements when recruiting by selecting how important different types of experience and qualifications were to them.

■ 'Essential'
 ■ 'Desirable'
 ■ 'Not important'

The reporting showed that leaders had fairly flexible requirements and with the exception of the highest rated requirement - IT proficiency - leaders selected 'Desirable' or 'Not important' more than they selected 'Essential'.

Formal qualifications were not important. Only 25% of leaders (6 out of 24 individuals) noted that A-levels were 'essential', and this dropped to 8% (2 out of 24 individuals) in relation to degree-level qualifications and 0% in relation to higher degrees.

Sector experience was not important, with only 4% (1 out of 24 individuals) noting previous experience in the cultural sector as 'essential'. By contrast, however, 42% (10 out of 24 individuals) noted that a demonstrable interest in the subject area of the institution was 'essential'. Whilst this may seem like a different requirement it would be difficult to see how a demonstrable interest could be proved other than through relevant qualifications in a subject area or through relevant experience in a similar institution.

MODES OF OPERATION

Cultural organisations would benefit from taking a more detailed look at candidates and considering attributes beyond traditional qualifications and experience. In addition to opening the field to a broader range of candidates, a greater understanding between leaders and the candidates they are engaging with, is likely to lead to much more successful recruitment overall.

A shared understanding at the point of recruiting is essential with support roles - analysis of the consultation responses revealed that there are two distinct modes of operation for these roles in relation to the aims and expectations of the staff fulfilling them:

1. A profession and evolving career, where an appointment is likely to be long-term

2. A stepping stone and development opportunity, where an appointment is likely to be short-term

LONG TERM

Support staff who saw their roles as long-term commitments noted they were happy and fulfilled in their work due to a strong fit between the role and their skillset, the positive impact of relationships, and their commitment to the sector. In many cases, the ability to shape and change the role had been key in making it a good long-term option.

"I am very proud of my current position. I have worked very hard to get where I am today and have shaped and made the role my own."
Support staff

Long-term appointments provide stability and create greater potential for support roles to become respected posts within their institutions. Support staff who remain in their roles over the course of many years have the opportunity to build up a wealth of institutional knowledge that can become an invaluable resource.

SHORT TERM

In some cases, support staff who saw their roles as short-term development opportunities noted that this was an active decision on their part and that the roles fitted in to their broader long-term career plans.

"I wanted to understand the bigger picture of working in an arts organisation and this was absolutely the best way." Former support staff

The majority, however, suggested that this approach is partly a result of factors outside of their control. They commented on the negative aspects that were driving them to leave and noted that they felt their skills were underused, that roles failed to provide challenges or development opportunities, and that they were unhappy with levels of pay.

"I am more competent than my role will ever have room for, and I will seek a new challenge very soon."
Support staff

Regardless of the reason for an appointment being short-term, leaders should be aware of and open to this approach as well as looking for long-term commitments.

There are some obvious challenges associated with short-term appointments: leaders commented on the disruption that high turnover rates can bring and noted a particular frustration in relation to the impact of a short-term mentality on performance.

"I find that staff who use admin roles as a way of gaining entry to other museum roles do not always understand that it is a professional role in itself and are sometimes less motivated to deliver excellence in that role." Leader

Staff at the beginning of their careers, however, will often bring high levels of energy and enthusiasm and can help to develop and challenge organisational practices. If they are developed in the right way, these staff can often be retained in other areas of institutions.

"We take the risk of a short term solution to the vacancy because we benefit in the short term from a talented person and in the longer term because they stay and progress through the organization through a different discipline." Leader

Each type of appointment can bring advantages and disadvantages, and institutions may need different types of appointment at different times.

"A balance is in order for minimizing disruption, of wanting people who want to stay in administration as a career and wanting to support young people in their first job." Leader

"One creates consistency for me which better enables me to do my job. The other enables me to cultivate an individual to be part of my team in a different capacity in the future that will understand the organisational culture and values." Leader

The key to success is in determining what is right for the organisation at the time of the appointment and ensuring that there is a shared understanding. A mismatch in expectations is likely to lead to dissatisfaction on all sides but mutually beneficial arrangements will add comprehensive value.



JOB DESCRIPTIONS

The job description is the central pivot for the recruitment process but it also constitutes the agreement between the leader and their support staff around which the rest of their future working partnership will be built. These documents are extremely important but both leaders and support staff felt that there was room for improvement in the way that they are defined.

“Determining tasks within the job description is hard as we have more need than we can fund. Therefore it’s really important to be clear about priorities.”

Leader

JOB DESCRIPTIONS THAT DO THEIR JOB

Leaders noted the particular challenge of putting together a concise list of duties and criteria for a role which covers such a broad remit and noted there was a need to prioritise certain aspects. They may be right to be selective, but if this focus exists only in the advertisement, and not the reality, of the job there can be great potential for misunderstanding and misaligned expectations. It would be beneficial for job descriptions to more accurately reflect the scope of the role. This approach may bring many types of advantages:

BETTER APPLICATIONS

Clarity at the advertisement stages of the recruitment process can help potential candidates to better assess their own fit for the role and to write more targeted applications. In particular, this clarity will enable candidates who may not be a perfectly aligned match to understand how their skills differ from expectations and to shape their applications accordingly to promote their vision for what they would bring to the role.

EASIER RECRUITMENT

Honest job descriptions, and job titles that relate to and accurately reflect the scope of the role, will enable honest conversations at the interview stage. A better understanding, between leaders and potential candidates, of each other’s expectations will lead to better recruitment decisions.

STRONGER FOUNDATIONS

The job description will shape discussions about the role and will be the starting point for the future development journey that support staff will take. If it is possible to have more open conversations about the nature of the work, it will be easier to differentiate between areas of work where candidates bring experience and areas where experience might need to be gained through support or training. Identifying these areas at the recruitment stage may seem counter-intuitive, but the knowledge that there are specific development opportunities that the role can offer may bring reassurance, on both sides, about the potential success of the appointment in the long term.

AREAS FOR IMPROVEMENT

In complement to the digital consultation, the Supporting Leadership project also included an analysis of a sample of job descriptions for leadership support roles (20 examples, dating between 2016 and 2019) from a variety of different types of institutions.

There was consistency across the job descriptions in relation to the person specification, with IT proficiency and communications skills emerging as the most frequently specified requirements. This aligns with the reporting from leaders and there was also relative alignment in relation to the low importance of formal qualifications.

In relation to specific tasks, 8 out of the top 10 tasks as seen in job descriptions and as reported by current support staff were the same.

On the surface there may not appear to be an issue, however, there is evidence to show that most job descriptions failed to capture the breadth of the role. Of the list of 41 focus-group identified tasks used in the consultation, the average number of these tasks referred to on the job descriptions was 10 (the lowest was 5 and the highest was 15) and there was very little consistency as in each case the 10 tasks were a different 10, reflecting leaders’ desire to prioritise when describing these roles.

