

Artistic interventions in small organizations: Why do the stakeholders engage and what do they value from the experience?

Preliminary findings from an evaluation of “Creative Pills” produced by Conexiones improbables 2011-2012

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[Resume. Full text available here:

<http://www.conexionesimprobables.es/docs/Artistic%20interventions%20in%20small%20organizations-report%20October%202012.pdf>]

Although the past years have seen the emergence of research findings on artistic interventions in organizations², essentially nothing is known about how small and medium sized organizations (SMEs) can benefit from them. A first opportunity to start filling this gap came when the producer of artistic interventions in Spain, **Conexiones improbables³**, offered a research partner in the unit “Cultural Sources of Newness” at the Social Science Research Center Berlin (WZB) the possibility of evaluating its projects.⁴

Artistic interventions can last for a few hours, days, weeks or months. In 2011 Conexiones improbables expanded its portfolio to offer **short artistic interventions for SMEs in the form of “Creative Pills”**, which they define as “a brief experience of impact for innovation for small companies.” **Web-based surveys** were designed in Spanish and Basque In order to find out what the participants

- expect from this new kind of interaction before they start the joint project, and
- what kinds of value they believe it generates after they have experienced working together.

This report first briefly presents Creative Pills as a form of artistic intervention in organizations, then describes the research sample and provides an overview over key results. The analysis focuses on **responses to the multiple choice questions about what the stakeholders were thinking and feeling before engaging in the project, on what benefits they perceive resulted from the interaction, as well as how they see the role of Conexiones improbables.**⁵

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² See for example Berthoin Antal 2009, 2012; Biehl-Missal 2012; Darso 2004; Schnugg 2010.

³ Conexiones improbables was created in 2010 by an organization for culture, communication and innovation (c2+i) under the leadership of Roberto Gómez de la Iglesia and Arantxa Mendiharat. See <http://www.conexionesimprobables.com>

⁴ For more information about the WZB research unit “Cultural Sources of Newness” see <http://www.wzb.eu/en/research/society-and-economic-dynamics/cultural-sources-of-newness>, and specifically on the research there on artistic interventions in organizations: <http://www.wzb.eu/en/research/society-and-economic-dynamics/cultural-sources-of-newness/projects/artistic-interventions-in-organiza>

⁵ The fine-grained analysis of the responses to the open questions is in preparation.

Creative Pills

The Conexiones improbables team had learned from their work producing long-term (9-month) artistic interventions that **small companies can only very rarely participate in the long format**, because it tends to be too expensive and too time-consuming for them. An additional trigger for Conexiones improbables to expand its portfolio was **the interest that the Bilbao City Council and the Irún City Council expressed in proposing “improbable connections” to local retailers and SMEs**. This funding enabled organizations to participate without having to pay for the artist and the support from Conexiones improbables themselves.

Since launching the Creative Pills in 2011, Conexiones improbables has run **three sets of projects** (two editions of EkintzaLab in Bilbao, and one BidasoaLab in Irún and Hondarribia), encompassing a total of **29 projects**, which have involved 31 organizations (in some cases organizations joined together for a project), **31 project managers, 42 artists** (in some cases artists came from collectives) and **43 employees**. A total of **122 responses** were received (2 sets of questions were sent, pre and post questionnaires).

The Creative Pill interventions run between **three and four months**, during which time the artists, creators and/or social scientists that Conexiones improbables has matched with an organization meet in **several half-day working sessions** to “provide the participants from the organization with ideas/ suggestions/ references based on a need that has been previously defined by the company” (www.conexionesimprobables.com).

The 31 organizations that participated in the three editions of Creative Pills come primarily from the **retail** (10) and **service sectors** (18) but also include a few manufacturers (3). All of the organizations are very small, i.e., **mostly fewer than 5 employees**, and some are run by an entrepreneur without any full-time employees.

Preliminary findings on objectives

The surveys first sought to clarify **the objectives the various stakeholders attached to their participation in the artistic intervention**.⁶ Based on our earlier research, we expect that employees, managers and artists will bring different expectations to the engagement. It is **important to recognize the existence of such differences in initial expectations** between (and within) stakeholder groups when undertaking an evaluation of what the participants later perceived as valuable about the process and outcomes of the experience.⁷

The project managers participating in EkintzaLab 2012 and BidasoaLab 2012 were **asked about the objectives** they had for the artistic intervention **using a multiple choice format** generated from responses to EkintzaLab 2011.

The most frequent responses from the responsible project managers were:

- **To think of new channels of communication with customers or the general public, and**
- **To stimulate creativity in the team.**

⁶ Several ways of addressing this topic were used in the survey, but this report focuses on the responses to the multiple choice question.

