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Research
Centre for
Human Potential



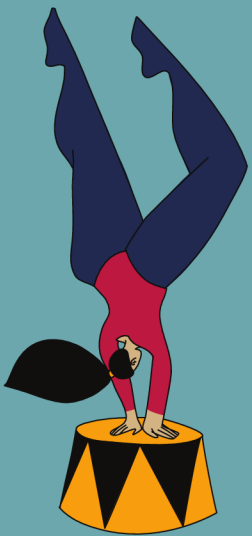
INFORMATION REPORT

**On challenges and best practices when
replacing circus artists**



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INTRODUCTION

Replacing¹ an artist within an ongoing circus production is a frequent and complex reality. Whether due to injury, a career change, or a desire for professional renewal, this process presents numerous challenges for companies. Beyond finding an artist with similar skills who can quickly assimilate into an existing choreography, multiple issues arise: integration into the group, prevention of physical and psychological risks, working conditions, professional status, and impact on collective dynamics.

Although these situations are common in the circus industry, they remain poorly documented. This prompted us to undertake a project aimed at better equipping directors, managers, and human resources of small and medium-sized circus companies. To this end, we assigned an intern, Martine Lauzier, a doctoral student in social sciences at INRS, under the supervision of Marion Cossin, a research engineer at the HUPR center. This work and document aim to inform and share experiences rather than conduct research. It serves as a practical integrative synthesis, presenting information as it stands, without analysis.

¹ We define the replacement of an artist as the need to replace an artist who leaves a production or an ongoing show for any reason.



It was vital for us to build this document in collaboration with members of the circus community. We started by asking them about the challenges they had encountered as well as the best practices they had developed. This process took place in several stages:

- An overview of knowledge was conducted in the summer of 2024 by the intern;
- Two roundtable discussions took place on October 22 and November 7, 2024, allowing seven directors, managers, and human resources representatives from small and medium-sized circus structures to exchange views on the challenges they had encountered and the best practices they had developed;
- Two surveys (one in French and one in English) were distributed in the fall of 2024 to the Quebec and Canadian circus community. 15 people completed the French survey, and four completed the English survey.

Based on the contributions of around 30 professionals, this report addresses key aspects of artist replacement in the circus context. While not exhaustive, this document serves to be a practical and concrete tool to support organizations in managing these transitions.

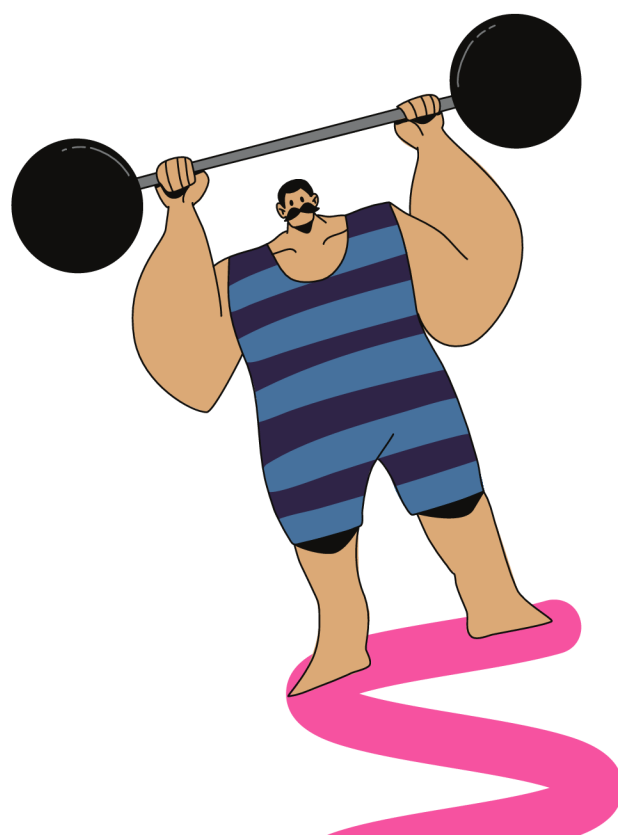


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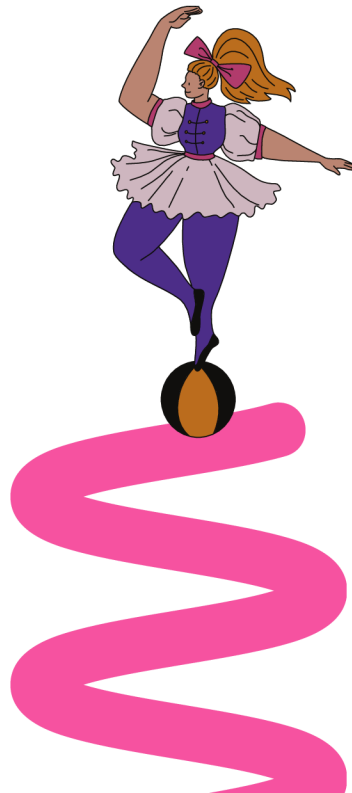
OVERVIEW OF KNOWLEDGE