More crucially, job descriptions consistently downplayed certain aspects of the role that entail high levels of responsibility; communication on behalf of the executive was not explicitly mentioned in any of the job descriptions

that were reviewed and financial responsibilities did not feature significantly.

Capturing and reflecting the true breadth and nature of support roles is a significant challenge but greater investment in the creation of accurate job descriptions will have benefits that reach far beyond the recruitment stage.

Difficulty in drafting a job description that is open and honest about the role may be a sign that there are issues with the role itself that could benefit from further consideration.

“I find my job description gives me conflicting messages regarding where my role sits and how my role is regarded in the organisation. I am asked to contribute to and manage key areas of governance such as internal audits, quarterly reporting and writing the annual review, however I am also responsible for loading and unloading the dishwasher.” Support staff

TOP 10 TASKS ¹

Reported by support staff

1. Diary management for the director
2. Booking rooms
3. Meeting support and minuting
4. General enquiries
5. Meeting and greeting
6. Communicating for the director
7. Booking travel
8. Filing responsibility
9. Financial administration
10. Internal updates and info

TOP 10 TASKS ¹

Observed in job descriptions

1. Diary management for the director
2. Meeting support and minuting
3. Filing responsibility
4. Booking travel
5. Meeting and greeting
6. General enquiries
7. Internal updates and info
8. Booking rooms
9. Event planning
10. Drafting reports

¹ Full descriptions of the tasks, as used in the surveys, are detailed in the appendices

RECRUITING WITH CONFIDENCE

[TOOL 3]

[RECOMMENDATIONS]

MUTUAL BENEFIT

WORK OUT WHAT YOU CAN DO FOR EACH OTHER

Be complimentary rather than conflicting.
Take time to ensure that individual and institutional aims are aligned.

Recruitment processes are standardised for good reason: to make them manageable, consistent, fair to candidates, and productive for employers. Familiarity with a system, however, can lead to complacency and opportunities to maximise effectiveness can often be missed.

The flow chart opposite follows the standard recruitment process, bringing together a range of advice and ideas to help make the most of each stage.

APPLICATION ←

Create a clearly defined job description to set out a shared understanding with potential candidates.

Carefully consider essential and desirable criteria so candidates can target their applications appropriately, prioritise attributes that are unique to the context of your organisation.

INTERVIEW

Put together a diverse interview panel including senior management who will be key contacts for the post-holder.

Use competency-based questions, rather than those requiring specific prior experience, to get an insight into candidates approaches and to keep the field open.

Include a structured task as part of the recruitment process to test skills and working methods.

Ask questions about working styles, reassuring candidates there is no wrong answer, to check there is potential to align.

Discuss future plans and ensure there is potential for benefit on both sides.

TESTING

| | | |
|----------------------|---|--|
| PRIORITISING | Candidates are given around 10 documents including emails, reports, letters, and minutes. They are asked to create a list of actions and at the start of the interview are asked to explain how and why they prioritised the different actions. | TESTS Prioritisation Approaches Organisation |
| COMMUNICATING | Candidates are either given a piece of correspondence, for example an email or a letter, and are asked to produce an appropriate reply. Candidates can also be invited to discuss their approach to the task at the start of the interview. | TESTS Writing skills Perception Diplomacy |
| REPORTING | Candidates are given a brief report to read and are asked to produce a short written summary (less than 300 words) of the key points. Candidates can also be invited to discuss their approach to the task at the start of the interview. | TESTS Interpretation Time management Writing skills |
| MINUTE TAKING | Candidates are given a 10-15 minute recorded section of a real meeting and are asked to create minutes based on the recording in a test environment. Time is allowed for the candidates to format their minutes. | TESTS Comprehension Attention to detail Writing skills |
| PRESENTING | In their invitation to interview, candidates are provided with a statement on the values of the organisation and asked to prepare a 5-minute presentation on how they see their role contributing to and upholding these values. | TESTS Communication Perception Approaches |

APPOINTMENT

Run a second interview or provide opportunities for additional discussion if there is doubt on either side.

Discuss the job title and make changes if possible to reflect the vision for the role and career objectives of the post-holder.

Be prepared to not hire and to run a second recruitment campaign if needed to get the right candidate.

*What are support staff looking for?
How can leaders and support staff
make best use of the
opportunities available?*

MOVING IN AND MOVING ON: DEVELOPMENT

It is natural to want development and progression opportunities within a role, whether this means taking on new challenges and responsibilities or simply finding ways to excel in existing areas of work. For support staff, however, there are few recognised routes to follow and feelings of confinement and frustration are common.

Progression may mean different things to different people and it is important for individuals to take responsibility for defining their own path – this section looks at ways in which support staff can take more control over their own development.

[RESULTS AND RESOURCES]

DEVELOPMENT

All staff progress through broadly the same development stages of recruitment, induction, progression and departure. Their journeys will be unique, but are not without areas of commonality where best practice can be identified. In particular, there is a shift in responsibility across these stages from the institution to the individual, and the right kind of institutional support in the early stages can set the foundations for individuals to successfully define their own paths in the later stages.

“Colleagues sharing their knowledge and giving advice on how they deal with tasks was invaluable at the beginning of my role, and helped me learn a lot and develop my own style of working.”
Support staff

STRONGLY DISAGREE STRONGLY AGREE

I have learned on the job and gained my skills and experience by doing
My support staff learn on the job through taking on new projects and areas of responsibility



My learning has been independent, involving trial and error



My learning has been guided, involving advice and support from colleagues and managers



I have engaged in formal training, provided or supported by my organisation
My support staff have engaged in formal training, provided or supported by the organisation



I have sought formal training independently
My support staff have sought formal training independently



I have had mentoring support
My support staff have had mentoring support



[ADJACENT] TRAINING EXPERIENCES: COMPARED REPORTING

Support staff were asked about their experiences of their training and development by selecting their level of agreement with a series of statements. The options were 'strongly agree', 'agree', 'neither agree nor disagree', 'disagree', 'strongly disagree'. The responses were given weighted numerical scores and have been collated to give an overall score.

Where appropriate, leaders were also asked about their agreement with related statements.

Statement viewed by support staff
Statement viewed by leaders



Reporting showed that support staff are more likely to gain new skills informally, in the course of the work itself, than through formal training. Where it was relevant to compare reporting from support staff and leaders, there was a significant variance in relation to perceptions of institutional assistance. Leaders felt strongly that staff were supported from within their institutions. By contrast, however, only around half of support staff agreed that they had engaged with or been encouraged to engage with training by their institutions.

Support staff experiences and leaders perceptions also differed in relation to mentoring, however, this is a type of development that is likely to be highly specific to individuals.

STARTING OUT

Settling into support roles can sometimes be difficult as much of the knowledge required to fulfil these roles will be institution specific, it cannot be learned in advance and in many cases is not formally recorded, meaning new support staff are reliant on good handovers to get started.