⁷ Another reason for eliciting expectations at the outset is to observe whether the features that the participants end up particularly appreciating are those that they expected to seek or quite different aspects of the project that they discovered along the way. Discrepancies between initial expectations and later appreciations may indicate areas in which the most learning has occurred. Analysis of the qualitative data will address these aspects.

- **Thinking about new ways of organizing the business, taking a fresh look at products and services or generating ideas for new products and services** were also objectives that were mentioned several times.

The **motivation of employees** was the **least frequently mentioned** objective. No project manager indicated that there was no specific reason for engaging in the project.

This study is the first one to give **employees** a voice about their expectations before entering an artistic intervention. Assuming that employees might not have the same objectives as management, they were not given the management list of objectives to choose from. Instead, the question was open, leaving them the space to formulate their own ideas.

- Most employees wrote that they hoped the intervention would bring **new perspectives, new ideas, new energy**.
- **Several admitted that they did not know** why the company was engaging in the project.

A complementary question sought to elicit the **employees' attitude to the project at the outset**. They were asked to indicate which had been their first thought when they had heard there would be an artistic intervention project. The two most common responses that the employees gave were **“good idea!” and “we’ll see”**. A few employees remembered having felt it was a “strange idea.” **None responded that they thought it would be a waste of time and money**. In other words the employees were quite open, some even enthusiastic about the innovative approach of Creative Pills. While it is important to note the uncertainty or scepticism some employees felt about the prospect of working with an artist in their organization, it is also interesting to speculate about how much anxiety the prospect of a traditional consultant entering the organization might have engendered.

Preliminary findings on how the stakeholders value the collaboration and its outcomes

Overall feeling

All three stakeholder groups were first asked how they had felt about the Creative Pill collaboration. They could choose up to three terms from a set of options.

The most frequent response from all the stakeholders was: “stimulating”. The next responses that the **employees** chose most often were **“fun”, “useful” and “inspiring”**; **project managers** added **“energizing” and “inspiring”**; and the **artists** emphasized **“useful”** especially often, then **“inspiring”** and **“fun”**. **None of the stakeholders chose the response option “waste of time”**. Only two respondents (project managers) felt the experience had been “disappointing”, and “irrelevant” was marked only once (by an artist).

A closer look at some of the less frequently mentioned items is useful, too. Given that people are sometimes afraid that working with the arts will reveal incompetencies or parts of themselves that they would prefer to keep private, it is relevant to note that **only one project manager and one employee mentioned having felt embarrassed in some way**. By contrast, it is intriguing that in all three rounds of Creative Pills, some artists noted that they had felt embarrassed—more analysis will be required to understand the nature and significance of this finding.

Perceived extent of impacts and types of benefits

Several questions sought to find out whether the participants felt that the artistic intervention had had an impact (a) on them personally, (b) on other people in the organization, and (c) on the organization itself—and if so, (d) what kinds of benefits they had observed.

The overwhelming majority of employees and project managers responded that the collaboration with the artist had had an impact on them personally, on other people,

and on the organization. Only 2 respondents reported no effect on them personally and 3 indicated that they did not think it had affected others.

In order to see what kinds of effects the respondents identified, the 2012 edition of the survey built on the responses given in 2011 to create lists of possible benefits from the Creative Pill experience. The employees and the project managers in the two editions of Creative Pills in 2012 were asked to identify which of the benefits they believed they had gained personally and which they believed the organization had gained from the experience.

Recognizing that the benefits of engaging in an artistic intervention start with the individuals who participate in it, a process that may then generate spill-over effects for the organization, the employees and project managers were asked about what benefits they felt they got from the experience personally (Table 7).

- The **employees** highlighted “**more energy**” and “**new perspectives**” particularly frequently and they appreciated having developed **better relations with clients and with the local community.**
- The **project managers** emphasized that the experience had given them “**new ideas**” and “**new perspectives**” and had **expanded their contacts in the local community.**
- Many respondents identified **specific new skills** they had learned, as well as **ideas that they discovered** through the collaboration. The most frequently mentioned skills related to learning **how to use different communication and presentation media** and **how to connect with social networks**; several wrote that they had **gained confidence in their abilities at work.**

The questionnaire offered a list of organizational-level benefits for the respondents to choose from, add to, and illustrate. Those most commonly identified by the employees were:

- **New ways of seeing things** and
- **Increased visibility in the media.**

The employees also mentioned **new methods and new ideas** for products and services.