There are numerous challenges surrounding the replacement of a circus artist in a show. For a replacement to occur, first, an artist must leave a production. This is not an easy decision, as each artist knows they possess unique physical and artistic abilities, making them difficult to replace (Dumont, 2022). Various factors can lead to a departure such as —injury, pregnancy, bereavement, physical or mental health issues, etc.—. Moreover, departing artists often have an exceptional team synergy since they trained with the rest of the group before the show. Leaving a production can cause feelings of guilt, care deeply about the show, their colleagues, and the company employing them. This decision can impact their artistic career (Dumont, 2022). For the company, replacing an artist involves significant financial costs and logistical adjustments. Depending on the company's size, financial situation, age, and human resources, its organizational practices range from informal to highly formal. The more formalized a company's practices and resources are, the better it can implement mechanisms to address various industry risks, such as the need to replace an artist mid-production. However, there are very few documented examples of circus companies adopting such practices apart from Cirque du Soleil (Beaunoyer, 2004; Massé & Paris, 2013). Over time, Cirque du Soleil has institutionalized itself due to its production success and growing resources. As a result, it has developed specific procedures that anticipate every step of an artist's replacement (Massé & Paris, 2013)².

² For instance, all acts are pre-recorded and shown to potential replacements. These artists first train at the Montreal facilities before joining the touring production. Once on-site, they rehearse during the day and attend performances at night to familiarize themselves with the show (Massé & Paris, 2013). These steps facilitate the integration of a new artist into a production, positively impacting group dynamics and performance. Another practice at Cirque du Soleil involves maintaining a pool of pre-trained recruits ready to join a show (Beaunoyer, 2004). To achieve this, Cirque du Soleil scouts talented artists worldwide and invites them to undergo several months of training. During this period the artists are housed, fed, and paid during training. Afterward, they must remain available to Cirque du Soleil for several months (Beaunoyer, 2004).

Smaller, mid-sized, and less formal circus companies often lack the resources to implement such replacement programs. Therefore, replacement conditions vary and can affect artists' health. In general, companies tend to underestimate the risk of injuries, despite their critical role in effective injury prevention (Cossin, 2019; Dumont, 2022). Additionally, injury risks differ between men and women. As Legendre illustrates with this expression, circus disciplines are often gendered: "elegant, flying girls and strong, base boys" (Legendre, 2016, p. 120). According to the author, female circus artists perform extra work due to the physical and artistic skills they must develop, making their workload more exhausting. In contrast, male artists focus more on physical skills (Legendre, 2016). Additionally, circus mothers have less time to train and rest, increasing their risk of injury (Dumont, 2022). Of course, artists must also play a role in injury prevention. However, finding healthcare professionals who can adequately treat circus-related injuries remains challenging (IRSST, 2009), especially for artists on tour (Dumont, 2022). Of the 220 circus artists who participated in Agathe Dumont's survey on risks, care, and health, 73% reported suffering chronic pain that impacts their work (Dumont, 2022, p. 33). Due to the repetitive nature of their movements, circus artists are prone to developing microtrauma that can evolve into severe injuries or experience acute trauma, such as falls with harmful consequences (Cossin, 2019). However, it is important to note that the number of severe accidents remains relatively low and that mortality rates in circus arts are similar to those in professions with a risk of falling from heights (Stuckey et al., 2024). Nevertheless, substitute artists may join a production already carrying injuries or develop new ones due to the demands of the performance or their age. The risk of injury increases with age (Goudard, 2010), which reduces the pool of available candidates for replacements.

