Survey of need for Art Technical Training in the East Midlands Report
November 2021

In 2021, Coventry University and ArtTechSpace Ltd developed and delivered an Art Technician training course to address the art technical skills shortage in the Coventry area. The training was created to introduce local Coventry people to the art technical profession, with the aim of creating a larger pool of skilled art technicians to address the skills shortage for cultural institutions within the area. We would like to run a similar course in the East Midlands area in conjunction with CVAN EM.

Before we look to develop and potentially deliver an East Midlands Art Technician course we wanted to gauge the need and check that art institutions in the East Midlands were experiencing a similar skills shortage.

We carried out a survey of local East Midlands art institutions to understand:
- Is there a need for more skilled art technicians in the East Midlands?
- If new technicians were introduced to the industry is there work experience available to support this training in the East Midlands?
- Is there ongoing work that could potentially sustain a career or part-time, freelance roles for trainees?
- Is upskilling required for those already working in the profession?

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY
- Nearly all of the institutions we surveyed (11 out of 12) use freelance art technicians.
- Half of these insitutions struggle to find skilled freelancers, with 8 out of 12 (67%) find it even harder to find skilled *local* people.
- The main issues to sourcing freelancers was stated as insitutions in the area scheduling their show changes at the same times throughout the year therefore using the limited pool of people all at the same times. Unitemps was stated as a recurring issue for sourcing freelancers as well.
- There is work available across the East Midlands, with at least 67 shows a year, that have a minimum total of 134 weeks of show change work plus quite a lot of other work available such as collection management, maintenance, special projects, etc.
- However, because many institutions change shows at the same time, there are often floods and droughts of work for freelancers in the area.
- There is appetite from East Midlands art institutions for a training program for art technicians, with 9 out of 12 institutions (75%) saying they'd support the program by offering work experience to the trainees.
- Furthermore, 5 institutions said they would have competent technicians to support their development by exhibiting best practice in their workplace, and a further 4

institutions said that it would depend on the project, scale of the installation and the general requirements of the project.

- 8 institutions (73%) could also see the benefit for their in-house staff to refresh the skills they have and encourage best practice.
- There is a clear need for training of technicians in the East Midlands to bring in new people to the industry and also to upskill those already working within the industry.
- The greatest need was for general art handling and AV / new media installation skills (7 institutions), although there appears to be a need across the board of all art technical disciplines.

RECOMMENDATIONS

1. Increase the number of skilled art technicians in the East Midlands by developing and delivering an East Midlands Art Technician training programme.
2. This training should start with general art handling and AV / new media installation, and look to then extend to other areas.
3. A focus should be on upskilling those already in the industry and then a discussion should be had with the institutions in the area as to what they think their requirements would be for new technicians
4. If this training was to be carried out those already working in the industry should be upskilled before creating new technicians through the boot camp as there is such limited support for on the job training of brand new technicians.
5. An alternative to Unitemps for sourcing freelancers should be investigated.

EAST MIDLANDS ART INSTITUTION SURVEY
We carried out the survey in October 2021. A total of 12 institutions replied to the survey: AAC, The Harley Gallery, Hub, Lakeside, Leicester Museum, LU Arts, Modern Painters, New Decorators (MPND), Nottingham Castle, Artcroe Gallery, The Collection, Nottingham Contemporary, and UK New Artists.

WORK AVAILABLE
The institutions who responded said they had from 2 - 15 show changes a year, with the average being 6 shows a year. In total, there are between 67 and 74 show changes a year across the institutions surveyed.

Install and deinstall periods are from between 2 - 4 weeks, with the average being 2 weeks. Just looking at the institutions that responded to the survey, there are between 134 and 181 weeks of installation / deinstallation in total across the East Midlands a year.

These institutions have a wide range of technical needs and are using between 1 - 15 freelance technicians. The average number of technicians for an install / deinstall is 4

technicians. According to the survey the total number of freelance art technicians used by the institutions a year is 53 in total.

We also asked institutions if they needed additional technical assistance outside of exhibition install / deinstall. 10 out of the 12 institutions we surveyed (81%) said they require additional art technical assistance, such as event-based roles, building maintenance and redecoration, prefabrication of exhibition furniture and display cases, crate building, receipt and distribution of materials, general housekeeping, installations outside of institutions and stores work.

Many cited that they have only 1 in-house technician or no technical staff at all, and so require everything to be contracted out to freelancers or art handling companies.

FREELANCERS
11 out of 12 art institutions (91%) use freelance art technicians and that they source their freelancers through word of mouth from other technicians and other local institutions and organisations.

The hourly rate for freelance art technicians varied from £8.60 to £20 an hour. The average hourly rate was £16 an hour, mainly due to Unitemps. *Unitemps is an issue for hiring freelancers in institutions as has been found in the Coventry area also and clearly needs more discussion to see how this can be resolved.*

Half of the institutions (50%) struggle to find skilled freelance art technicians. This is worse for sourcing *local* freelance art technicians, with 73% of respondents saying they struggle to get freelance technicians who live locally to their institutions.

The issues they face finding them are:
-    Freelancers are not interested in having to sign up to Unitemps to be paid an hourly rate that is well below the expected day rate they can receive at other institutions.
-    Installation periods falling at the same time as other institutions in the area was commented on a number of times, so technicians are not available or prioritise hours with organisations that can offer better rates.
-    They struggle with people not willing to travel to smaller institutions/locations.
-    A lack of training and development / supported routes into the profession mean that it is hard to find enough technicians at times when lots of support is needed.
-    Often end up working with less experienced staff and having to supervise them more closely – this increases the workload for staff who should be focusing on other aspects of the install.

