

# Why studying arts like acting or dance can better equip business students for the post-COVID world

July 20 2021, by Lucy Gill-Simmen

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COVID has seen the idea of caring for your employees take on a [whole new meaning](#). As workplaces reopen and companies deal with the socio-

economic fallout of the pandemic, leadership specialists [increasingly stress](#) the importance of maintaining this focus on human needs.

Beyond the immediate imperative to keep employees safe in the midst of the health crisis, [business](#) administration specialist [Hubert Joly](#) [underlines](#) how managers need to consider the longer term mental health needs as well as sense of purpose and social wellbeing of their workforce.

Historically, the so-called [soft](#) or [people skills](#) required to do this were not the primary focus of a business and management education. Rather, [management theory](#) centered around what managers do: planning, organizing, coordinating and controlling.

This focus has long had its critics, of course. One answer, which is backed up by [years of research](#), is that when business students engage with the arts and humanities at university level, it can equip them with the additional skills that they need.

## Soft skills

Returning to the office post-lockdown has put [kindness](#), [compassion](#) and [empathy](#) at the top of employee wishlists. Workers now expect their managers to be [more supportive](#).

Although [long recognized](#) as important leadership skills, the pandemic has made these more salient. And with [changes to the workplace](#) like remote working and increased use of virtual technology likely to be [here to stay](#) to some extent, the greater demand for such skills may be permanent too.

When teams were sent home amid lockdown procedures, our ability to collaborate was also [dramatically reduced](#). Collaboration has [long been a](#)

[focus](#) of workplace culture and managerial methods. [It is key](#) to quality of work, innovation and employee engagement.

Companies emerging from the pandemic are therefore understandably keen to get their employees working effectively together [once again](#). This also makes [cultural intelligence](#)—defined as the skill by which you understand other cultures, learning from ongoing interactions and adapting your thinking accordingly—even more [important](#) than before.

## **How can arts studies help?**

Students themselves are conscious of the importance of human-centric skills, as well as critical thinking and creative problem-solving. A [survey](#) of 1,000 Australian students in 2020 found that 88% believed [soft skills](#) to be necessary for their future career, with 78% agreeing such skills would give them an advantage in an increasingly automated workplace.

These findings are confirmed by [a 2021 study](#) among undergraduate aviation students in Australia. The respondents thought non-technical skills such as critical thinking, problem-solving and emotional intelligence would be highly necessary in the post-pandemic economy.

Human-centric skills are best learned by doing. This kind of experiential approach is something the arts have [traditionally offered](#). Unlike a standard management lecture, where students will sit and listen to lecturers passing on their knowledge, arts majors—[student](#) dancers interacting in a dance routine, for example—focus on ideas and expression.

Since the 1980s, management education specialists have noted the impact of including [poetry](#), [music](#) and [literature](#) in business courses. In a 2002 study, American management theorist Robert Mockler looked at how drama, too, could [be used](#). He highlighted the leadership lessons to

be found in Shakespeare—from Henry V and Coriolanus to King Lear—and the presentation, [self-awareness](#) and leadership skills to be gleaned from [taking acting classes](#).

Business students are more likely to be found in a financial accounting lecture or an organisational change dynamics tutorial than learning about storytelling. Yet storytelling serves as a [powerful tool](#) for communication both inside and outside organisations. Narratives enable companies to develop their own personas and for brands to forge [customer relationships](#).

Beyond techniques, [a simple visit](#) to an art museum can readily enhance the [critical thinking](#) skills for any student—not just art history majors. The arts engage us, as the audience, mentally, physically, and emotionally. And they prompt us [to understand](#) and improve the world and ourselves. This may be one of their most powerful uses in education.

To this end, [prospective students](#) interested in pursuing a business and management degree should be encouraged to immerse themselves in additional arts and humanities courses. Even better, they could seek an [interdisciplinary degree](#) where arts and humanities are embedded in the curriculum.

US business schools often dabble in the [liberal arts](#). But in the UK, [business students](#) will need to dig a little deeper to find a way to integrate the arts into their studies. There are [professional development courses](#), which include acting classes to promote self-awareness and creative writing classes.

Students can also acquire these skills by themselves. In [A Whole New Mind](#) management specialist and author Daniel Pink recommends taking [drawing classes](#) and heading to storytelling festivals. It's about developing the right side of the brain, the side [most often associated](#) with

soft skills.

**More information:** Arvind Malhotra, The Postpandemic Future of Work, *Journal of Management* (2021). [DOI: 10.1177/01492063211000435](https://doi.org/10.1177/01492063211000435)

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