

NETWORKS - BEST PRACTICE GUIDE

The topics addressed in this guide should be of interest to anyone who is connected to a Craft Network, is considering joining a Craft Network or is interested in establishing a Craft Network.

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Background

This document was compiled by the CCoI after a series of meetings looking at Best Practice in Networks (Sligo 1999, Naas and Kilworth 2000). In addition, in recent years CCoI have seen a wealth of information from facilitated sessions with groups of craftspeople coming together to share activity. The establishment of GANS (groups, association, networks and societies) is another noteworthy development and illustrates how important it is for groups to share learning amongst each other. The CCoI acknowledge the valuable contributions given to all these gatherings by enthusiastic and committed craftspeople.

It is hoped that these guidelines will assist decision-making for individuals who are thinking about setting up or joining a network.

For information on the Network Scheme run by the CCoI contact Mary Whelan at 056 776 1804, or by email at maryw@ccoie.ie. To find out when our next closing date is for network support please see www.ccoie.ie/networks

WHAT IS A NETWORK

For the purposes of this guide, a Network has ***an agreed purpose or focus among a group of craftspeople.***

A Network is created when like-minded people, operating in a particular discipline, come together to share ideas, discuss problems, find solutions, and seek opportunities.

Although there are many types of Craft Networks, they generally fall into two categories:

MARKETING & PROMOTION NETWORK – e.g. Homethrown

The main focus of Homethrown is to increase members' sales of pottery through the promotion of Irish handmade pottery. Additional benefits to this Network are educating the buying public about quality pottery products and heightening the importance of craft programmes for producing skilled potters and ceramicists.

SKILLS & EDUCATION NETWORK – e.g. Cork Textile Group

The focus of this large network is to promote the discipline and augment the skills of its members through workshops, exhibitions and educational programmes for schools. Through publicity, promotion and exhibition sales, the Cork Textile Group also offers its members commercial benefits.

“WHY DO YOU NEED A NETWORK?”

There are numerous reasons for joining or starting a Craft Network. Some of the most common reasons are listed below:

SOCIALISING AND OVERCOMING ISOLATION

For some craftspeople, the opportunity to discuss the day-to-day operations of their enterprise with a colleague is enough to justify involvement in a Network. Contact with colleagues is particularly important for people that work in studios located in remote areas and/or where there are few craft enterprises.

This ‘professional isolation’ can lead to loneliness, low morale, and loss of opportunity. A Network provides the opportunity to meet and talk about craft and design. This, in itself, can be stimulating, informative, creative and enjoyable.

ENHANCING EXPOSURE AND PROMOTION

Exposure and promotion are vital for success, not only for small craftspeople but for the outlets in which their products are sold. However, the cost of promotion for small companies can be prohibitive. For example, good photography is a basic tool for many promotional activities but the costs can be high. A group of craftspeople in a Network can avail of quality photography at more affordable rates.

ACCESSING FUNDING AND SUPPORT

Development agencies are prepared to support small, craft-related enterprises that demonstrate initiative. In many cases, this support is dependent on the merits of specific projects. Remember there is strength in numbers. Networks may have more influence when it comes to lobbying state agencies for support.

POOLING INFORMATION AND EXPERTISE

Limited resources, time and expertise often mean individual craft enterprises do not have substantial clout to market and sell their products. Many craftspeople share the same goals and challenges. Networks enable them to share expertise, advice and market information. This group interaction allows individuals to address market demands more effectively. Exploring new markets, particularly export ones, is more manageable when pursued by a Network than by an individual craft enterprise.

ENHANCING SKILLS

Updating skills and developing new products is crucial to survival. The strength and commercial relevance of the craft sector is dependent on product design that is fresh, innovative, progressive and timely. Group efforts can greatly enhance the opportunities for development and education. Together, Network members can learn about technical developments, facilitate training opportunities or highlight disciplines and skills in decline.

Many craftspeople also find that working alone can contribute to ‘sterility’ in product design. Interaction with your contemporaries can be an ideal way to enhance creative stimulus.

“WHAT SIZE SHOULD A NETWORK BE?”

Network size varies enormously from 6 to over 300 members. Numbers depend on a Network’s resources, members’ needs and their expectations.

Some Networks set a membership ceiling, as they believe efficiency will diminish if numbers increase beyond a certain level. New Networks often find it useful to initially limit membership until the group has become established.

Establishing membership criteria can be a thorny issue for many Craft Networks. This can vary markedly. Some Networks observe strict membership criteria while others open their membership to anyone who is interested in joining. The main criterion for determining Network participation and size are:

- Geographic location
 - Standard and quality of work
 - Principal focus of the Network
- For example, Networks pursuing education and training as a principal focus typically believe the larger the Network, the greater the opportunity to lobby for resources.