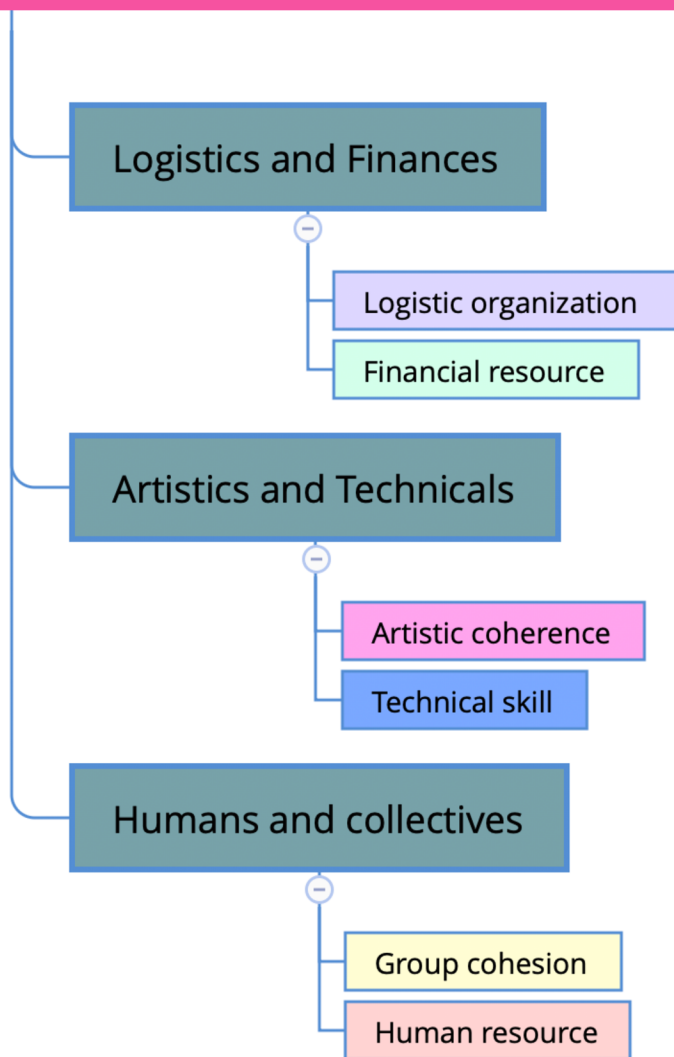


Another factor that negatively impacts the pool of candidates is career transitions. The career of a circus artist is relatively short, averaging around nine years (although this duration varies by discipline), and those who continue rarely remain active beyond 40 (Salaméro, 2015). Career transitions are sometimes voluntary, but often involuntary and constrained. They result from a complex interplay of factors such as age, gender, economic precarity, risks involved, physical and psychological health, and sociohistorical context (Reveau, 2021). However, among the new generations of circus artists, there is a growing desire to remain in the field for as long as possible. Through a multidisciplinary strategy involving learning additional circus techniques, artists have been delaying career transitions (Salaméro, 2015). This benefits companies seeking replacements as the workforce is becoming increasingly versatile.

In conclusion, we have not found any research that documents and characterizes the experience of replacing an artist within a small or medium-sized circus company. What about the integration and adaptation of substitutes, injury prevention and mental health, working conditions, training, and the logistical, financial, geographical, and temporal challenges? What is the impact on group dynamics, performance, and the artistic dimensions of the show? While this document does not explore these questions in depth, it provides an initial insight into the challenges and best practices of mid sized circus companies in Canada.



CHALLENGES AND BEST PRACTICES





A stylized illustration of a circus performer in a yellow tank top and red-and-white striped pants, balancing on a pair of black stilts. The performer is holding two silver plates on thin poles, one in each hand, raised above their head. The background is a solid teal color.

LOGISTICS AND FINANCES

"WHEN IT'S A LAST-MINUTE REPLACEMENT, YOU JUST NEED TO FIND SOMEONE WHO IS A GOOD MATCH FOR THE GROUP AND CAN STEP INTO THAT ROLE WITHIN THE TEAM. SO, THE CHALLENGE IS FINDING THE RIGHT PERSON WHO CAN BE THERE AT THE RIGHT MOMENTS AND HAS THE NECESSARY TECHNICAL SKILLS TO ENSURE SAFETY." (S. MCGOWAN-RICHER)



LOGISTIC ORGANIZATION

CHALLENGES

LOGISTICS

The logistical challenges of a circus performance are significant. Depending on the show's location (local, national, or international), logistics vary and become increasingly complex the farther the performance is from the company's headquarters. At the local and national levels, replacements are mainly arranged through professional networks. However, the process becomes more complicated when the desired replacement artist is an immigrant due to —limited permanent residency applications, lengthy and sometimes unsuccessful work permit processes, and other bureaucratic hurdles—. These factors reduce the pool of potential replacements. At the international level, performances require obtaining visas and work permits, organizing travel arrangements (transportation, accommodation, etc.), securing insurance, and finding suitable rehearsal and training spaces (if not provided by the venue). The existing logistical plan must be adjusted if an artist needs to be replaced during a tour or a series of performances. Obtaining last-minute visas for international performances is particularly challenging, as it involves tedious bureaucratic procedures. Additionally, finding local replacements abroad is difficult because companies do not always have established networks in every country where they perform.

GEOGRAPHICAL AND TEMPORAL

The geographical and scheduling aspects of replacements should not be overlooked. It can be difficult to find available replacements who can travel to the performance location and commit to the show dates and necessary rehearsals. If the company is based outside major cities with inadequate public transportation, this further complicates the situation. Companies may be tempted to prioritize replacements who are nearby or have their own means of transportation, such as a car. Coordinating rehearsal schedules is another challenge, as most artists juggle multiple projects and have busy calendars. In rural areas, a close-knit artist community often supports one another. However, some artists leave these regions to pursue opportunities elsewhere, weakening the existing network and reducing the pool of potential replacements.