- Only 2 employees responded they did not know what benefits the organization had from the experience and
- **None indicated that they felt there had been no benefits to the organization.**

The **project managers** also most frequently identified:

- **Increased visibility in the media,**
- **New ideas for products and services** and
- **New ways of seeing things.**

Among the benefits to the organization that the respondents specified in their own words are:

- “Nos ha ayudado a centrarnos” [It helped to center us] (Employee, EkintzaLab 2012)
- “ke nos sirvió para analizarnos y se dijeron muchas cosas en las reuniones” [it helped to analyse us and many things were said in the meetings] (Employee, BidasoaLab 2012)
- “El hecho de haber decidido enfrentarnos a las preguntas incómodas.” [The fact of having decided to confront uncomfortable questions] (Project manager, EkintzaLab 2012)
- “El poder realizar actuaciones que nunca se me hubiesen ocurrido realizar” [The ability to achieve things that I would never have thought of doing] (Project manager, BidasoaLab 2012)

Since artistic interventions are quite a new field of activity for artists, little is known about what they feel is valuable in these interactions. It is important that the **artists** also experience benefits in the projects because without their sincere engagement, it is unlikely that the participants from the organization will get much value out of the interaction (Berthoin Antal 2009). The survey provided space for the artists to explain what they had valued and they reported a variety of points. A few examples are:

- "Haber podido inventar y probar métodos relacionados con las dinámicas grupales en un caso real." [To have been able to invent and try out methods relating to group dynamics in a real case.] (Artist, BidasoaLab 2012)
- "Comprobar que mi visión alternativa es válida para su negocio y conocer otros casos de colaboraciones entre artistas y empresas, sus éxitos y teóricos fracasos." (Artist, EkintzaLab 2012) [Discovering that my alternative vision is valid for the organization's business and getting to know other cases of collaboration between artists and companies, their successes and their theoretical failures.]
- "Contrastar realidades y formas de afrontarlas. Conocer una empresa que me llamaba la atención y que ahora me gusta más (con más conocimiento de causa)." [Contrasting realities and ways of dealing with them. Getting to know a company that was calling my attention and that I now like more, with a better knowledge of it] (Artist, EkintzaLab 2012)

Should others try it?

One way of getting the respondents to summarize their evaluation of the experience was to ask them whether they would recommend such a collaboration to others, based on this experience with a Creative pill, and if so why; if not, why not; and if "maybe", under what conditions they would recommend it. **It is significant that every single participant in all three groups of all three editions of Creative Pills said "yes" they would recommend it.**

The questionnaire gave them the space to explain their reason for this recommendation. A few examples are:

- "Porque nuestro sector está en crisis y esto nos da nuevas energías" [Because our sector is in crisis and this gives us new energy] (Employee, EkintzaLab 2011)
- "Por el probable impacto de exponerte a las propuestas de personas ajenas a tu día a día." [For the probable impact of exposing yourself to the ideas of people who are far from your daily context] (Employee BidasoaLab 2012)
- "Por el análisis que se hace desde la empresa para explicarle a alguien ajeno a la organización todo y en ese aspecto es cuando se dan los cambios." [For analysing the company and explaining it to someone outside the organization, this is when the changes happen] (Employee EkintzaLab 2012)
- "Porque el resultado ha sido muy positivo ayudándonos a cimentar un par de ideas y proyectos que teníamos pendientes por ahí." [Because the result was very positive, helping us to advance a few ideas and projects that we had had pending until then] (Project manager EkintzaLab 2011)
- "Porque supone una oportunidad para conocer nuevas ideas, metodologías de trabajo, y reflexionar sobre cómo trabaja la empresa, qué está haciendo bien y mal." [Because it offers an opportunity to get to know new ideas, ways of working, and to reflect on how the company is doing, what it is doing well or badly.] (Project manager EkintzaLab 2012)
- "Es una dinámica colaborativa que potencia las capacidades de ambos agentes (artista y pyme) sin necesidad de acordar de forma previa ni acotar cuáles son los roles que juega cada uno dentro del proyecto. Esos acuerdos/simbiosis/sinergias surgen del propio proceso de negociación. Por tanto el proceso se convierte en aprendizaje y en reto para ambos." [It is a collaborative dynamic that strengthens the capabilities of both parties (artist and SME) without needing to agree on the form in advance nor specify the roles that each one plays in the projects. These agreements/symbiosis/synergies emerge from the process of negotiation itself. Thereby the process becomes a learning process and a success for both.] (Artist BidasoaLab 2012)
- "Es un espacio nuevo, encontrarte dentro de un contexto empresarial es estimulante... te hace recapacitar sobre tus funciones, metodología y objetivos." [It is a new space, being in a business context is stimulating ... makes you reconsider your functions, methods and objectives.] (Artist, EkintzaLab 2012)

Some artists added qualifiers to their recommendation. For example, one pointed out that this kind of interaction is not suited to artists who have no interest in relational processes, or who consider working with organizations to be an encroachment on the autonomy of the arts. Another artist noted that the values of the organization are an important factor in enabling collaboration with artists. These points confirm past research findings (Berthoin Antal 2012; Darsø 2004) and highlight the importance of the intermediary role in selecting artists and matching them with the organization, which is the dimension addressed in the last section of the survey.