Without a handover it can be a challenge to seek out knowledge due to the lack of understanding of the role by other staff across the institution.

This issue can be compounded by the fact that it is less likely, in leader and support staff line management relationships than in other line management relationships, that the manager will have personal experience in similar roles to their staff member, and there are also no middle management layers to bridge this gap.

“The support I have had from other admin staff, rather than immediate members of the team I support, has been the most helpful as they understand the processes I have to work with, rather than just a general idea of what they need the end result to be (which is often what I have found from managers).” Support staff

Leaders, however, can have a very important role to play in providing context for the role and sharing information on the history of the organisation, personalities, and favoured communication methods. This transfer of knowledge is invaluable in making the role a success and should be given more formal consideration as part of support staff inductions.

“It is not so much the technical aspects of the role that she has helped me with, but how to understand different personalities and find ways to build relationships with them and therefore work more effectively.” Support staff

LEARNING ON THE JOB

Support staff noted that the majority of their learning within their roles had been through practical means, either learning from colleagues or via a process of trial and error. Guided and formal learning did not feature significantly and whilst some staff reported positively about their experiences of development, a greater proportion expressed frustration at a perceived lack of opportunities and progression routes.

“I feel a lot of the time in the sector that your opportunities are ‘capped’, particularly for administrative roles.” Support staff

The training opportunities that were noted can be grouped into four key areas: administrative training, system-specific training, project management, and sector-specific updates.

The limitations of these options mean that more creative thinking is required in order to ensure that support staff can have access to development opportunities that will have a more meaningful impact.

ADMINISTRATIVE TRAINING

A number of experienced support staff who had been in administrative roles for many years reported they had undertaken extensive training (diplomas) early in their careers. This practice was much less common, however, amongst staff who had more recently joined the profession.

SYSTEM-SPECIFIC TRAINING

Many staff reported undertaking training on finance systems, IT programs, design software, and other bespoke programs. This type of training is driven by organisational requirements and does not generally take place unless there is a change to respond to.

“Often you expect technical and organisational skills to be in place so often wouldn’t provide training. Only in organisation specific issues or use of new software.” Leader

PROJECT MANAGEMENT

The most common types of training undertaken by support staff were those exploring aspects of project management. Skills in this area are essential to the role, however, many support staff noted difficulty in finding practical applications in the cultural sector for formal techniques used in other sectors.

SECTOR-SPECIFIC UPDATES

Leaders noted that support staff were offered and participated in general training that is undertaken by wider institution teams, this kind of training can be within any discipline and often occurs in response to sectoral developments and to share best practice. Support staff, however, did not report on this type of activity and it is possible they did not see this specifically as training as it is organisation wide rather than individually targeted.

MAKING THE MOST OF EXISTING SKILLS

It can be tempting to look to external providers to solve problems but in the case of training and development the search should start closer to home. We learn by doing and similarly we can lose out, both in terms of development and fulfilment, by not doing.

Support staff are often highly skilled and highly qualified and finding opportunities for them to use their skills more often will bring rewards for both the staff member and the organisation. It is important to be open-minded both in terms of recognising where staff can make relevant contributions and finding ways of managing workload to create the space for them to do so.

"I don't enjoy that my competency is sometimes written off because of being in an admin role. Support staff

"Although I am the only person with a qualification in project management, my advice and experience is not listened to." Support staff

Scheduling regular reviews throughout the working year can help to create space to discuss and, if needed, redefine roles and look for opportunities to make the work more meaningful. Leaders are already accustomed to using the end of probationary periods for this purpose but this should not be the only occasion that the scope of roles can be revisited.

"[the probationary period] is a period of time at the end of which, a review can be made to check in and see if the job is shaping up as the candidate hoped it would." Leader

"My manager and I have regular monthly 1:1 meetings to review work and forward planning - these discussions also include a CPD conversation, which is very useful as I am receiving advice from an experienced executive within the culture sector, [this is] so invaluable." Support staff

MAKING SPACE FOR NEW SKILLS

If the role is working well, then new skills can be developed and new opportunities can be explored.

The majority of support staff reported that they did not need administration-focused training as they already felt competent within their roles, and also noted they have been reluctant to pursue this type of training following previous negative experiences.

"I am more interested in exploring what the people I work with across different departments do as opposed to learning from my peers... I already know what I do!" Support staff

"In my recent experiences of training supposedly aimed at PAs I have found these to be of poor quality and sometimes quite patronising. There is insufficient focus on building and developing key skills... which is a great pity as having these skills is an excellent way to foster confidence and resilience." Support staff

Participants expressed a general interest in broadening experience outside of administration and at higher levels. There was not a consensus, however, on topics of interest and out of a list of possibilities even the top five were only of interest to between 40-50% of the consultation participants.

POPULAR TRAINING AREAS

1. Briefings on current cultural sector issues
2. Project management
3. Cultural awareness
4. Briefings on cultural sector policy and governance
5. Data presentation and reporting

Skills-based development opportunities that can be engaged with in the workplace may be more appropriate than formal training courses. Support staff noted that opportunities to apply lessons learned were the most important factors in determining whether training could be of value. Formats that provide tailored and practical advice and experiences – such as workshops and secondment opportunities – were preferred over more generalised offers.