PERFORMANCE BOOKING AND TOURING

The landscape of performance booking has changed since the COVID-19 pandemic. In response to the uncertainty that characterized the pandemic, some presenters have become more cautious about cancellations. As a result, many no longer confirm performance dates far in advance, opting to book only one or a few dates at a time. This makes it harder to plan tours and maintain a stable workforce for production. The difficulty in securing multiple performance dates has led some companies to create more adaptable, short-lived productions.

BEST PRACTICES

- Plan performance dates and book artists as early as possible;
- Avoid venues that offer only a single performance, as this is too energy-demanding and financially risky;
- Suppose visas have already been secured, but a replacement is needed, and new visas cannot be obtained due to long processing times. In that case, some companies find it easier to continue the performance without replacing the missing artist by adapting the show. Others prefer to search for local artists by working closely with the venue. However, finding local replacements can be a complex challenge without well-developed international networks.



FINANCIAL RESOURCE

CHALLENGES

Small and medium-sized circus companies often lack financial resources or must operate with tight budgets. Replacing an artist during a production can collect additional costs that are difficult to anticipate and absorb. For example, some substitute artists negotiate higher fees due to the urgency of the replacement and the risks they take in learning a role within short timeframes. Some companies implement an equal pay policy, ensuring that all artists, including substitutes, receive the same salary. Others would like to offer higher fees to replacements but cannot afford to do so. Additionally, some companies cannot rent a rehearsal space during a touring production due to budget constraints, meaning substitutes must train in the performance venue. However, this limits their preparation time before the show. Finally, many companies have reported that they cannot set aside funds or budget in advance for artist replacements due to their precarious financial situation.

BEST PRACTICES

- Set aside emergency funds to cover unexpected replacement costs (performance and rehearsal fees, hotel accommodations, per diem, transportation, etc.);
- Reassess the budget when necessary;
- Allocate a budget for training substitutes in advance, such as having backup artists available for specific dates;
- When applying for grants, include a budget for a substitute artist to attend all rehearsals and performances, even if funding is not guaranteed. This highlights the need for financial support in this area;
- Seek independent revenue streams and grants to improve the company's financial resources;
- Establish a financial subcommittee to anticipate and manage unforeseen costs;
- Request that presenters help fund substitute artists' work hours to prevent budget deficits;
- Help injured artists as much as possible so they can continue working or earning income during their replacement period;
- Be as transparent as possible with substitute artists regarding their compensation and available accommodations. Put all agreements in writing.



ARTISTICS AND TECHNICALS



"REPLACEMENT AND THE CHOICE OF A SUBSTITUTE SHOULD NOT BE TAKEN LIGHTLY BECAUSE WHILE THE ARTISTIC ASPECT IS IMPORTANT IF WE WANT TO ENSURE STABILITY IN THE LONG RUN, WE MUST NOT UNDERESTIMATE THE TECHNICAL DIFFICULTY AND THE CHALLENGE OF REMEMBERING SEQUENCES." (F. GÉRARD)

ARTISTIC COHERENCE

CHALLENGES

When replacing an artist, it is crucial to balance finding the right person with delivering the intended performance to the audience, minimizing any impact on the show's quality. Sometimes, the replacement must meet specific criteria that align with the artistic direction of the production (e.g., an African troupe may need an artist from that cultural background, or a social circus project may require an artist skilled in social action). These requirements make the search more complex. Maintaining the integrity of the show's original concept as much as possible is essential, even though it may limit replacement options.

BEST PRACTICES

- Search within personal and professional networks for an artist whose values and interests align with the project and the existing team;
- Train and/or hire multidisciplinary artists to ensure versatility within the team. When the budget allows, prepare an understudy;
- Support and mentor emerging artists to increase the number of potential replacements;
- Some companies prefer to reshape the show with the existing cast rather than hiring a substitute;
- Others develop backup acts that fit the production narrative and potential replacements' skills.

TECHNICAL SKILL

CHALLENGES

Artists with the same technical skills are not always easy to find in a small ecosystem like the circus industry. This presents a challenge, especially when a show requires multiple skills (e.g., a circus artist who is also a musician and a rigger). Finding someone capable of fulfilling all the necessary roles can be difficult. Most circus artists take on multiple responsibilities within a production, making replacements even more complex. In some cases, a substitute must possess highly specialized and diverse skills while also being able to perform for a specific audience. This versatility allows small and medium-sized companies to achieve a lot with a limited number of performers, but it becomes a disadvantage when a replacement is needed. That said, small and medium-sized companies tend to be more agile and flexible in adapting to unexpected replacements. In contrast, larger companies face more significant challenges in modifying or adapting a show due to the complexity of their technical infrastructure.

