

Business Volunteers for the Arts®
[Arts + Business Council of Greater Philadelphia](#)

Tell us a little bit about your organization.

The Arts + Business Council of Greater Philadelphia (ABC) was established in 1981 and is an affiliate of the [Greater Philadelphia Chamber of Commerce](#). Our core programs include three skills-based volunteer programs: [Business Volunteers for the Arts®](#) (BVA); [Technology Connectors](#) (TC); and [Philadelphia Volunteer Lawyers for the Arts](#) (PVLA). BVA and TC match volunteer consultants with nonprofit arts organizations (or arts projects with fiscal sponsors). PVLA matches volunteer attorneys with arts nonprofits (operating budgets up to \$1 million) as well as with individual artists, arts collectives, and other organizational structures; and provides pro bono legal support for patents across the state of Pennsylvania, for all types of inventors (who meet financial eligibility criteria).

We also offer three leadership programs: [Business On Board](#), which prepares business professionals for board service in the nonprofit arts sector and matches them with boards; [Designing Leadership](#), which is executive development for the creative sector (nonprofit and for-profit creatives); and [CreativeXchange](#), an interactive leadership development program that takes professionals out of the world of analytical thinking and, through the creative process, helps them begin to understand, tap into, and maximize their creative potential.

We also bring thought leaders to Philadelphia to stimulate thinking and conversations around topics that relate to innovation, creativity, leadership, and more. And we host an annual [ABC Awards Celebration](#) to recognize outstanding ABC volunteers, creative and philanthropic leaders, and exceptional arts and business partnerships.

When did your BVA start and can you give us a brief history of it?

BVA was the founding program of ABC of Greater Philadelphia, beginning in 1981. Around 2000, as requests for technology-related projects were increasing, a new program modeled on BVA was added—Technology Connectors. TC operates much like BVA, with projects focused on technology and volunteers coming from technology companies and backgrounds. For some of its existence, TC had a dedicated program director, but now operates essentially as a branch of BVA, with the same staff managing both programs and combined orientation sessions for new volunteers. The main difference is that experienced TC volunteers help with TC project assessments and scoping.

How active is your BVA?

We start about 40 new BVA and TC projects each year, with about 75% BVA and 25% TC. We typically have about 30-35 active projects at any one time. Most projects are handled by a single volunteer, although about 20% of our projects are team assignments (typically two volunteers with complementary skill sets, usually within one program, occasionally one BVA and one TC). We have many repeat arts clients, but we are always adding new organizations to our roster of clients. Within any given year, we don't typically support more than one BVA or TC project with a single arts organization; occasionally one project does lead right into another one, but more often it suggests another one that might be done later. We rarely tackle more than one BVA or TC project with a single organization at the same time, unless they have a large enough staff to support two separate consulting engagements. But during the course of a BVA or TC project, an arts client may also receive service from PVLA and/or may be matched with a board observer or a current board member through Business On Board.

How is it structured/operated?

New BVA and TC volunteers pay (or their employers do) a one-time fee of \$250 to enroll and are required to attend a half-day orientation session before being matched on their first consulting assignment. Each new volunteer is interviewed in person before the orientation session so the program director can explain the consulting model and assess the level of expertise and types of assignments appropriate for each individual. We typically look for business/technology professionals with at least five years of experience following college, but sometimes we make exceptions for those with less work experience, but direct experience in a consulting role. Arts clients also pay a fee to ABC after they have been matched with a volunteer consultant; project fees range from \$100 to \$1,000, based on organizational operating budgets, but by far most of the fees we receive range from \$100-\$250.

A program staff of three full-time employees (Director, Governance + Consulting Services; Programs + Community Manager; Programs Associate) manages all aspects of BVA, TC, Business On Board, Designing Leadership, and CreativeXchange. One additional program staff member manages PVLA, with support from a steady stream of part-time, mostly unpaid law students working as interns or fellows.

The administrative/marketing staff (three additional full-time employees) supports volunteer program marketing/recruitment and business support/fundraising, but is not directly involved in the delivery of volunteer services, training sessions, or ongoing relationships with volunteers, arts clients, and alumni.

Once a volunteer accepts a consulting project, we facilitate the initial “match meeting,” then document the project scope, deliverables, and time frame in a project agreement, signed by both the volunteer(s) and the main contact at the arts organization. We then check in with both the volunteer(s) and the arts client on a monthly basis to see how the work is progressing and to offer guidance as needed. We ask for end-of-project reports when the work is completed.

How do you find and work with volunteers?

We have a “pipeline” of new volunteers through businesses that support ABC as Producer Circle sponsors, because those sponsorship packages often include a set number of opportunities for employees to participate in our volunteer programs. We also promote volunteer opportunities through the Chamber. And we get a fair number of volunteer referrals from our existing volunteers.

How do you find and work with arts organizations?

Because we have been in the community for so long, we are well known within the arts sector and project requests tend to roll in without a great deal of marketing outreach. Also, people in the arts community talk to each other and often work across different organizations, so we get a lot of referrals through past arts clients. Our volunteer consultants—as well as the board members we place through Business On Board—often identify the need for a new consulting project. Local foundations and other service agencies sometimes refer arts organizations to us as well.

What has been the most successful aspect of your BVA, and what has been the biggest struggle?

The best evidence of success—in addition to having a BVA program that has been around for 35 years—is that our volunteers consistently tell us that they value the consulting opportunities we find for them and they feel they gain more than they give through BVA projects. (Our arts clients would make the same claim, which is also a good sign.) At least 4-5 times each year, we hear from a BVA volunteer who has completed a consulting project and then joined the board of the arts organization we matched them with. And organizations we’ve worked with over time—one project or board placement at a time—will often point to ABC as having made a significant impact on their organizational development and success.

The biggest struggle is resources—staff stretched thin across several programs, not as much time as we would like for in-depth analyses of impact, or “continuing education” and networking for our volunteers. Volunteers often come to other ABC events, but we rarely have the opportunity to convene them just as volunteers to see what we might learn from them or what they might learn from each other that would strengthen our programs.

What feedback have you gotten from any of those partners, or do you have a positive anecdote you can share?

Our best success stories are with organizations we get to work with over time, across one program, or even better, across two or more programs. The same can be said about our volunteers—the ones who take multiple assignments over time, learn from each arts client, and gain confidence and insights that they bring to the next project often have the greatest impact, and become the best ambassadors not only for ABC and our programs, but for the arts community.

What does the future hold for your BVA?

It’s hard to imagine how we can increase the volume of BVA and TC projects with available resources, but we are always looking for ways to increase the impact and do a better job of measuring the results of the work done by our BVA and TC volunteers. We also strive to generate more stories and testimonials that really capture the benefits of the work for both the arts and business sides of the equation. Increasingly, we are looking to add new programs—like Designing Leadership and CreativeXchange—that offer other ways to “bridge” the arts and business communities and broaden the conversation about the importance of our region’s overall creative economy—nonprofits, for-profits, and individual artists and “makers” alike.