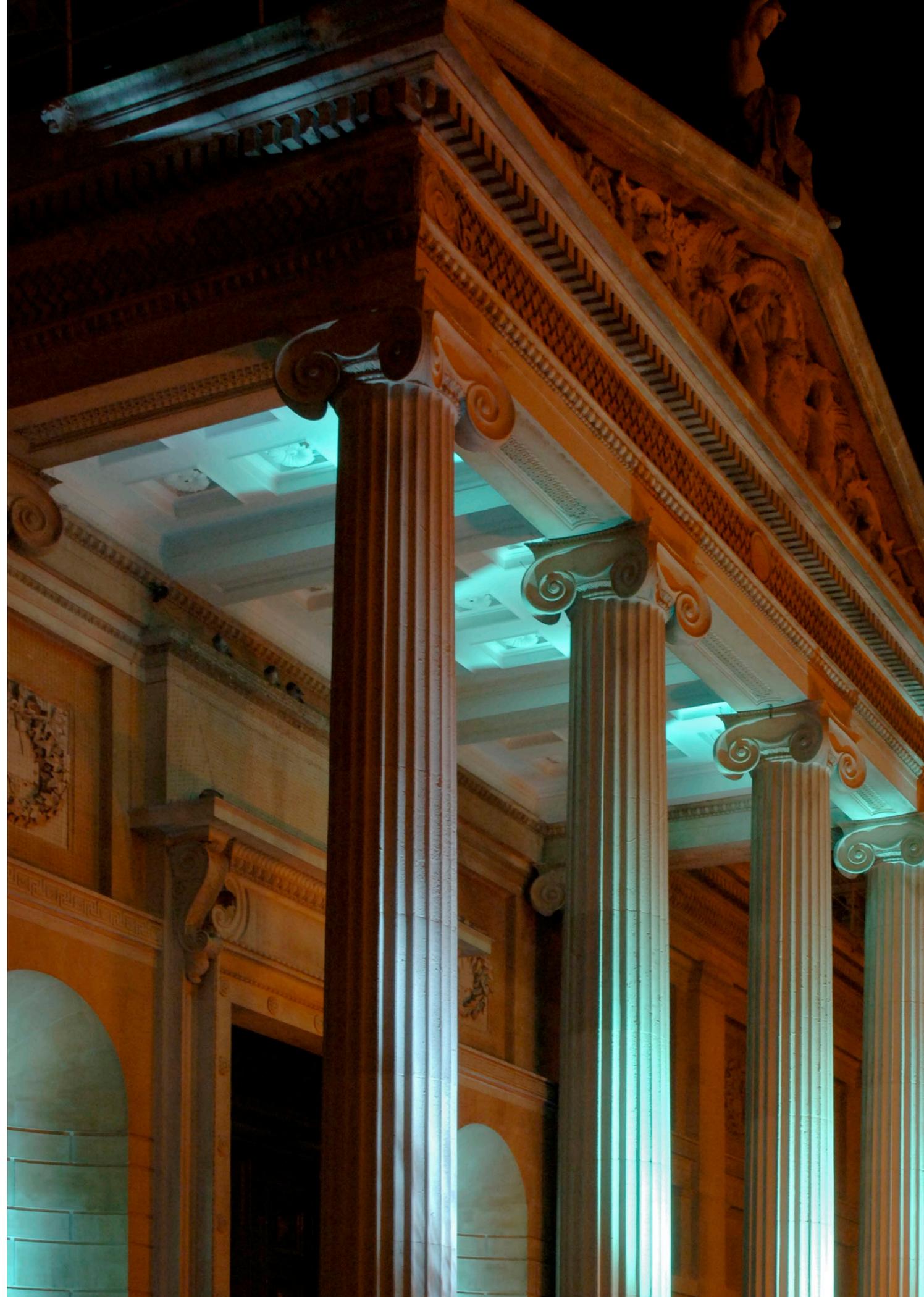
SEEKING SUPPORT

Whilst training options that revolved around administration were generally unpopular with survey participants, mentoring from colleagues in senior administrative roles was the exception to this rule. Support staff have a high regard for the skills and knowledge that can be built up within these roles and would be keen to learn from their more experienced peers.

Many senior staff were willing and keen to provide this support and to help more junior colleagues to find their way within the sector. Some support staff surveyed had already developed their own networks, and others were keen to do so. It may be beneficial to create a more connected network amongst this section of the cultural sector workforce to link up individuals in similar roles.

"It would be good to shadow senior roles and see if there is a viable pathway for development." Support staff

"I've reached a point where I would like to give advice and coaching to others in the sector. I already mentor some PAs in an informal capacity. This has happened quite organically - it seems to be valued and I really enjoy it. It is an area that I would like to develop in the future." Support staff



TAKING A LEAD

There was a sense of frustration from some support staff at a lack of direction and assistance with personal development from leaders in their capacity as line managers, however, the responsibility for deciding on a future career path – as it depends so much on personal aims and circumstances – can only ever rest with support staff themselves.

Former support staff were strong advocates for a proactive approach and had a wealth of advice to give.

"Love what you do. If you don't, work out why and change it if you can or find a new role that suits you more."

Former support staff

"Find a support network of fellow administrators - if you need to know something, talk to others. If they don't know the answer themselves, they will definitely know someone who does."

Former support staff

"[I explored career paths by] listening a lot, reading a lot online, and talking to people from similar and also very different backgrounds."

Former support staff

"Have a clear career plan in mind. If you are choosing to be in a support role for career progression reasons, set out how you will maximise your time and have a clear end point."

Former support staff

"Ask for opportunities if you want to receive them."

Former support staff

"Be proactive in seeking development opportunities and presenting these to your manager. Don't wait for them to come to you with ideas... you'll be waiting a long time."

Former support staff

[Peers are] an excellent "safe space" to vent and help you realise you're not alone."

Former support staff

"Identify why you are doing the job, whatever the reason. From there work out what 'going forwards' looks like for you (even if that means staying still)."

Former support staff

"I attended several sector conferences, which made me feel confident about identifying roles I was interested in, and trends in the sector."

Former support staff

"Network and build relationships, not just with your Director and immediate team, but internally and externally."

Former support staff

"Don't turn down opportunities outside the norm, make sure you keep in the stretch zone."

Former support staff

"Start to build a network of people who can help you [move forwards] the best, make it easier, or offer you the best company."

Support staff

"You need to take the initiative and I've found that managers appreciate that."

Former support staff

Whilst it may be true that there are few recognised training and progression opportunities for support staff outside of moving up into more senior variants of the same post, this is not an issue that it is possible, or would be appropriate, to try to solve as every individual is different and will have different aspirations.

There is a need for individuals to take control of their own development. Just as leaders must make their work requirements clear in order to get the best support from their support staff, support staff must make their development requirements clear in order to get the best support from leaders.

"We have a strong culture of supporting staff training and opportunities are flagged up regularly. Staff are also encouraged to suggest training that they identify themselves." Leader

"[Developing support staff is] no easier or more difficult than any other member of staff... the more self-aware and keen to develop the individual is, the easier it is for them to develop and for me and others to support and encourage this." Leader

Former support staff were also strong advocates for a proactive approach to development, with the majority noting they had sought out mentoring, training, and further study.

"I felt there were few options available to take and the ones I did... I carved them out or undertook extra study etc." Former support staff

Asked what advice they would give to current staff, they focused on taking ownership of career paths and had three key recommendations:

1. Get support from peers
2. Identify what is right for you personally
3. Take the initiative to move your role and your career forwards

There are many ways to move forward and there was some evidence within the consultation that a small proportion of staff have been able to engage positively with opportunities.

"I have attended governance training sessions... these were reassuring and it was helpful to meet others in the sector." Support staff

"I set up an informal network with key institutions." Support staff

"I attended the PA Show and specifically a seminar on minutes, which frankly I found revelatory - a single one hour session was enough to radically improve my diabolical minuting abilities." Support staff

"I did some shadowing with colleagues and took advantage of a part-time secondment opportunity." Support staff

"I did an online diploma on digital mapping at my own suggestion, my line manager agreed I could spend some work time on it... it involved project work and I devised one using the collections which is beneficial to the museum too." Support staff

More support staff must find the courage to explore opportunities, and leaders must create a culture that encourages and enables this.