BEST PRACTICES

- Invest in marketing efforts to enhance the company's visibility and attract artists with the required technical training (e.g., aerial skills) and experience to join their productions. Developing and promoting its identity as a company specializing in specific disciplines can generate interest within the relevant artistic community and attract enthusiastic talents who align with its mission.



COLLECTIVES AND HUMANS

"WE ARE SMALL TEAMS, SO INTEGRATION HAPPENS THROUGH KNOWING THE ARTISTS, HAVING NICE CATERING, CARPOOLING, AND OTHER LOGISTICAL SUPPORT TO MAKE THE ARTIST'S LIFE EASIER." (M. DE ZANGRONIZ)

GROUP COHESION

CHALLENGES

GROUP COHESION

Circus companies are responsible for treating artists properly and ensuring strong group cohesion. A cohesive group fosters harmonious relationships, encourages mutual support, and creates a positive atmosphere essential for a thriving working environment. Moreover, trust among artists is crucial, as their health and safety are at stake during rehearsals and performances. When replacing an artist, finding someone who "fits" well with the existing team can be challenging. Sometimes, having an artist who does not match the group dynamics can be more problematic than continuing the show without a replacement.

Additionally, tactfully handling both the existing artists and the replacement is essential to ensuring trust and effective collaboration. Many companies have stated that group cohesion is more important than an artist's virtuosity. Companies may also face delicate situations, such as when an artist learns a show in preparation for a replacement but ultimately is not needed. In these cases, the artist may have spent time rehearsing—either unpaid or in paid rehearsals—expecting to perform and earn additional income. This can create relational tensions, with the company feeling guilty and the artist experiencing frustration and disappointment.

FORMATION

Training replacements are not always easy, depending on the circumstances. Limited time and practice space can make it difficult for an artist to learn a show efficiently. Additionally, teaching a replacement within a very short time frame, while not disrupting the entire group can be challenging. The terminology used during training is also crucial to ensure clear communication, prevent misunderstandings, and avoid injuries.

BEST PRACTICES

GROUP COHESION

- Define the ideal profile for the replacement and collaborate with colleagues to select artists who can take on the role;
- Prioritize candidates who have previously worked with the company or share its values and vision;

- Gather feedback from the existing cast after performances or tours to assess their experience with the replacement;
- Organize group sessions with current and former artists to keep everyone informed and foster a sense of community;
- Invite potential replacements to attend rehearsals to establish connections. Ask them if they would be interested in stepping in if needed —planting seeds and maintaining relationships;
- Find out more about the replacement's working methods and personality in advance to ensure a good fit with the team;
- Use communication platforms like Facebook groups, Messenger, or others to stay connected with confirmed and potential artists;
- Plan social activities around replacements, such as group dinners, drinks, or outings (bowling, board games, etc.);
- Conduct a debrief at the end of the project.

TRAINING

- Provide paid hours for independent study of the material;
- Start with a technical meeting to assess skills and ensure mutual trust and connection;
- Bring the replacement on-site to familiarize them with the equipment before they officially enter. Encourage them to watch recordings of the show multiple times beforehand. Schedule rehearsals with the replacement and the original performer when possible to help transition smoothly. Organize group rehearsals to integrate the replacement into the show's dramaturgy and make necessary adjustments;
- Approach training step by step, starting in small groups and focusing on one aspect at a time before adding music, singing, and technical elements;
- Assign secondary roles to replacements to help them ease into the show throughout the tour;
- Train as many artists as possible and pair emerging artists with mentors as long as funding and time allow. Develop a support system so the company has a broader network of replacements available in case of injuries or other challenges;
- Plan adequate rehearsal time for replacements to maintain high-quality performances. Check-in regularly with the replacement and provide feedback throughout the training process;
- Keep an updated "Q sheet," ensure other artists are available and open to working with the replacement, and take time for proper integration, including technical, artistic, and safety considerations;
- Invite artists to annual masterclasses to ensure everyone understands the basic terminology used within the company.

HUMAN RESOURCE

CHALLENGES

HUMAN RESOURCE

Small and medium-sized circus companies often lack the proper human resources to support replacements. As a result, other employees take on this task, increasing their workload. To facilitate replacements, some companies maintain a file or database with the artists who have participated in their shows, but due to limited resources, keeping it updated can be challenging.

RECRUITMENT

Recruiting a replacement in small and mid-sized circus communities involves informal practices, as many artists know each other in these circles (e.g., word-of-mouth, use of personal networks). Some companies also use more formal methods (e.g., job boards and employment websites). However, having and maintaining a strong network is crucial.