Preliminary findings on the role of the Conexiones improbables team

Small and medium sized companies and artists belong to different worlds, so **they need an intermediary who can not only bring them together at the outset but who has the**

knowledge and skill to support the entire process. An additional significant factor in these cases is **the ability and credibility of the intermediary to inspire policy makers to invest in the project.** Producing artistic interventions is a new kind of activity, entailing a multitude of responsibilities, and requiring flexibility and the ability to learn from each set of project experiences in order to keep improving⁸. In keeping with the spirit of learning from experience, the Conexiones improbables team made some changes in the Creative Pill process support in 2012. They added an introductory session with all the participants and scheduled time in the final session for all the participants to talk about their results.

The 2012 surveys included questions focusing on the role of Conexiones improbables in order to discover what the project managers and the artists found most helpful and what kinds of further improvements they suggest for future rounds. **Overall, the respondents were satisfied with the support from Conexiones improbables,** some were even delighted, and only two managers indicated that they were disappointed. In response to the open question about which aspects in particular they appreciated:

- Several project managers wrote **“everything”**, so it appears all the phases of the support are important to them.
- Beyond the actual tasks fulfilled by Conexiones improbables, the project managers valued the spirit: the **enthusiasm** shown by Conexiones improbables and the help in overcoming doubts.
- The artists, too, indicated that the help provided in all the phases of the project was important.

The most frequently mentioned type of recommendation from the participants for future rounds would be **to manage expectations better in advance of the interaction.** Two aspects were raised here. First, **communicating to the organization that artists** who enter into an artistic intervention in an organization **are not “just another consultant”** paid to provide answers and deliver a specific result as efficiently as possible, but rather **a source of questioning, opening up space and trying out possibilities.** The second aspect of managing expectations entails emphasizing to all the participants that **getting something out of the experience means really engaging in the process.** A question that arises from this analysis is whether there is a drawback to fully-externally funded projects. Might having to pay at least a part of the cost of the artistic intervention be necessary to increase the project managers' and their employees' commitment to engaging in the process?

The role of the intermediary is very significant, but of course the responsibility for getting the most out of the artistic intervention lies primarily with the members of the organization and the artists. All three types of respondents were therefore also asked in the survey to consider whether the organization and/or the artist **could have done more/should do something differently next time** to make the project more valuable. Quite a variety of suggestions appear in the responses, indicating that each actor engaged in some (self-)reflection. **The most common concern they addressed was the need to invest more time on the project together.**

⁸ See Berthoin Antal in collaboration with R. Gómez de la Iglesia and M. Vives Almadoz 2011 for a comprehensive review of the roles of intermediaries and their development in Europe. Also Berthoin Antal 2012.

Conclusions

The current **economic crisis** in Spain is creating pressures on companies of all sizes, and many SMEs are experiencing existential concerns. So the idea of investing time and money (in the case of Creative Pills: public funds) to work with the arts may at first glance seem superfluous. However, as the project managers indicate in the surveys, **such difficult times require new thinking and new energies** —and these are among the **most frequently mentioned benefits** that project managers and employees drew from the collaboration with the artists in Creative Pills. The responses to the survey suggest that these two kinds of resources generated in the interactions with the artists (and sometimes also with the intermediary from Conexiones improbables) stimulate the respondents to overcome doubts about their ability to innovate and deal actively and creatively with the challenges they face, individually and collectively.

Another striking finding of this preliminary evaluation was the **frequency** with which the respondents mentioned **expanding their contacts into the local community**. This finding confirms that the benefits from the artistic interventions may well spill over beyond the boundaries of the organization (Berthoin Antal 2009; Schiuma 2011).

Considering that the Creative pills format entails just three half-day work sessions over the course of three months, these are **considerable achievements**.

There is also visual material from the projects on the Conexiones improbables website (www.conexionesimprobables.com). The images and mini-films generated during and after the projects capture complementary aspects of the experience that the written survey format is not equipped to access. These materials can be mined in order to deepen the understanding of what actually happens in artistic interventions in organizations and how these activities generate value, for example by observing people's gestures and physical interactions to see what they reveal about the creation of relational space in the collective learning processes (Berthoin Antal & Friedman, forthcoming) and emotional energy as a resource for action (Collins, 1993). The visual material can also be examined to discover the roles that artefacts may be playing in the communication and collaboration between the artists, project managers and employees (Nicolini, Mengis & Swan 2011).

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