FULL-TIME vs. PART-TIME

Network membership is attractive to full-time and part-time craftspeople. Networks where membership comprises primarily of full-time craftspeople typically focus on marketing and sales strategies. They tend to have higher subscription rates and employ professional Network managers to implement activities as part of a long-term strategy.

Networks open to both full-time and part-time craftspeople tend to have a larger membership and smaller subscription rates. They pursue strategies with broad aims and objectives. But this kind of membership mix may present a unique set of problems, as network members divide naturally into two groups. These groups may have widely divergent motivations and expectations. If not handled carefully and transparently, such a two-tier membership could impair a Network’s effectiveness.

“WHO RUNS A NETWORK?”

Typically, networks are managed by a steering committee, comprising of members filling the following roles:

The Chairperson is responsible for calling and managing network meetings. He/She is often a signatory on all network documents, including financial matters.

The Secretary is responsible for managing incoming and outgoing communication among network members. They also take minutes at the meetings.

The Treasurer is responsible for managing network finances, such as producing end of year accounts, monitoring budgets and cash flow. He/She is a signatory on the chequebook.

Representative(s) Depending on Network size, one or more members sit on the steering committee to oversee Network activities on behalf of all members.

Depending on financial resources, some Networks employ an **External Manager**. Their job description would typically include the functions of the Chairperson, Secretary, and Treasurer. Great care should be given to the choice of an external manger because they are there to facilitate promotion of the network and its activities.

FILLING COMMITTEE ROLES

It is important to match a committee position to an individual’s talent, ability, and willingness to execute their duties. Consider committee positions carefully as the typical length of service is one year. The number of committee members and their associated roles depends on the network size. But bear in mind that a committee with too many members becomes unwieldy, and one with too few members becomes overburdened.

FINDING A CHAIRPERSON

In appointing a chairperson (or external manager) look for someone who is:

- A good communicator and listener
- Committed
- Fair
- A peacemaker
- A good organiser and delegator
- Able to motivate members
- Well briefed on the expectations and needs of the members
- Respected by the membership
- A good leader.
- Affordable (in the case of an external manager)

Bear in mind that if a Network does not have funds to employ an external manager, all tasks and activities should be apportioned fairly to avoid individuals becoming overburdened, frustrated and cynical about Network participation.

“HOW MUCH DOES IT COST?”

Regardless of size, every Network needs money to fund their activities. The amount needed varies hugely. In order to work out how much money is needed, a Network needs to decide on an accurate **Financial Plan**.

TIPS FOR FINANCIAL PLANNING

- Outline the ‘essential budget’ required for the Network to pay basic operation and communication costs (telephone, stationery, postage, travel and petrol)
- Plan a calendar of events in order to meet Network aims and objectives.
- Assess much it would cost to implement each planned Network activity. Try to allow for unforeseen costs.
- Bear in mind that Marketing and Promotion Networks require a larger budget to meet the cost of achieving their goals and objectives (photography, publicity, literature etc)
- It is likely that some planned activities might have to be adjusted, scaled down or postponed to another period if costs prove to be too high.

Once you have worked out a Financial Plan for your Network, the next stage is sourcing revenue. The two most common sources are **Subscriptions** and **Grants**.

SUBSCRIPTIONS

Membership subscriptions are the most efficient way to fund a Network’s operation costs. Subscriptions can range from as little as €15 a year to over €900 a year. They can be collected by cash, cheques or direct debits allocated over a period of time.

Subscriptions are usually broken down in two ways: Members can either pay a small initial fee for the year with pro rata contributions for each activity organised. Alternatively they can pay a realistic flat fee for annual activity (in one payment or in instalments).

Bear in mind that flat fee subscriptions allow Networks to avail of *matched funding opportunities from development agencies such as the Crafts Council of Ireland.

GRANTS

Network aspirations often require more funds than members are able to commit. Because of this, a large number of Networks receive funding from development agencies. These agencies include the:

- Crafts Council of Ireland
- Regional Enterprise Boards
- Arts Council
- FÁS
- Leader
- Dublin City Council
- Údarás na Gaeltachta
- County Arts Offices
- Shannon Development
- Partnership for Peace and Reconciliation
- Private sector funding

* A Network can receive the same amount of funding from development agencies as is pledged by its members.

TIPS FOR GRANT APPLICATIONS

Many Networks find the grant application process time-consuming and difficult. It may help to:

- Ask the funding body to outline the specific information required in order to enhance your chance of success.
- Provide background information on the Network (reasons it was formed, aims, planned activities, membership list and visual examples of members' work).
- Give details on the Network's management structure, how funds will be handled and accounted for and the detailed project budget for which the Network is seeking support.
- Explain to the funding body how their support will offer advantages to both Network members and the craft sector in general.

