

Business Volunteers for the Arts®
[Arts & Business Council of New York](#)

Tell us a little bit about your organization.

Arts & Business Council Inc. was created in 1965 by a group of business leaders from the New York Board of Trade, with the purpose of creating closer ties between business and the arts. In 2005, Arts & Business Council Inc. merged with the national organization Americans for the Arts, and all New York City programs are run by the Arts & Business Council of NY (ABC/NY) under the umbrella of its parent organization Americans for the Arts. ABC/NY is both a division of Americans for the Arts and its own, separately incorporated nonprofit.

The mission of the Arts & Business Council of New York is to develop creative partnerships between the arts and business communities in New York, enhance the business skills of the arts sector, and promote creative engagement within the business sector.

Through its [Diversity in Arts Leadership](#) (DIAL) intern program, ABC/NY has placed hundreds of college students from diverse backgrounds in arts management internships and paired them with business mentors for a summer full of cultural activities and personal and professional growth. The [Emerging Leaders of NY Arts](#) (ELNYA) network is a peer-managed program providing young professionals in the first decade of their careers with opportunities to develop the contacts, skills, and knowledge they need to advance to senior leadership positions. Throughout a yearlong [calendar](#) of professional development, ABC/NY provides vital support and training to arts organizations enabling them to develop skills to strengthen their organizations.

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

The Business Volunteers for the Arts® (BVA) program was launched in 1975 by the Arts & Business Council (now the Arts & Business Council of New York) and, with assistance from the Rockefeller Foundation, replicated across the country.

How active is your BVA?

Building upon its 40 year history, the BVA program of ABC/NY has shifted its model to become a full service employee engagement program. Over the course of the past two years, our staff and resources have been laser focused on the development of expanded programming, new online services, customized engagement menus, and advocacy and training to local arts organizations and business partners.

We've created a robust [digital matching platform](#)—a place for program participants to post, search, and apply for available opportunities—equipped with tools and resources to help the arts and business communities to better partner and highlight the benefits of utilizing one another's assets. With over 50 projects representing more than a dozen local arts organizations to date, ABC/NY's program has opportunities for individual volunteers and teams of volunteers; customized volunteer events for businesses; and bringing the arts into the workplace or employees to the arts. During the past two years of development, we have matched only a small number of volunteers and business groups, totaling 5 individuals, 1 group, and many more placements made through our two annual arts volunteers fairs (with 40-60 business attendees at each). Presently, our emphasis is on placements, training, and marketing to businesses, and we expect our program placements numbers in 2016 to climb significantly.

How is it structured/operated?

ABC/NY currently has two staff members working across all programs. As it stands, the coordinator oversees individual volunteer matching (skills-based and non-skills-based)—the interviews, matchmaking, project oversight, and evaluation. This staff member also assists arts organizations in scoping their projects and facilitates the project addition on our digital portal. The director leads the effort to manage group matches and customized events for businesses, working in the same way as intermediary between the two, as well as with arts organizations to prepare their projects for the portal.

Much of our professional development also supports this program, and we provide training and resources to help arts organizations better partner with the business community. We have a series of workshops, webinars, and events throughout the year that address topics related to employee engagement and provide opportunities for the two sectors to convene.

Funding for this program comes from local government, corporations, and foundations interested in capacity building for arts organizations and building bridges between the arts and business communities.

How do you find and work with volunteers?

Volunteers often come to us via our website. They hear about us through word of mouth, internet searches, and events throughout the year. Outreach for our annual Arts Volunteer Fair targets past business volunteers and HR, CSR, and marketing professionals at local businesses. Along with promoting events through our listerv and social media platforms, we also market on the event calendars of strategic partners like the Manhattan Chamber of Commerce, Crain's NY Business, NYC Service, and Con Edison's Power of Giving platform.

How do you find and work with arts organizations?

Arts organizations have a number of entry points to our program. Firstly, since ABC/NY has been around for 50 years, we have a large arts network from years of service. Many organizations are introduced to us through our professional development training and events and through our other programs like [DIAL](#) and [ELNYA](#). When we began building out the [matching portal](#) with arts projects, our team did some targeted marketing to arts organizations locally—organizations that we had worked with in the past and new ones—explaining our program, the value proposition, and how they could participate.

Once an organization has a volunteer project in mind, the process varies based on their level of experience with volunteers. For organizations with little to no prior experience, there is a significant amount of assistance required from staff. Our team works closely with these organizations to ensure projects are well thought out, scope forms are completed in detail, and that they have a plan in place to manage, track, and measure the project and volunteer(s). For organizations that are more experienced with volunteers, there is a familiarity with volunteer scope forms and they tend to have processes in place to oversee the life of the project and capture and report outcomes.

How do you find and work with businesses?

We encourage participation in our employee engagement offerings to businesses already connected to us through our programs, board members, events, and companies that fund our work. We are currently working to add some of our "plug and play" group volunteer opportunities to a corporate menu for internal departments to use when looking for team projects. We hope to do this for more businesses going forward. Marketing our program to local businesses is currently a major focus of ours and we are working internally and with advisors in the business community to develop a strategic marketing plan.

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

One of the best aspects of our BVA is the large base of arts organizations and artists in NYC, many with a history working with ABC/NY and the BVA program. This familiarity with our program within the arts field and among individual business volunteers in the region has helped us remain at the center of the pro bono volunteer placement effort in the arts.

One of things we're finding in this process is that our program is extremely niche compared to some of the national service organizations working across nonprofit issue areas. Oftentimes we're not viewed as a direct competitor but more a supplemental service provider in a specific area, the arts. This is also one of our biggest challenges and demands increased visibility of our work and messaging for the value of working with the arts and its overlap with many other social issue areas. The future is bright, and if we can continue to utilize the power of collaboration, we can make a much larger footprint with our limited resources.

What does the future hold for your BVA?

Our team has been diligently laying down the foundation for robust BVA and employee engagement program with exciting new opportunities to build bridges between the arts and business sectors in New York City. The future of our program is filled with even more experimentation, sharing best practices with our national counterparts, and learning from one another. In the coming years, we hope to uncover a strong demand from businesses to connect with the arts community, through capacity building projects and those that foster creativity and innovation in the workplace and among employees. We will continue to expand the breadth and depth of services provided, delving deeper into training topics, experimenting with new formats and delivery mechanisms, and further refining our best practices for partnering with businesses on volunteer and engagement projects. Thinking creatively about building relationships with organizations that share this space with us (e.g. NYC Service, Taproot, NY Cares, Volunteer Match, Catchafire, Idealist, Common Impact) is key to developing innovative partnerships with them. We are beginning to leverage these new relationships by recognizing the similarities and differences in our services, acknowledging our shared beneficiary and user base, and exploring ways to collaborate on professional development.