HEALTH & SAFETY

When hiring a replacement, the company must be able to rely on and trust that person, as health and safety concerns affect all performers. Replacing someone adds stress for everyone —the existing team, the replacement, and management— which companies should not underestimate.

BEST PRACTICES

HUMAN RESOURCE

- Meet with the replacement, clearly outline expectations and the company's framework, provide continuous follow-ups, and send the employee manual and artistic and technical policies to help them understand the company structure;
- Introduce the project, the team, touring life, and specific aspects in advance;
- Maintain an Excel file or database listing artists who have participated in previous shows and those who have expressed interest;

- Inform artists of the need for a "shadow replacement," meaning another artist who can perform the same act. Some companies include in the contract that if an artist leaves the production, they are responsible for finding or assisting in finding a replacement;
- Hold meetings with the replacement, artistic team, and administrative staff;
- Establish clear communication between the replacement and the general and artistic direction regarding the show, the role, scheduled rehearsals, fees for rehearsals and performances, UDA (Union des Artistes) contract signing, HR policies, and anti-harassment policies;
- Hire an external professional to manage replacements if the company lacks human resources;
- Develop partnerships with the private sector to offer additional contracts to artists, helping retain them within the company.

RECRUITMENT

- Reach out to artists who have previously been part of the show and those who have expressed interest;
- Utilize personal and extended networks via social media to seek replacement suggestions, spread the word, and call for auditions;
- Use job boards such as En Piste, Conseil Québécois du Théâtre, Regroupement Québécois de la Danse, Cultive, Quebec Drama Federation, DAM (Diversité Artistique Montréal), ATEQ (Association Théâtre Éducation du Québec), TUEJ (Théâtres Unis Enfance Jeunesse), Culture Montréal, circus schools, Cirque du Soleil, etc.;
- Encourage artists at various career stages to present their work. This will allow companies to meet emerging artists, support their development, and expand the pool of potential replacements;
- Contact potential replacements promptly and remain flexible with proposed terms and conditions;
- Avoid hiring artists who do not work well in teams or lack collaboration skills, even if they are technically strong and available;
- Request references and conduct background checks before hiring a replacement;
- Stay informed about artists specializing in the disciplines or techniques featured in the show;
- Maintain connections with other similar-sized companies to support and assist each other.

