

ARTS AND CULTURE

Denver Startup Week zeroes in on artists as entrepreneurs

Corporations can benefit from having "creatives" in the workforce
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Artists see things differently. It's as simple as that. And because artists see things differently, they can be a corporate asset.

That simple proposition, requiring a shift in the way the culture perceives the role of creatives, is at the heart of the kickoff address for the sixth annual [Denver Startup Week](#), Sept. 25-29.



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Laura Callanan of [Upstart Co-Lab](#) will deliver the keynote, “Great Minds Don’t Think Alike: Artists as Innovators in Business, Government & Society” on the opening day. She intends to offer proof that it’s essential in building any enterprise to bring artists into the mix. “It’s not enough to have MBAs and techies,” she said by phone from New York. Specifically, Callanan said, artist innovators are an untapped source of value for organizations in business, government and the social sector.

The "designer" track at Denver Startup Week, one of six

program tracks, is intended as a comprehensive guide to entrepreneurship in the creative economy. Overall, the idea is to persuade decision-makers of the benefits of engaging, partnering with, and investing in artists.

Callanan, who formerly served as senior deputy chairman of the National Endowment for the Arts, offers findings from neuroscience about the benefits of diversity of thought, and proof from business schools of the economic value of creativity and diversity.

She highlights how arts businesses are exploring for-profit models (the most significant example being Santa Fe's [Meow Wolf](#), which may be coming to Denver).

“CEOs know they need more creativity in the workforce,” Callanan said. “But knowing you need it and knowing how to go get it, how to optimize and engage creative people— those are two different things. We’re developing a toolbox for doing this effectively.”

Upstart Co-Lab offers a framework using the traits of artists— openness, seeking an original approach, not being constrained by what’s gone before— for “folks trying to come up with elegant solution.”

Callanan talked to the Bonfils-Stanton board last year and met with locals thinking about arts and the creative economy. “I’m excited to bring this conversation to entrepreneurs and leaders in Denver,” Callanan said.

Now is the time, she feels.

“This really is a moment. With the popularity of platforms like [Kickstarter](#) and [Indiegogo](#), it’s clear that people want to support creative work, even if they don’t think they can do it themselves. If you look at mayors and governors from throughout the U.S., cities and states are commissioning creative economy plans.” They recognize creative work is important to social cohesion and to assure a sustainable future, she said.

“With CEOs, government leaders and everyday people all valuing creative work, this is an important moment to be pushing forward.”

Don’t tell the boss, but more than a few attendees at Denver Startup Week will be folks with 9-to-5 jobs who are sneaking out to catch a session in hopes of launching their own business.

Perhaps the most telling aspect of Denver Startup Week, operating under the 501(c)3 of the Denver Downtown Partnership, is its steady growth. Attendance has increased by 3,000 every year since it began in 2012. Organizers expect 15,000 this year. Underwriters include Herman Miller (for the design track) and title sponsors WeWork, [Downtown Denver Partnership](#), [Comcast](#), Chase for Business and Aging2.0.

Boasting over 350 events and billed as the largest free entrepreneurial event in North America, Denver Startup Week is “a summit of entrepreneurial energy, innovation, and

connection” with sessions devoted to “the very best in tech, design, DIY-making, marketing and leadership.”

The content is mostly local. Again, it’s free.

“People say you could charge \$1,000 for the week for this quality of event,” according to Castle Searcy, co-chair of the designer track. “It is free and will always be free.”

Creative strategist [Brian Corrigan](#), of [Oh Heck Yeah](#) (best known for turning the [Denver Theatre District](#) into a first-of-its-kind immersive street arcade in 2014), is co-chair of the design track. The tone is less tech-driven than in the past. “This year,” he said, “the focus is not just on tech but how we develop programming that supports entrepreneurship in the creative economy.”

Organizers suggest limited bottom-line thinking is out; broad, sustainable businesses that serve the social and physical aspects of communities are in, with art and culture integrated into community development.

Contrary to the flaky/dreamy stereotype, Corrigan believes “artists make the best entrepreneurs,” giving value to something that didn’t have value before. “They make something out of nothing. Part of art is really imagining new futures.”

DSW comes at the perfect time, Corrigan agreed, since “there’s a national trend where people are looking to artists to solve the most pressing challenges of our time.”

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