I would like to do something more challenging but I don't feel confident enough to put myself forward." Support staff

"My colleague applied for an internal secondment opportunity to work one day a week in one of my other teams, for her own career development. She didn't ask me in advance, and actually I think that's good: she knew I was keen that anybody interested would have the opportunity to apply." Leader

TAKING OWNERSHIP WITH TARGETED TRAINING

[TOOL 4]

[RECOMMENDATIONS]

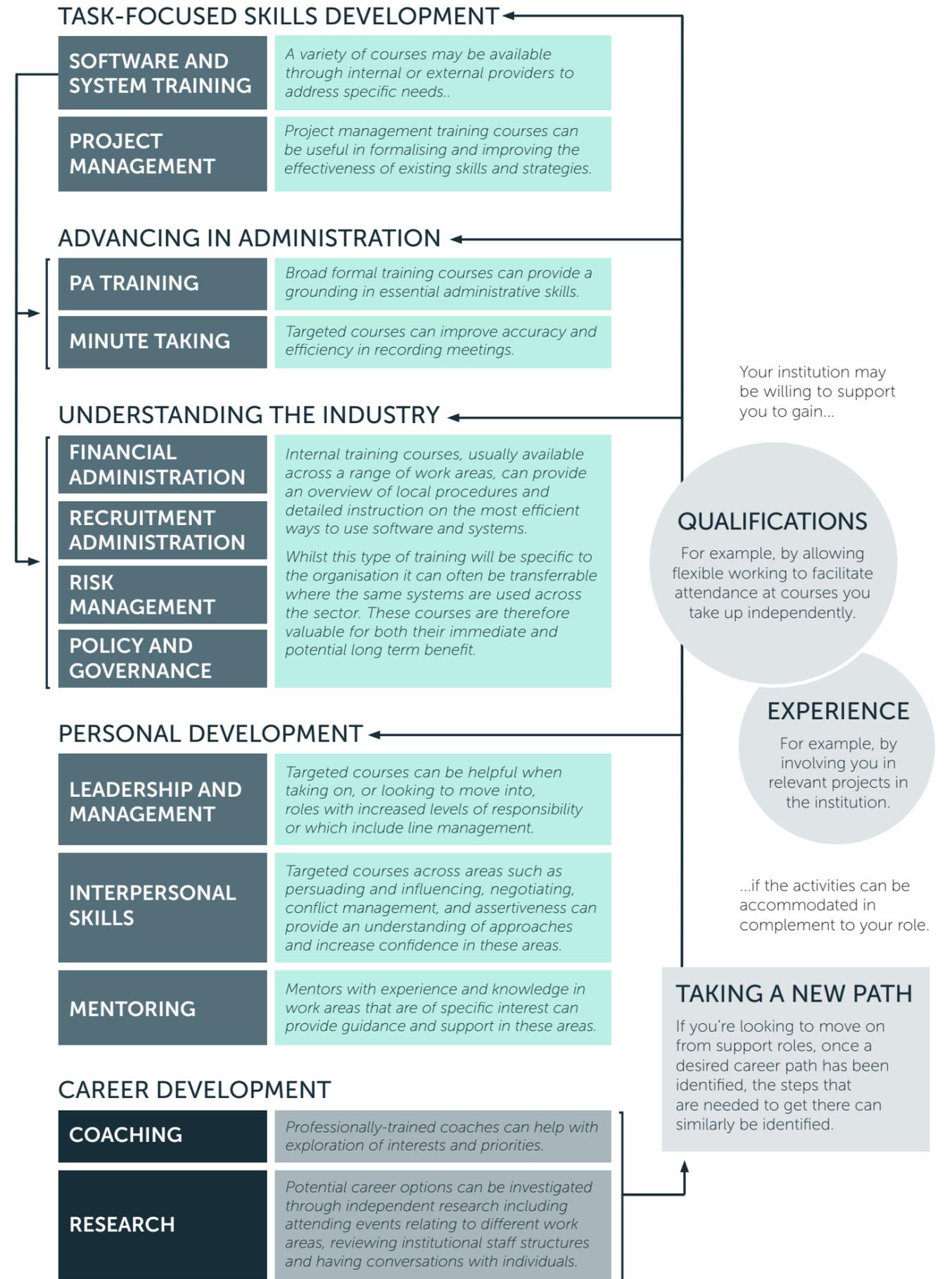
ROOM TO GROW

FIND THE RIGHT DEVELOPMENT ROUTE

Everyone is different. Create space for honest and open discussion about how to make the most of the role.

Recommended routes for professional development are impossible to define. There are no simple solutions and when looking for the answer, it's important first to know the question: are you looking to get a specific task completed, enhance existing skills, increase responsibility, or expand into a completely new area of work?

The menu opposite groups opportunities in relation to their aims. There are different types of training for different purposes, all can provide value and fulfilment, provided the training is matched to the target outcome.



VIABILITY AND VISIBILITY

[CONCLUSIONS]

[RECOMMENDATIONS]

DEFINITION

CREATE A CLEARLY DEFINED ROLE

Support staff can be all things to all people.
Decide what the role needs to be for your staff and for your institution.

INFORMATION

COMMUNICATE AND COLLABORATE

Knowledge is power.
Establish clear communication systems to stay ahead of developments.

AWARENESS

RESPOND TO CHANGING ENVIRONMENTS BY CHANGING REQUIREMENTS

Flexibility is the key to managing the unmanageable.
Set up systems for reviewing workloads and revising priorities on a regular basis.

EMPOWERMENT

CELEBRATE THE WORK THAT GOES ON BEHIND THE SCENES

It's everyone's responsibility to raise awareness.
Create opportunities to talk about the value of hidden contributions.

MUTUAL BENEFIT

WORK OUT WHAT YOU CAN DO FOR EACH OTHER

Be complimentary rather than conflicting.
Take time to ensure that individual and institutional aims are aligned.

ROOM TO GROW

FIND THE RIGHT DEVELOPMENT ROUTE

Everyone is different.
Create space for honest and open discussion about how to make the most of the role.

VIABILITY AND VISIBILITY

[CONCLUSIONS]

Support staff play a vital role in cultural sector organisations but their contributions have long been overlooked and undervalued. **It is important now to change our perceptions and interactions, in order to achieve and promote best practice and to maximise the potential of these roles and of the individuals who fulfil them.**

The Supporting Leadership project has made it possible to take a closer look at these critical roles and to draw together perspectives from across the breadth of the cultural sector. The responses to the digital consultation have revealed great **dedication**, but also **frustration**, as both leaders and support staff grapple with **complex and fragmented requirements** and face **challenges of both practical and interpersonal natures**. In these challenges there are opportunities, and the recommendations from this report centre around **seeking clarity** around each aspect of the support staff role and at every stage of the journey from definition to recruitment to development and eventual progression.

Despite the identification of many areas of common ground across different types of cultural sector institution, the research has not revealed a singular understanding of the support staff role. It highlights instead **the importance of creating our own understandings** – unique to the needs of the individuals, both leaders and support staff, who are working together, and to the needs of the institution that they serve.