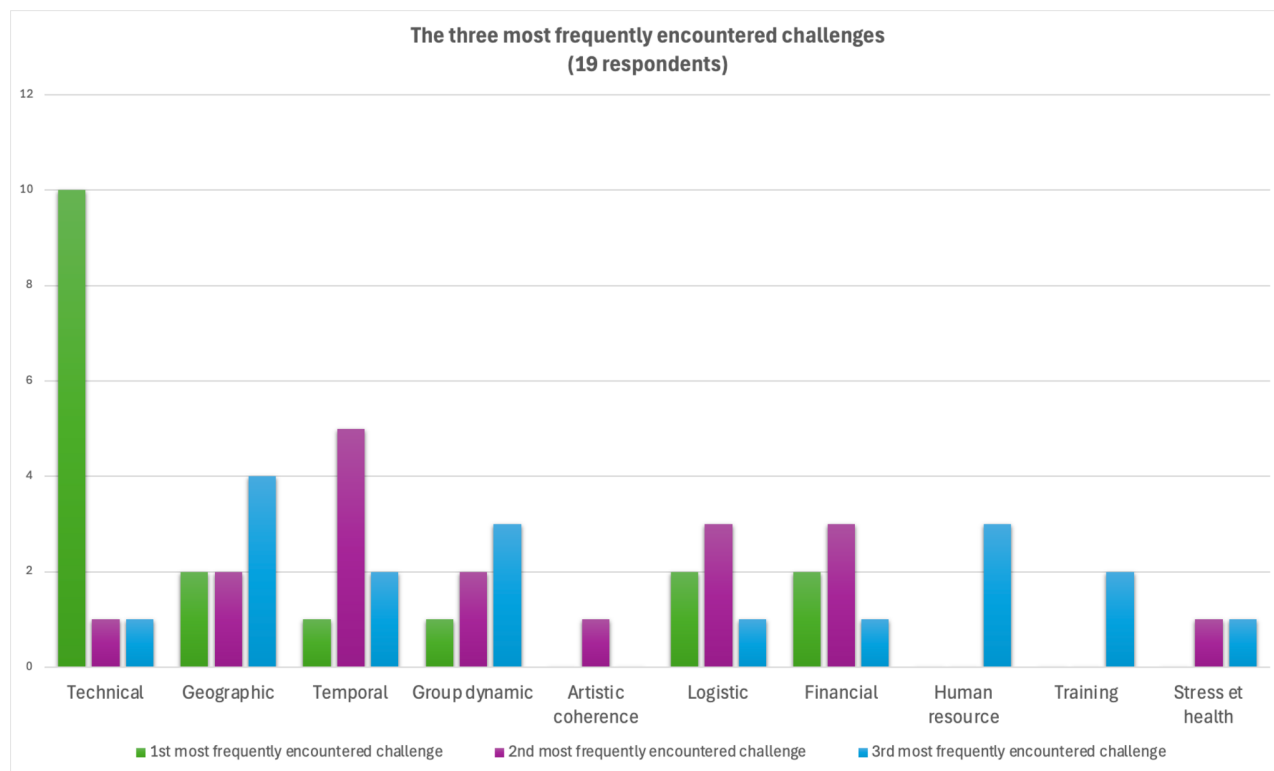
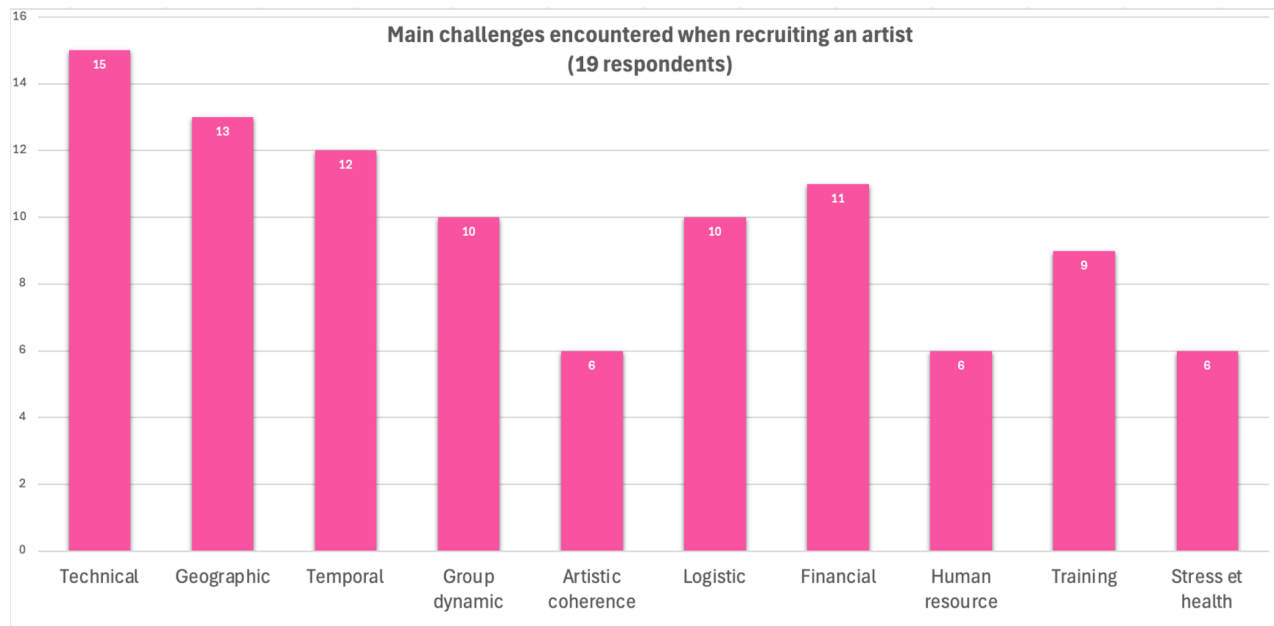


HEALTH & SAFETY

- Due to the significant safety risks in circus performances, organize at least one rehearsal before the performance with the replacement and the costumes, lighting, music, and equipment;
- Appoint a safety and insurance coordinator to enforce regulations and high standards, reinforced through regular safety checks during rehearsals and performances;
- Promote open communication and less hierarchical approaches to ensure everyone is responsible for each other's safety;
- Allow sufficient time for the replacement to integrate into the show safely. Avoid rushing the process, which could lead to injuries;
- Provide proper conditions for replacements, ensuring adequate warm-up time, that all artists are present and on time, and that they have access to a secure and comfortable training environment;
- Verify that the replacement has the necessary skills to participate in the show, ensuring they feel confident and are not pressured into performing something beyond their comfort zone;
- Encourage participation in external training programs to maintain skill levels and stay updated on safety practices;
- Approach training, performance, and recovery with longevity in mind. Remember that artists are human beings with unique experiences and valuable knowledge to share. Their overall well-being—mental, emotional, physical, and spiritual—must be properly considered to ensure they can perform at their best.

