

## **SMILE – the shortest way to a visitor-friendly museum**

The Museum of Fine Arts, Budapest (MFAB), opened in 1906. As one of Hungary's most outstanding and dynamic institutions, it receives around half a million visitors every year.

### **Project summary and outcomes**

Visitor services at MFAB have expanded widely since the 1990s, with the launch of docent and volunteer programmes and the expansion of children's activities and museum events. The role of room minders has also changed: besides making visitors aware of museum rules, they need to be able to tell them, often in English, much museum-related information; they also need to create a welcoming atmosphere, while still keeping an eye on the collection.

The main purpose of the *SMILE* project was actually to develop communication between visitors and museum staff, in particular room minders. *SMILE* addressed language learning and the development of staff intercultural competencies and skills. No similar staff training had been offered in the region, so the project challenged both participants and organisers.

The main outcomes were:

- Increased willingness among staff to participate in training and self-development activities;
- Greater understanding of their role;
- Greater awareness of consequences of room minders' reactions to visitors;
- Increased willingness to communicate creatively with foreigners.

### **Process**

The project was planned following discussions with staff team leaders and other colleagues. To help identify areas on which to focus, staff were surveyed about visitor-related challenges and English knowledge. At the same time, visitors were asked about their experiences in the museum, and the target group was involved in developing a curriculum which addressed the identified problems.

The objectives set for *SMILE* were to:

- Create a pilot training for general museum staff (room minders, cashiers, cloakroom minders and administrative colleagues);
- Develop and highlight communication channels and methods;
- Change the staff's attitude towards visitors;
- As a result, to provide visitors with a better experience during their visit.

The museum worked with several external partners to develop and deliver the project: The International Business School provided the English classes, Inspi-Ráció Association provided training and the Komoly-Hang Bt. company assisted with project coordination.

All room minders were invited to participate, and days off were offered for completing the programme. 28 out of the 96 participants met the expectation of participation of 80% (and received four paid days off), while only 8 room minders did not attend any sessions.

The training consisted of three phases:

1. Walkabouts in the museum: learning about the collection and the museum rules;
2. English classes: concentrating on spoken English and museum-related words. (If the course were to be repeated, both the duration and frequency of the classes would be increased;)
3. Communication and conflict-handling training. The age, educational background and fear of failure all created a negative atmosphere among participants in the first two sessions, so the delivery method was changed to be more instructive. There was also misunderstanding of the museum rules which room minders are expected to communicate. This was resolved by inviting the head of room minders to participate, resulting in a satisfactory solution and positive feedback.

The intercultural competencies of staff were improved through increased self-confidence, improved English knowledge, and by being better able to serve as “museum ambassadors” and help visitors to learn about the collection. Another benefit was an increased understanding of museum rules.

The project was successful in providing the room minders with the opportunity to speak up and enrich themselves, an area often forgotten by many museums. The attitude of the trainers meant that participants felt involved and open to new experiences. On the other hand, those room minders who rejected the idea of participation were impossible to convince, even though the museum offered a generous incentive for taking part. The timing of the training sessions coincided with many events around Christmas, which negatively affected participation.

For the museum, this was a true pilot project. For the first time, issues related to this segment of museum staff were addressed and awareness raised of the importance of the room minders’ skills, knowledge and attitudes. Although it is too early to say whether the project has created lasting change in the institution, the effect on the participants has clearly been positive. The project coordinator plans to make longer-term use of the project outcomes within staff recruitment and induction.

### **Institution**

Szép művészeti Múzeum / Museum of Fine Arts, Budapest  
[www.szepmuveszeti.hu](http://www.szepmuveszeti.hu) / [www.mfab.hu](http://www.mfab.hu)

### **Project coordinator**

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### **Target groups**

Museum visitor services staff