Boundaries are not the enemy of flexibility, they are empowering as they allow us to see when and where we need to step outside of our regular duties and help us to effectively resource and support this activity. **Leaders and support staff should work together to set out clear visions that will maximise the potential of support roles**. They must also work towards increasing **awareness** of and **recognition** for these roles more broadly so that staff can enjoy the same **professional status** within the cultural sector as they might do beyond it, and are incentivised to stay and build **excellence** in this area of work.

SUPPORTING LEADERSHIP

[ABOUT THE PROJECT]

THE PROJECT

The Supporting Leadership project was initiated in March 2019 as a direct response to a knowledge gap within research into cultural sector leadership. While there have been many studies and initiatives focusing on cultural sector leaders, there has been a distinct lack of engagement with the support staff working closely with them on a day-to-day basis.

Support staff provide a vital service to leaders, managing their offices and ensuring the smooth running of their diaries and fulfilment of their commitments. There is much to be gained from building up a better understanding of the nature of these roles and this project has sought to draw out new knowledge that will be of benefit to both leaders and the support staff that work with them.

The project had a focus on analysing direct support relationships with leaders but it has also been possible to look at the interaction of support staff with wider staff groups, and to consider the position of these roles more broadly in relation to both organisational and wider sectoral wellbeing.

PROCESS

In July 2019 a digital consultation was launched to gather information from across the sector. Three separate surveys were created to allow an examination of the support staff role from several perspectives; those of leaders, of current support staff, and of former support staff who have since moved on to different roles. These parallel surveys used aligned but tailored questions to ensure their relevance to each of the contributing groups and the questions were defined with the help of focus groups and special advisors from across the University of Oxford's Gardens, Libraries and Museums division.

The surveys included open questions that enabled survey participants to comment freely on their experiences and working relationships. Anonymised quotations have been used throughout the report, allowing issues and possible solutions to be described and defined through survey participants' own words.

PARTICIPANTS

The digital consultation was promoted through an open call on the project website, within sectoral newsletters, through social media, and via direct invitations to institutions. Submissions were received from:

124 individuals

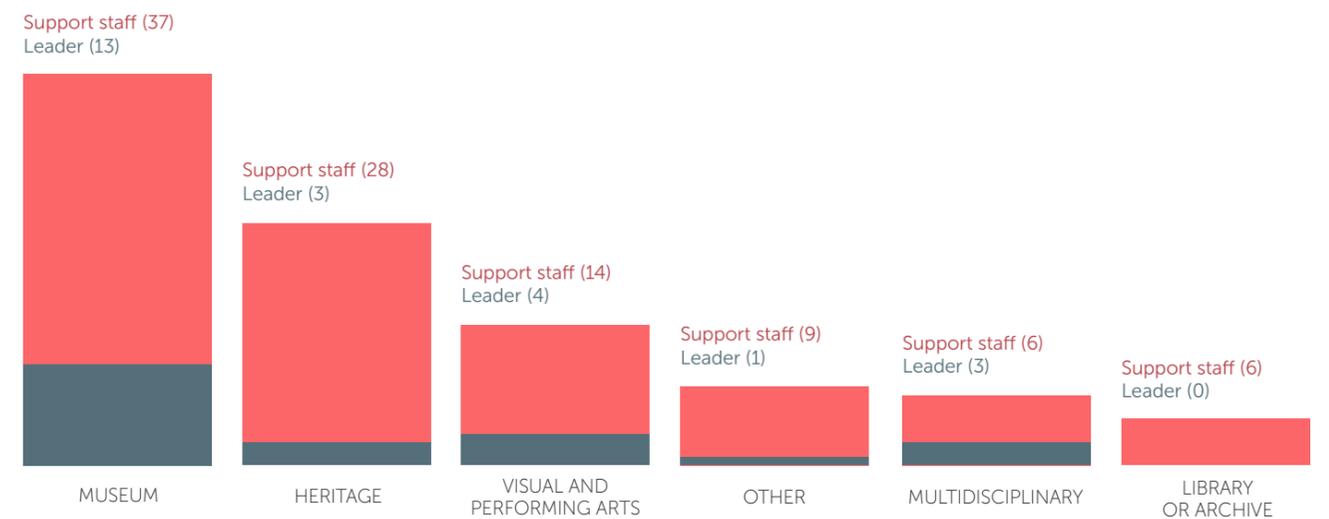
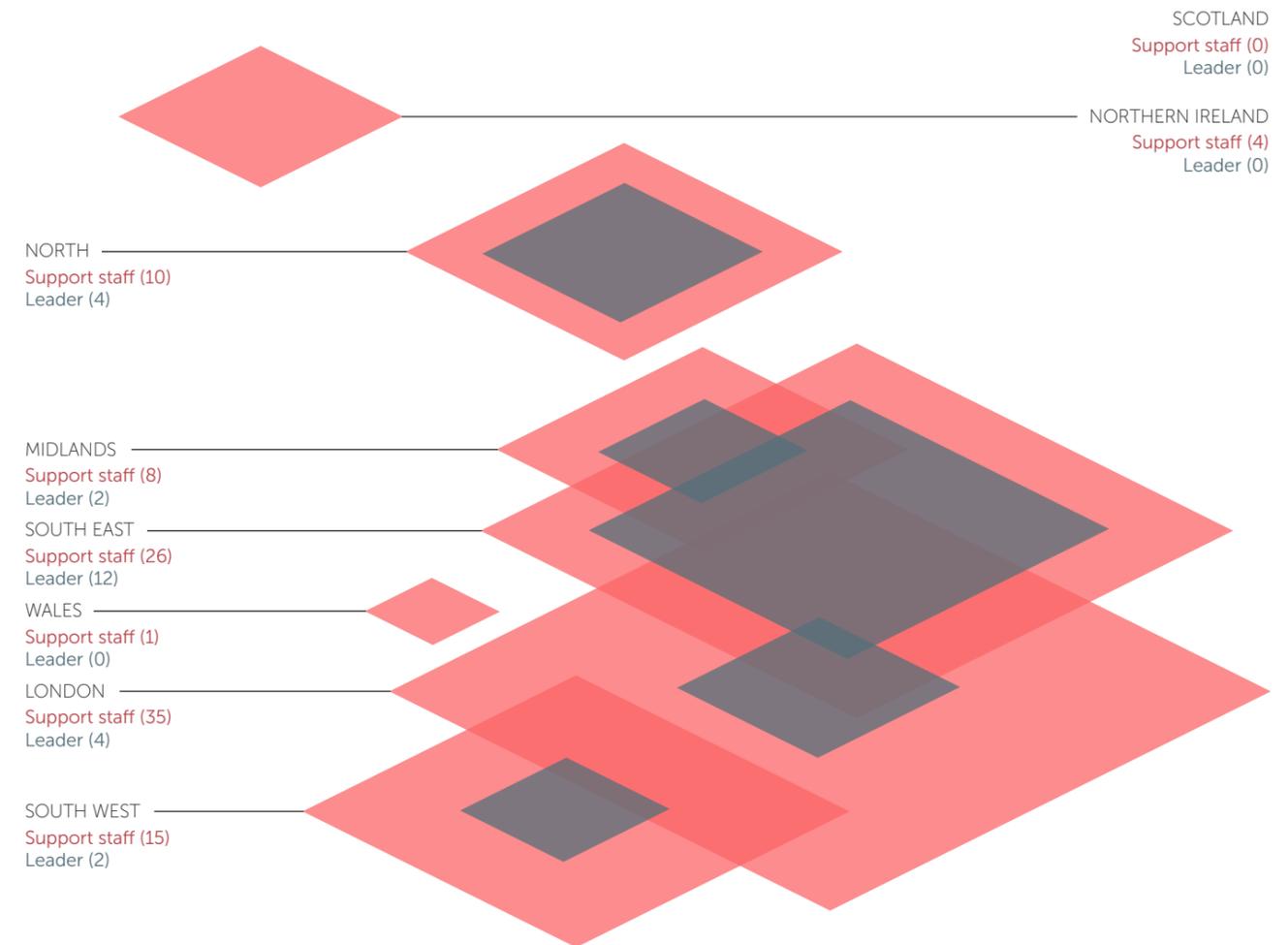
61 different institutions