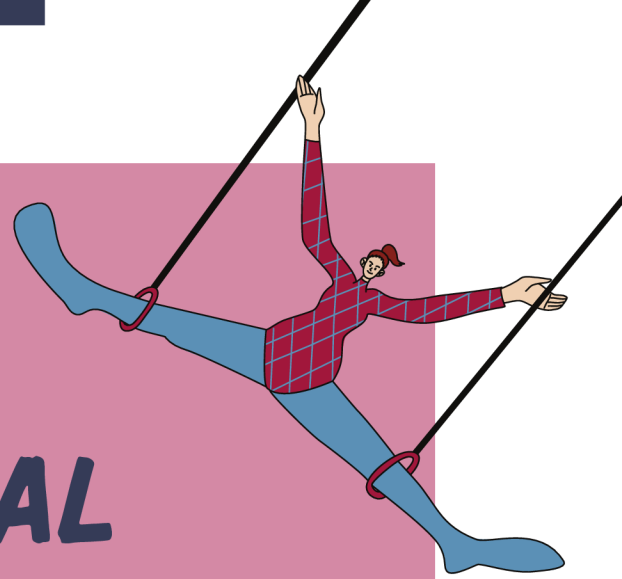


MAIN CHALLENGES ENCOUNTERED



IN AN IDEAL WORLD...

- Companies would have access to a lawyer to assist with all legal matters (visas, contracts, international work permits, etc.);
- They would have sufficient funding to plan for replacements, offer financial compensation, hold auditions, etc.;
- They would own their own space for rehearsals and creative activities instead of renting one;
- They would have custom-built data management software to support their operations better;
- They would organize more preventive rehearsals and additional paid collective sessions;
- The culture around performance distribution would change to offer companies more extended presentation periods, better conditions, and more support;
- They would have assistance in completing CNESST documentation in case of injuries.



BEST PRACTICES SUMMARY



LOGISTIC

Book dates as early as possible, avoid venues that only offer a single performance whenever possible, and consider adapting the show instead of replacing performers when international logistics become too complicated

01

02

FINANCIAL

Include replacement costs in budgets and grant applications, create a financial committee to assess unexpected expenses, set aside funds for replacements, and seek independent revenue sources

ARTISTIC

Adjust the show with existing performers or adapt it based on the replacement's skills and prioritize replacements who share the company's values and vision

03

04

TECHNICAL

Promote the techniques used in the company's performances to generate new talent interest and implement targeted marketing and recruitment efforts for artists with the required technical training

HUMAN RESOURCE

Communicate the company's expectations and needs, listen to the replacement, provide them with company policies, invite them to meetings, use job boards, networks, and word-of-mouth for recruitment, appoint a safety and insurance coordinator to enforce protocols, offer good replacement conditions, and allow enough time for the replacement to integrate into the show safely

05

06

COLLECTIVE

Prioritize artists who have previously participated in a show, nurture professional networks, ensure a good "fit" with the replacement and the existing team, organize social activities to strengthen team cohesion, allocate sufficient rehearsal time, start with small-group rehearsals before moving to full studio sessions with music, singing, and technical elements, and take the time to integrate the replacement properly



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PRODUCTION TEAM

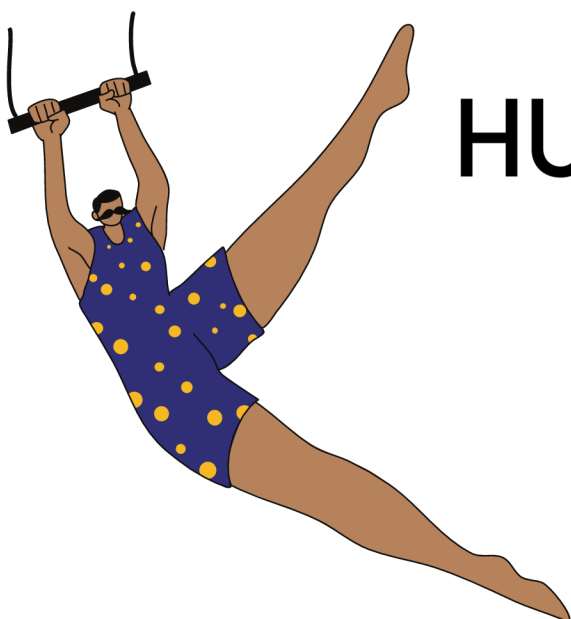
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HUPR shines both nationally and internationally, bringing together researchers, technicians, designers, educators and managers. With a transdisciplinary approach, it supports artists and organizations in integrating new tools and knowledge to innovate sustainably and push back the boundaries of creation.

Report production team

This information report was prepared by Martine Lauzier, an intern at HUPR and a PhD student at the Institut National de la Recherche Scientifique (INRS), under the supervision of Marion Cossin, a research engineer at the HUPR center.



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Participants in Roundtables and Questionnaires

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Contributors

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Visual Credit

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