

Business as (un)usual

(5 minute read)

Published: 30 March 2021

Written by: Rian Trim, Office Manager and Executive Assistant

Back in January 2020, I interviewed for my role as Office Manager and Executive Assistant at John Ellerman Foundation's office, which is based by Embankment in Central London. I remember looking around and thinking that it would be an adjustment to work in an open plan office with five colleagues. At the time, I had been working for an arts funder for two years, as part of a small, two person team. Of course, back then, I had no idea that not only would I be offered the position, but that I would be starting the role with a laptop couriered to me, working remotely and alone!

At first this may sound disappointing and isolating. In some ways that is true. However, I am relieved to say that despite the circumstances wrought by the Covid-19 pandemic, this past year has been one of learning and adaptation for me and the wider team. We have learnt to draw on the art of the possible, rather than dwell on the impossible.

I wonder if we were helped by the fact that by the time the first lockdown was implemented and I had arrived, half the team at Ellerman was new! Sufina joined as our new Director in January and Gareth as our new Grants Manager in February. When I joined in March, Philee had only been with us as our Grants Assistant since September 2019. As you can imagine, us new starters leant on Dorothee, our Head of Grants, Matthew, our Head of Finance and Resources, and our Trustees, for institutional knowledge, and we are very grateful for their support during this most unusual of years.

The last year also saw changes to our Board. We said goodbye to long standing Trustee Brian Hurwitz in April 2020. Nearly one year later, we welcomed Jonny Hughes to the Board, who brings with him a wealth of experience in the environmental sector. We recruited to Jonny's role without using a recruitment firm, and we were very pleased (and relieved!) with how the process went and the calibre of applicants received, which speaks to our ever-growing reach and reputation.

Amidst all this change, we have been working on further defining our organisational identity, a process that never really ends. [Updates from the team](#), including this one, is one of the new ways in which we are communicating regularly and externally about the things that matter to us. We have also been using our Twitter account more regularly, and are now followed by over two thousand individuals and organisations.

Another way that we are seeking to explore and share our identity further is through our so-called 'History Project'. This is something I am passionate about, as it really allows me to build on my interests and experience of working with archives and historical material, which I gained originally through my research for my BA and whilst working in museums and galleries. 2021 marks our 50th anniversary, and we are committed to thinking about how the insights from our past can shape and reinforce our identity today and in the future. To support this work we are reviewing our own archival holdings; working with academics, historians and researchers, and partnering with the [UK Philanthropy Archive](#) based at the University of Kent. The History Project has been internal facing so far, and we have also been planning how to share our progress on this more publicly, so keep an eye on our [website](#) and Twitter [@EllermanUK](#).

In the past year, like most people, technology has become our friend. My role within the team and the wider organisation is a diverse one and I had to build trust quickly. Technology has enabled

us to build connections within the team through regular work meetings plus some social gatherings with 'catering by post' to our respective remote working locations. Shortly before I joined the Foundation, our IT systems were moved to the cloud, which was fortunate! Internally we have undertaken a number of exercises as a team and in small working groups to review and streamline our electronic filing systems, introducing a basic set of guidelines to maintain these, and we have put systems in place to ensure our policies are monitored regularly and are fit for purpose. Technology has also enabled us to meet our governance, grantmaking and financial audit commitments; convene meetings with grantees and external colleagues; and develop existing and new working relationships. In addition, online learning and participation has enabled us to attend events that perhaps we wouldn't have been able to in real life, such as international conferences, training and workshops.

Although there was a small window of opportunity last year to go to the office and meet all of my colleagues face to face at least once, I suppose that within my role, I am least familiar with the office management side of things. For example, pre-pandemic, our meeting rooms were available for use by our grantees at no charge. I am really looking forward to being able to reopen these rooms, perhaps later this year, and meet and interact with grantees.

Alongside developing a Covid-19 response for our grantees and applicants, we were also able to undertake new work that we had planned to do in 2020 anyway. This included a [perception survey](#) with grantees, unsuccessful applicants and other funders, led on by nfpSynergy, and developing a new [Investment Policy](#), which we published externally to our website for the first time too. It has also been a year of collaborative working partnerships with other funders to support one another – some are of course in response to Covid-19, and others are existing partnerships that have been strengthened even more in the past year.

Despite the challenges of the past year, and joining the Foundation in this way, I feel very pleased (and a little bit surprised) at what the wider team and I have managed to achieve. As a team we have all had different personal circumstances to contend with, yet we have adapted at speed to these business as (un)usual times, and it's a source of great pride to us all that we have delivered the core work of the Foundation and made progress on various new and existing areas of our work.