Museums were the largest contributing group (40% of participants, 50 out of 124 individuals) but submissions were also received from across the sector more broadly – from galleries, performing arts institutions, heritage sites, libraries, multidisciplinary institutions, and governing bodies.

Geographically, the contributions were weighted towards London (31% of participants, 39 individuals) and the South East (31% of participants, 38 individuals) but submissions were received from across the country and also from Wales and from Northern Ireland.

Individuals at all stages of their careers were keen to participate and contributions were received from staff of different ages (covering all survey categories from '24 and under' to '65 and over') and with different lengths of service in their current roles (from 'less than 1 year' to 'more than 20 years'). While the majority of the participants were support staff (81% of participants, 100 out of 124 individuals), take up by leaders was also significant and covered most of the defined institution types.

The majority of the contributions from support staff were from current staff (92 individuals) but contributions from former staff (8 individuals) have also proved to be invaluable and, whilst they are not included in numerical data due to the small sample size, their insights have been drawn upon throughout the report.



99% of the leaders and support staff surveyed (123 out of 124 individuals) gave their geographical location. 100% of the leaders and support staff surveyed gave their institution type.

THE PROJECT TEAM

VANESSA MOORE

LEAD AUTHOR

Vanessa Moore is a cultural sector professional with ten years experience in interpretation, exhibition development, programme coordination and event facilitation. She has worked previously for a range of cultural and heritage organisations including private and local authority run art galleries, historic houses, libraries, national museums including the Science Museum and the British Museum, and charities including the Royal Horticultural Society.

At the initiation of the Supporting Leadership project Vanessa held two administrative support roles within the University of Oxford, working as the part-time Oxford Cultural Leaders Programme Coordinator within the Gardens, Libraries and Museums division and as the part-time National Trust Partnership Support Officer in the Humanities division. At the time of the publication of the report she was acting as a maternity cover Exhibitions Officer at Oxford University Museum of Natural History.

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EMMA THOMAS

Emma Thomas has more than twenty years' experience working in a number of diverse support roles across several different sectors. She joined the cultural sector in 2016, working as an executive assistant in the Gardens, Libraries and Museums (GLAM) division at the University of Oxford and since October 2019 has been working as Projects Officer in GLAM, a role which includes administration of the Oxford Cultural Leaders programme and supporting the GLAM Divisional Secretary/Chief Operating Officer.

Before working in museums, Emma held a variety of support officer posts including in the international law team at the British Embassy The Hague, at Sheffield City Council, the Homes and Communities Agency and started her career as the office manager of a translation and language projects agency in London.

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www.glam.ox.ac.uk/oxford-cultural-leaders

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researchsupport.admin.ox.ac.uk/funding/ke-seed-fund

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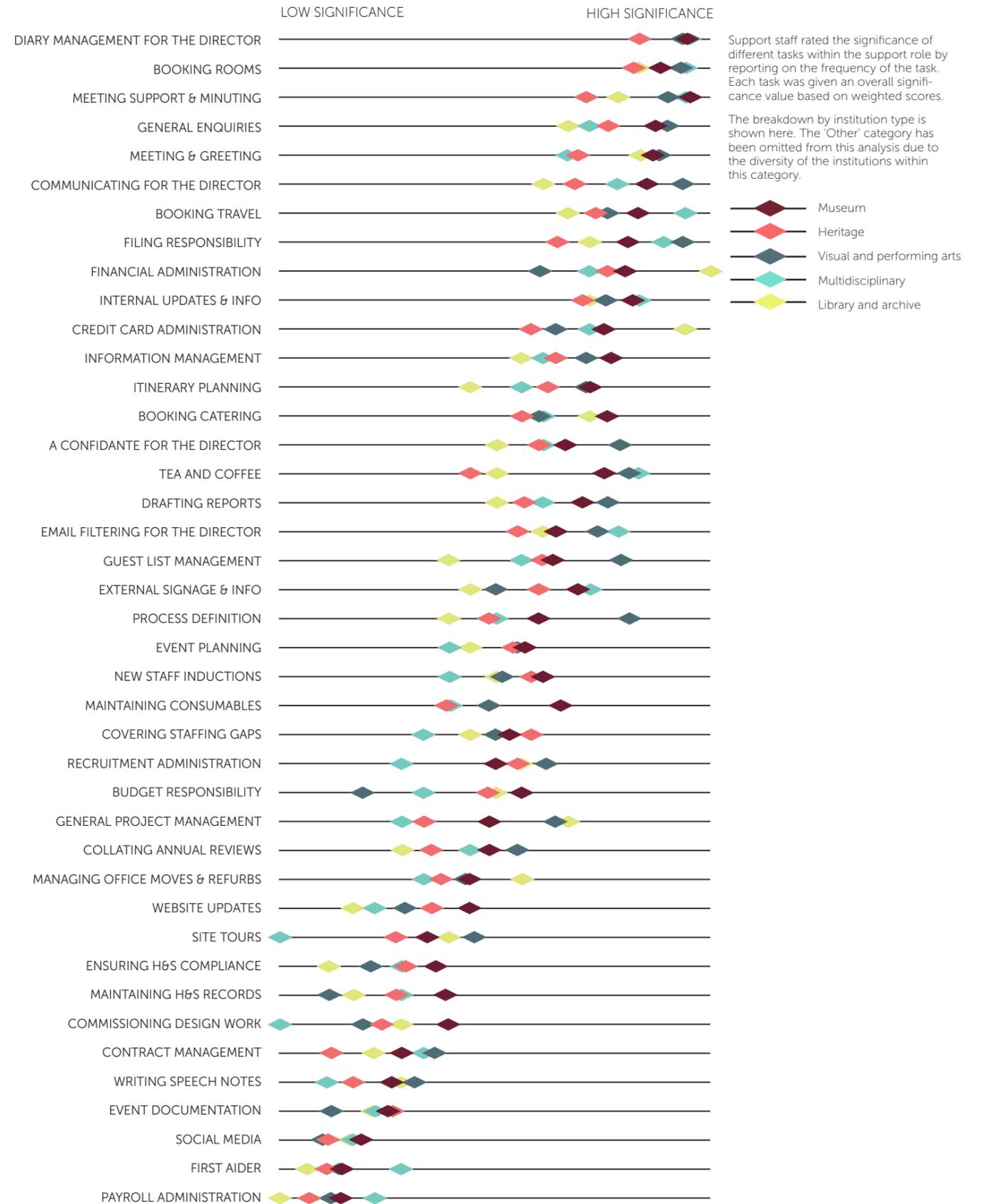
SUPPORTING LEADERSHIP

