The changing world of museums and arts centers—with tighter budgets and greater technology influence—requires an artful shift in HR practices.

By Archana Mehta
When you think of art, what do you think of? You probably think of an art piece or a favorite art gallery—probably not a “virtual” art gallery that you can access right from the comfort of your living room, like Google’s Art Project.

Indeed, art museums are rapidly changing, prompting senior human resources officials to quickly adapt with them.

“As our society changes and evolves, museums must follow,” says Elizabeth Detels, SPHR, manager of human resources at the Seattle Art Museum. “They must reflect the communities they serve.”

HR professionals across the country are experiencing a wave of changes at their museums, whether it’s a new interactive Gauguin exhibit in Seattle, the ability for visitors to use their smartphones to learn more about pieces of art in Denver’s museum or Saint Louis’ aggressive new social media push to interact with a wired audience.

For HR managers, the goal is to attract and train employees who can adapt and excel in a changing environment at a time of enormous financial constraints for museums from coast to coast.

“Money is the biggest hurdle for us,” says Nancy Martin, SPHR, HR director at Saint Louis Art Museum, which is free for all visitors. “But because we also rely so heavily on membership and donations, we are constantly having to manage our controllable costs, like benefits, and trying to do more with less.”

Linda Orr, SPHR, the human resources director at Denver Art Museum, can relate to the challenges facing the Saint Louis museum. Addressing the needs of hundreds of full-time...
staff—including payroll and benefits—can be daunting when money is one of the biggest challenges facing the arts today. So museums are looking to younger audiences as a way to expand their reach, develop lifelong patrons and grow their revenues. This shift to engaging younger audiences has a significant impact on HR practices.

“The art education piece is incredibly important,” Orr says. “If we don’t expose young people to art at an early age, they’re less likely to be donors and patrons in the future. In addition, lack of funding affects HR specifically as it has an effect on staffing levels.”

With money tight all around, museums are getting creative—to the benefit of both their communities and their workforces. At the Seattle museum, which relies on earned revenue through memberships and ticket sales plus contributions to keep its doors open, Detels says that the 250-person full- and part-time staff are trying “to look at things upside down and in a different way” in order to evolve with the times.

“From an HR perspective, what that means for me is that all [staff members’ ideas] are heard, no matter how unusual or impossible it might sound,” Detels says. “And this has real implications on how we work together.”

Those discussions influence Detels’ decisions on hiring, staffing, training and retaining personnel.

“If we’re reflecting on how museums evolve in a changing world, then that has direct implications on who we hire, how we organize our meetings, how we organize our organizational chart in order to get the best ideas from the most diverse sources to explore and perhaps implement,” says Detels, who began her career in general management at the La Jolla Playhouse in California.

But managing a diversity of employees, ranging from curators and conservators to full-time and part-time staff, introduces its own challenges because there’s a constant need to find the right personnel for a variety of positions and create a collegial workplace.

“There is quite a dichotomy,” says Orr, the Denver HR director, who has been working in the HR field for 13 years. “It’s necessary to create an environment that can bring everyone together.”

On the other hand, working in a museum environment has its benefits. Employees believe in the work of the museum and in the work that they do. Working in such a mission-driven environment creates a collegial, friendly workplace, HR managers say.

“Because we have a national reputation for excellence, and we already have talented
professionals currently working at our museum, talent acquisition at many levels is easier,” says Martin, the Saint Louis director, whose love of St. Louis brought her to the museum a year and a half ago. “People want to work here.”

In Denver, the feeling is the same. “Working at an art museum is very much like working in academia,” says Orr. “We have highly educated and highly talented staff who love their work and are very passionate about art.”

Finding young talent remains a top priority for museums, so internship programs are critical to their long-term success, even as museums rely heavily on the expertise of their veteran employees.

“We have considerable tenure at the museum; some staff members have been around for 35-40 years,” Detels says. “The experience and more traditional viewpoints of museum-going are highly valued. However, bringing in younger talent helps us continue to keep up with what’s going on outside the museum. We’re really benefitting from the best of both worlds.”

Martin adds, “Our interns and research assistants add a nice complement to our tenured staff. They help us stay on the cutting-edge of where art museums are going.”

HR professionals say that at times tension can arise because of the different viewpoints. But if successfully managed, the contrasting perspectives make for a better experience for the museum-goer, they say.

Indeed, museums are doing whatever they can to stay on top of the latest technological and cultural shifts.

It helps to have a passionate, forward-thinking board of directors who sees the value in being progressive, while also remaining true to the more traditional museum school of thought. “How do we, as a museum, commit to our mission while being responsible?” Detels asks. “The board is very much involved and looks to our senior leadership and partners with HR to deliver on that greater directive.”

For instance, Seattle Art Museum recently changed its policy regarding photography. The museum used to prohibit photographs in its art galleries. But with social media and digital cameras, camera phones and tablets becoming more popular and accessible, the museum in March 2010 decided to change its policies and allow photography in certain galleries.

This allows friends and followers of museum-goers to witness some of Seattle’s most stunning art exhibits through social media.

“We think this policy change makes for a stronger museum-going experience,” Detels says. “These photos now show up on Facebook, tied to Seattle Art Museum. It’s a different way of museum-going that reflects our ever-
Denver Art Museum has taken some different steps for the wired museum visitor. The museum has created a new mobile application called “DAM_SCOUT,” which allows museum-goers to uncover content and learn about exhibitions by scanning Quick Reference (QR) codes. The QR codes are set up like barcodes, which allow various types of data to be encoded.

By scanning the codes from their smartphones, enthusiasts can access a multitude of information — they can listen to artists, museum experts and even comedians speak about the art they are witnessing before their eyes, and then share that content on Facebook and Twitter.

Similarly, part of a Gauguin exhibit currently on display at the Seattle Art Museum has an online, interactive component. Visitors can click on an interactive map to learn about Gauguin’s influence around the world.

Visitors can watch YouTube videos from curators, view images of Gauguin’s art and read content on Gauguin’s life. This creates a comprehensive experience for museum-goers and provides them with the ability to continue their art experience after they leave the museum.

All of these enhancements led to an aggressive effort by Seattle Art Museum to engage with outside audiences through social media. Detels says that the HR department encourages employees to be active on the museum’s Facebook page and Twitter feed. They encourage employees to comment on posts and photos and to repost articles.

“It’s a different way of working,” she says. “And from my HR office, we’re going to see more internal communications with employees on a social media platform.”

Martin says embracing technology can be a hurdle for some within the museum. However, the past year has seen the Saint Louis Museum begin to embrace social media and use Facebook, Twitter and Flickr to connect with its audience and fans.

“There is so much potential for us using social media and reaching new audiences, getting them in the door and then providing them with a rich experience and then interacting with them in the mediums they use,” Martin says. “The more engagement we have, the more likely museum-goers will buy memberships, which support the museum, and stay committed to the arts.”

While museums must take advantage of technology, money shortages can place a burden on how quickly museums can evolve.