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# Building soft skills in the creative economy: Creative intermediaries, business support and the 'soft skills gap"

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ABSTRACT

In recent years, the UK government and policymakers have sought to maximise the impact of the creative economy via a programme of targeted intervention. Intermediary agencies – those organisations that sit between government and policymakers on one hand, and creative practitioners and microbusinesses on the other – are increasingly seen as crucial to the functioning of the creative economy. This article reports on the activities of one creative intermediary – Cultural Enterprise Office – based in Glasgow, Scotland. CEO's remit is to help creatives become more 'businesslike', and they provide or facilitate access to training and skills development. The article draws on interviews conducted with CEO staff and clients, and ethnographic material gathered from observation of CEO's working practices. I explore how creatives narrativise their personal and professional development in relation to intermediaries, and demonstrate the tension at the core of CEO's practice – between their remit to support a skills and employability agenda and their understanding of the limitations of this agenda. I also explore the emotional component of business support, which arises in response to the extreme individualisation associated with creative work, and the precarious working conditions that creatives face. The rationale for writing this article stems from the fact that the creative economy is now a globalised concept, with many countries looking to the UK for guidance on growing the sector. Yet little is known about what services creatives draw down from intermediaries, why and when, or how they understand the role of intermediaries.

## 1. Introduction

In the UK, we are rapidly moving on from what McRobbie (2010:32) has called the 'creative decade' wherein creativity came to be understood as a key driver of the national economy. In recent years, the UK government and policymakers have sought to maximise the impact of the creative economy via a programme of targeted intervention. As it stands in the UK this 'intervention' consists in part of a draw-down programme of funding and support that will help creative practitioners develop a business from their talent. To this end, intermediary agencies – understood as those organisations that sit between government and policymakers on the one hand, and creative practitioners and microbusinesses on the other – have come to be seen as key to the functioning of the creative economy, working as they do to organise and govern creative production and to keep creative practitioners aligned with high-level cultural and creative-economic policy.

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The article is based on qualitative research conducted with Cultural Enterprise Office (CEO) and their clients, throughout 2013 and 2014[2]. CEO is a small, Glasgow-based creative intermediary agency that provides support for creative practitioners and microbusiness in the Scottish creative sector. CEO's remit is to help creatives to become more 'businesslike', and to provide or facilitate access to training and skills development. The rationale for writing this article stems from the fact that the creative economy is now a thoroughly international concept, with many countries looking to the UK for guidance on growing the sector. Yet an upsurge in the volume of theoretical work on intermediaries has not, to date, been matched by exploratory empirical research. As a result, we know relatively little about the nature of the 'oscillations' that intermediaries perform as part of their role, and how competing pressures find expression in organisational practice. We also know relatively little about what services creative practitioners and micro-businesses draw down from intermediaries, why and when, nor how they perceive of the practical role of intermediaries.

The article draws on interviews conducted with CEO staff and their clients, and ethnographic material gathered from observation of CEO's working practices. I demonstrate several tensions at the core of CEO's practice, including between their top-down remit to support a skills and employability agenda and their situated understanding of the limitations of this agenda, and between government and funders' desire for macro-level impacts, and CEO's interventions, which tend to come at the micro-scale. I also explore what creatives value about CEO's services, and how they narrativise their personal and professional development in relation to creative intermediaries such as CEO.

The article proceeds in four sections. In the first, I review the literature pertaining to current debates concerning the role of intermediaries in the creative economy, and briefly summarise some of the key issues concerning the training of creative practitioners and microbusinesses. In the second, I introduce the case organisation, how they are positioned in the Scottish creative landscape, and the various routes through which they seek to support their clients. The third section deals with three main issues arising from the empirical material. I demonstrate how agencies like CEO are instrumental in supplementing the training provided by Higher Education (HE) institutions, and thus are particularly important to creatives at the beginning of their careers. In line with what others have argued, I also document the "portfolio" (Schlesinger and Waelde 2012: 22) nature of creative careers, and demonstrate that work in the sector is still characterised by extreme precariousness (Banks and Hesmondhalgh, 2009). In the Scottish case, this is arguably exacerbated given the well-documented 'pull' of London within the UK's creative economy. I then demonstrate (following Schlesinger et al., 2015a) that the emotional component of business support is crucial yet often under-recognised by both advisers and clients, and that the need for this arises largely in response to the isolation and individualisation often cited as a key feature of creative labour. In the final section I offer some conclusions, and recomm,endations for future work in the field.

## 2. The rise of the creative economy

The UK's long-running focus on creativity, and the assumed role of the so-called 'creative economy' in ensuring national, regional and local competitiveness is at this point well examined (Andres and Round 2015; Cunningham 2002; O'Connor, 2010; Schlesinger 2009). The creative industries have been central to the UK's economic growth strategy since the 1990s (Oakley 2004). According to the Centre for Economics and Business Research, the creative industries contributed £5.9bn to the UK economy in 2013 (CEBR 2013: 17). In the last five to ten years there have been very significant − though unevenly distributed − improvements in information and communications technology (ICTs), leading to growth in digital creative production, distribution, and consumption. As Bahkshi et al. (2013) have written, the creative industries[3], and the so-called 'digital industries' are often now grouped together as a separate economic sector − the 'creative economy'. Similarly, the spread of creative-economic ideas from their initial genesis in London during the New Labour years, throughout Europe, North America and Australia, and into the Global South has been well documented (see Booyens 2012; Farr-Wharton et al., 2013; Gregory 2015). Schlesinger et al. (2015a) have argued, however, that the term 'creative economy' is increasingly unhelpful, in that it forces us to think in terms of the sectors designated as 'creative' by national governments, and closes off avenues to investigate the non-economic activities that help to constitute the sphere of creative production (see also McRobbie 2010, 2016).

### 2.1. Cultural intermediaries

Latterly, 'creativity' is understood as a panacea for a range of economic and social problems, and moreover, is seen as a synonym for "dynamism, growth, talent formation and national renewal" (Schlesinger 2013: 29). As a result, the creative industries' influence on the economic, social and cultural life of the UK, and other developed economies, shows no sign of diminishing. As Schlesinger et al. (2015a: 22), have noted "for those adopting a creative industries development strategy […] having established a new focus or object for policy the task is to try and make it work better". One key way in which governments seek to do this is to charge intermediary agencies with developing the creative economy.

Smith Maguire and Matthews (2012) − in their influential review of scholarship on cultural intermediaries − write that to date, this scholarship falls into two broad (though by no means mutually exclusive) camps. They note that the first, following Bourdieu

[2] Note that following funding cuts in late 2014, CEO now runs with a smaller staff, and no longer has a formal base in Edinburgh. The last two years have seen significant changes in staffing, and in CEO's working practices. This article of course deals with CEO as it existed from 2013-2014.

[3] The Department for Culture, Media, and Sport (DCMS, 2001: 4) describes the creative industries as: "those industries which have their origin in individual creativity, skill and talent and which have a potential for wealth and job creation through the generation and exploitation of intellectual property". The DCMS recognises 9 creative sectors: advertising and marketing; architecture; crafts; design (product, graphic and fashion); film, TV, video, radio and photography; IT, software, and computer services; publishing; museums, galleries and libraries; music, performing and visual arts (DCMS 2015).