[APPENDICES]

TASKS: EXPANDED DESCRIPTIONS

| SHORT TASK DESCRIPTION | FULL TASK DESCRIPTION |
|-----------------------------------|--|
| DIARY MANAGEMENT FOR THE DIRECTOR | DIARY MANAGEMENT AND SCHEDULING |
| BOOKING ROOMS | BOOKING ROOMS, EQUIPMENT, IT AND AV SET UP FOR MEETINGS AND/OR EVENTS |
| MEETING SUPPORT & MINUTING | MEETING SUPPORT INCLUDING PREPARING PAPERS AND TAKING MINUTING |
| GENERAL ENQUIRIES | FIELDING AND RESPONDING TO GENERAL ENQUIRIES |
| MEETING & GREETING | MEETING AND GREETING VISITORS |
| COMMUNICATING FOR THE DIRECTOR | COMMUNICATING FOR THE DIRECTOR VIA PHONE AND/OR EMAIL |
| BOOKING TRAVEL | BOOKING TRAVEL AND ACCOMMODATION |
| FILING RESPONSIBILITY | HOLDING RESPONSIBILITY FOR ELECTRONIC FILING |
| FINANCIAL ADMINISTRATION | FINANCIAL ADMINISTRATION: RAISING PURCHASE ORDERS, RECEIVING INVOICES AND EXPENSE CLAIMS |
| INTERNAL UPDATES & INFO | CREATING AND SENDING OUT STAFF INFORMATION - UPDATES, BRIEFINGS, INSTRUCTIONS ETC |
| CREDIT CARD ADMINISTRATION | HOLDING RESPONSIBILITY FOR MONITORING AND RECONCILING CREDIT CARDS |
| INFORMATION MANAGEMENT | ORGANISING, COLLATING, INTERPRETING, AND SUMMARISING INFORMATION |
| ITINERARY PLANNING | RESEARCHING AND PLANNING ITINERARIES FOR STAFF AND/OR VISITORS |
| BOOKING CATERING | BOOKING AND LIAISING WITH CATERERS |
| A CONFIDANTE FOR THE DIRECTOR | A CONFIDANTE FOR THE DIRECTOR |
| TEA AND COFFEE | MAKING TEA AND COFFEE AND WASHING UP |
| DRAFTING REPORTS | DRAFTING, EDITING, AND PROOF-READING REPORTS |
| EMAIL FILTERING FOR THE DIRECTOR | EMAIL FILTERING FOR THE DIRECTOR |
| GUEST LIST MANAGEMENT | MANAGING EVENTS LISTINGS, INVITATIONS, GUEST LISTS, AND RSVP MAILBOXES |
| EXTERNAL SIGNAGE & INFO | CREATING DOCUMENTATION: INFORMATION SHEETS, HANDOUTS, PRESENTATIONS, SIGNAGE, PLACECARDS ETC |
| PROCESS DEFINITION | DEFINING PROCESSES, CREATING STANDARD DOCUMENTS, DEFINING REPORTING PROCEDURES |
| EVENT PLANNING | DEFINING THE FORMAT AND CONTENT FOR LECTURES, CONFERENCES, WORKSHOPS, PREVIEWS, DINNERS ETC |
| NEW STAFF INDUCTIONS | ARRANGING INDUCTIONS FOR NEW STAFF |
| MAINTAINING CONSUMABLES | MONITORING AND ORDERING CONSUMABLES, FOR EXAMPLE: PRINTER TONER, STATIONERY ETC |
| COVERING STAFFING GAPS | COVERING STAFFING GAPS AS NEEDED |
| RECRUITMENT ADMINISTRATION | RECRUITMENT ADMINISTRATION: LIAISING WITH CANDIDATES, ARRANGING PAPERWORK FOR HR |
| BUDGET RESPONSIBILITY | HOLDING RESPONSIBILITY FOR UPDATING AND MONITORING BUDGETS |
| GENERAL PROJECT MANAGEMENT | GENERAL PROJECT MANAGEMENT |
| COLLATING ANNUAL REVIEWS | COLLATING ANNUAL REVIEWS |
| MANAGING OFFICE MOVES & REFURBS | PROJECT MANAGING OFFICE MOVES, REFURBISHMENT, AND MAINTENANCE PROJECTS |
| WEBSITE UPDATES | CREATING AND UPDATING (INTERNAL AND/OR EXTERNAL) WEBSITE CONTENT |
| SITE TOURS | GIVING SITE TOURS |
| ENSURING H&S COMPLIANCE | HOLDING RESPONSIBILITY FOR H&S COMPLIANCE |
| MAINTAINING H&S RECORDS | PRODUCING, COLLATING AND MONITORING H&S RECORDS, RISK ASSESSMENTS, INCIDENT REPORTS ETC |
| COMMISSIONING DESIGN WORK | COMMISSIONING DESIGN WORK |
| CONTRACT MANAGEMENT | DRAFTING, ISSUING AND MANAGING CONTRACTS FOR WORK |
| WRITING SPEECH NOTES | WRITING SPEECH NOTES |
| EVENT DOCUMENTATION | PHOTOGRAPHING AND DOCUMENTING STAFF ACTIVITIES AND EVENTS |
| SOCIAL MEDIA | CREATING SOCIAL MEDIA POSTS |
| FIRST AIDER | ACTING AS A DEPARTMENTAL FIRST AIDER |
| PAYROLL ADMINISTRATION | PAYROLL ADMINISTRATION: FOR STAFF, FREELANCER, CONTRACTORS |

TASKS: BREAKDOWN BY INSTITUTION TYPE



Graphic design by Vanessa Moore

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