One comment was as follows:

Many freelancers are unskilled, or inexperienced, but demand higher rates of pay (as there is often large discrepancies between organisations, especially those with larger budgets) as they often compare themselves to their peers – pay consistency. Working conditions, pay and hours vary from place to place, so often arrive not behaving like contracted/self-employed staff, showing their inexperience in the workplace is often hard to manage as they have no understanding of institutional structures (and in turn, what is expected from them). Offering a zero-hour-type contract, which comes with relevant NI contributions, paid holiday, and some employment rights (especially during Covid when contracts were cancelled) has been offered, but this isn't something they want. Consistency would be helpful, as I've often had difficult conversations over other things like travel reimbursements halfway through a job, which should be a simple point of negotiation upon appointment – so a contract may be useful if the org supports it.

TRAINING PROGRAM

When we asked about supporting a training program for art technicians by offering work experience to the trainees, 9 out of 12 institutions (75%) said yes.

The remaining 3 institutions said they would possibly consider it, but that it was unlikely on their installs, particularly with regards to art handling, and would depend on who was carrying out the training and what the program was.

We went on to ask about support for trainees. Of the institutions surveyed, 5 said they would have competent technicians to support their development by exhibiting best practice in their workplace. A further 4 institutions said that it would depend on the project, scale of the installation and the general requirements of the project.

The remaining institutions do not have in-house technicians, so they would have to rely on freelancers, and weren't sure how they felt about that.

A lot of institutions could also see the benefit for their in-house staff, with 8 institutions (73%) saying they felt their permanent/regular technicians could benefit from training that would refresh the skills they have and encourage best practice.

The institutions who didn't see the benefit commented:
This also creates workplace uncertainty for the more experienced, older techs – they would be concerned to protect their 'go-to' orgs and regular, secure income streams when potentially losing work to a cheaper workforce.

We have run training courses both internally and externally for our core pool of techs previously, and feedback was given that on the whole people found them not to be particularly useful. When we identify specific skill sets that are required for an install that we feel are outside the capabilities of our techs or require qualifications that our team don't have we tend to bring specialists in or arrange in-house training as required depending on the job in question. Typically the majority of prefabrication, furniture, and display case building, CAD design, and specification elements will be carried out in-house with engineering calculations, etc being outsourced as required.

When asked what particular areas they felt there was a need for upskilling for art technicians working in the region the responses were as follows:
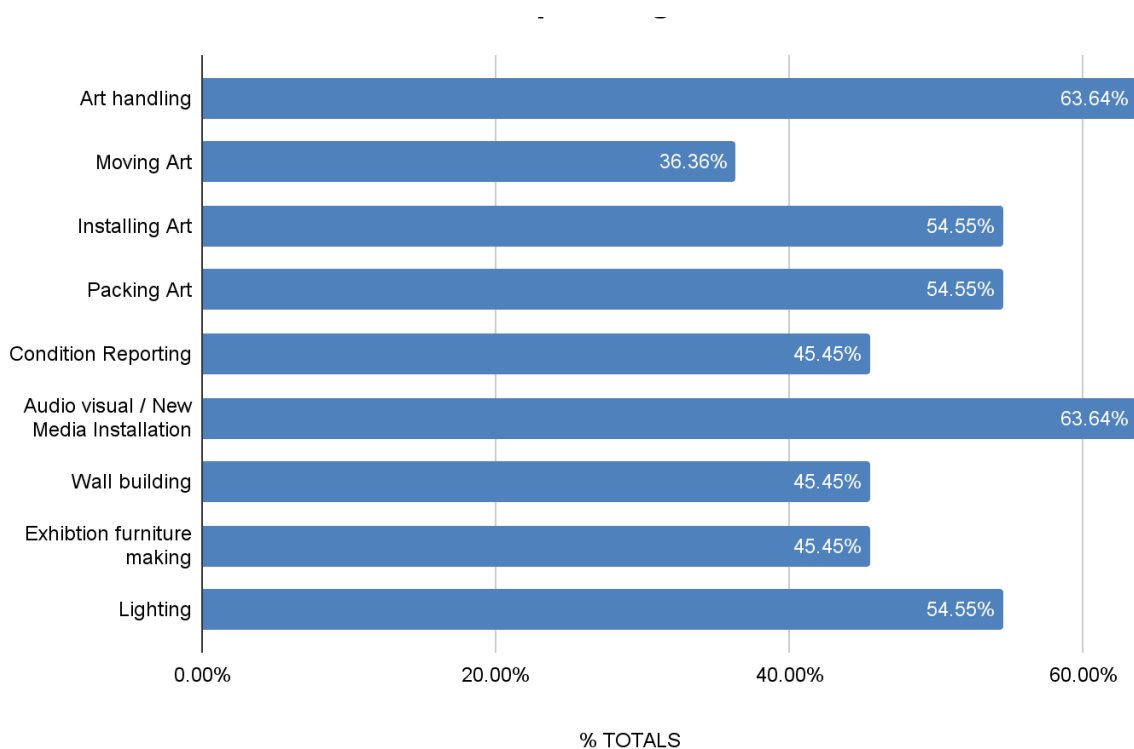
The greatest need was for general art handling and AV / new media installation skills, although there appears to be a need across the board.

One organisation commented rather than responded via the tick box above with the following:

For the core team of techs, we work with, I don't feel they are particularly lacking in any of the skills identified above. As we have quite a large scale of build/construction in our exhibitions and each install is unique we tend to employ technicians for specific roles, in that we'll have a team who are skilled carpenters for cabinetwork, framing etc, a team for wall and room construction to include drylining, suspended ceilings, and flooring etc, a team for art handling, condition checking and installing (depending on the specific nature of the works in question), then for specific specialities, for example, both analogue and digital AV elements including 16mm & 35mm film, lifting and slinging, work at height, confined access, welding and metalworking etc these would either be carried out or supervised by our in house team or an external contractor.