MANAGING THE MONEY

Once a Network has sourced its revenue, it's time to manage it properly. New Networks need to:

- Register the Network name with the CRO (Company Registrations Office)
- Set up a bank account for the Network. There are regulations governing the establishment of new accounts for organisations. Check with your local bank for details on how to comply with these regulations.
- Identify at least two signatories for the Network's bank accounts, who will be authorised to sign cheques on behalf of the network.
- A postal address for bank correspondence will have to be decided. For practical reasons, it should be one of the signatories.
- If members decide to spread their subscription over a period of time, direct debit mandates with the relevant banks can be set up on agreed dates.
- Include bank charges in the yearly budget and, if necessary, shop around for the bank that will offer the Network favourable terms.

“WHAT ARE THE RULES AND REGULATIONS?”

Rules and regulations vary greatly from one Network to another. Some Networks have loose regulations, while others have *‘Articles of Association’, and in some cases, form a limited company. Generally, the longer the Network is established, the more formal the structure becomes. Whatever the size of the Network, it is good practice to outline some basic rules covering:

- **Membership terms.** The conditions for joining and leaving the network should be addressed early in a Network’s formation.
- **Financial practices.** For example, if Network funding is based on matched funds and a member leaves, how will it affect the budget?
- **Liability and confidentiality.** At the time each member joins, they should read and sign a copy of the Network rules, outlining the membership and subscription terms. This should be factored into the Network rules and regulations.

PLANNING MEETINGS

Networks should agree on a strategy for their meetings. Planning and structuring them properly maximises results and saves time.

- At the AGM, decide how many meetings will be held in a year and agree on the meeting length and format.
- Appoint a meeting venue to suit as many members as possible. If necessary, rotate venues to facilitate attendance.
- Nominate a chairperson to guide the meeting and a secretary to write the minutes. These positions may rotate from one meeting to the next.
- Give two weeks notice before the date of the meeting and circulate an agenda at least one week before the meeting. This gives members the chance to add agenda items to ‘Any Other Business’ (AOB).
- Begin Network meetings by reviewing the minutes of the previous meeting and ask members for corrections and clarifications before ‘signing off’ minutes.
- Ensure important decisions are agreed and documented at the meeting. Date all documents and provide an attendance list for the meeting.
- In the network rules and regulations, outline a procedure to allow any member to call an EGM (Extraordinary General Meeting).
- Most importantly, open and close the meetings promptly, so members can plan their time away from the studio.

* The CCol have a template for an ‘Articles of Association’ that can be tailored to the needs of individual Networks.

“WHAT PROBLEMS DOES A NETWORK FACE?”

Craft Networks, like all organisations, do have problems. Recognising these problems is the first step towards solving them. The most common Network problems include:

STAFFING

Most staffing problems come about because the Chairperson or Network Manager operates on a voluntary basis. As a result, they often feel overburdened and unappreciated. It is vital that other committee members help share the burden and deliver on tasks they agree to perform. If Networks fail to share responsibilities equally among members, they increase the risk of losing hard-working, committed members.

FUNDING

Funding and finance can be a severe problem for Networks. This is made worse by the fact that many Networks find the funding application process laborious, complicated, and fruitless. See Section: “How Much Does It Cost for?” for tips on applying for funding assistance.

AIMS AND OBJECTIVES

Incompatible needs, goals and desires can be the main reason for conflict within a Network. In order to avoid future disputes, one of the first things a Network must do is identify its aims and objectives. Many Networks have been in existence for a long time and, as they evolve, it is a good idea to revise aims and objectives periodically.

PERSONALITY CLASHES

Many craftspeople work on their own and don't need to compromise with others in their professional life. It can therefore be difficult to make compromises within a Network. There will always be a wide spectrum of personalities, perceptions and opinions. But bear in mind it is possible to be a member of a focused, successful Network, without getting along with every single member. Often, these differences contribute to the Network's energy and dynamism. Social and professional compatibility are not a condition for Network success.

OUTSIDE HELP

When problems become severe, external mediation may help put a Network back on track. As part of their Network Support Scheme, the Crafts Council of Ireland can offer mediation services. This has proved to be successful not only for periods of disagreement but for the start-up of a new Network and the evaluation of Network milestones.

HOW CAN THE CRAFTS COUNCIL OF IRELAND HELP?

The Crafts Council of Ireland has a wealth of experience in establishing and managing Craft Networks. Our staff are there to help.

For new Networks, support can be given at meetings to focus the group and outline its exact aims and objectives. The CCoI also offers, where necessary, expertise from specialist consultants.

Existing groups can access the same support to assist in managing Network development and momentum.

Finally, before you decide to join any Network, take the time to answer honestly the following questions:

- Why am I interested in becoming a member?
- Do the network aims and objectives match my own?
- Can I professionally identify with the other members?
- Is my work compatible with the work of other members?
- Do I comply with the network's membership criteria?
- Can I afford the subscription?
- Can I afford the time required to become a committed member?
- Is the network well organised and managed?
- What are the network's short, medium and long-term plans?
- What are the benefits to network members?
- What are the advantages for my business?
- Will my voice be heard?
- Would I be proud to be a member of the network?