Books@Work has opened my eyes to what people are capable of. It's a unique opportunity to see individual thought processes firsthand.

-Employer
Dear partners, participants, professors, supporters and friends,

In a famous set of lectures at Harvard University, Italian author Umberto Eco explored the reasons humans read stories:

>“To read fiction means to play a game by which we give sense to the immensity of things that happened, are happening, or will happen in the actual world. By reading narrative, we escape the anxiety that attacks us when we try to say something true about the world. This is the consoling function of narrative — the reason people tell stories, and have told stories from the beginning of time... to find a shape, a form, in the turmoil of human experience.”

Although we do not limit our reading to fiction at Books@Work, we do in fact limit our reading to narrative. But we have tried — and failed — to successfully include non-narrative literature. Literature that seeks to teach. It may be strange to open an Annual Report by celebrating a failure, but this observation informs one of our most powerful learnings to date: for Books@Work to achieve its desired outcomes, narrative becomes essential.

Why? The power of Books@Work lies in sharing human truths that encourage the joint exploration of the divergent realities around the table. Each story connects deeply to a reader’s personal experience, providing varied lenses from which to view the characters and the plot. As one participant shared recently, “Even though every one of us had read the same story, none of us had read the same story.”

Narrative powerfully provides the canvas to explore these differences, to realize that our own perspectives — as “real” as they may seem — are often different from those of our colleagues. By using stories to explore these differences, we “give shape” to an understanding that others see the world differently, that plural views may be more effective than singular perceptions.

In this Annual Report, we are delighted to share our progress, our learnings and our impact in 2015. But more importantly, we thank you for your support and your partnership on our growth journey. We are honored to be using powerful narrative literature as a bridge across educational and cultural divisions, contributing ideas drawn from their life and work experiences and building deeper relationships.

Thank you.

Ann Kowal Smith
Founder and Executive Director

Felix M. Brueck
Chairman of the Board

Evidence & Impact

We are deeply committed to measuring our impact. With each program, we survey participants before and after, and we meet with as many participants as we can in one-on-one interviews. The surveys and the interviews (to date, we have nearly 350 transcribed interviews with participants in a wide cross-section of our programs), have yielded powerful insights that help us to understand the ‘lived experience’ of Books@Work and to shape and refine the program.

Evidence from the collected data tells us that through meaningful social interaction among the participants, Books@Work

- builds individual skills like critical thinking, communication (especially engaged listening), creativity and confidence
- nurtures team skills around trust, collaboration and critical dialogue
- strengthens a culture of respect and empathy, openness and inclusion, and innovation.

Engaging Minds, Transforming Communities

Individual Skills
- Critical Thinking
- Communication
- Confidence
- Creativity

Social Interaction

Culture
- Respect & Empathy
- Openness & Inclusion
- Innovation

Team Skills
- Collaboration
- Critical Dialogue
- Trust

Individual Level

Books@Work provides important opportunities to reflect, practice workplace skills and nourish creativity.

“When you have intellectual conversations like that, it fills up you and gives you more to give back to the patients. Especially with my team, we deal with people who are very sick. It can be very draining.”

At the Team Level

Books@Work fosters high quality connections that break down barriers, nurture trust and foster authentic openness and acceptance.

“Being able to get outside of your role and just be a person, a whole person, and not just a worker. I get to know you better and then when we go into our work situation, I already know you. There’s a higher level of trust because you’re a person now and not just a worker bee.”

At the Cultural (Organizational) Level

Books@Work creates important organizational networks to navigate the workplace and fosters respect and openness to diverse perspectives.

“Basically, it’s a shift of culture. It used to be very rigid and good or bad, a steady pace. Now, you can get a more open dynamic and people tend to forget about the hierarchy. They’re challenging me and their supervisors, if there’s a better way to do it. People have the courage to challenge.”

Through Social Interaction

Books@Work creates safe spaces for colleagues to interact, to learn together and to encourage meaningful social relationships.

“The great value was the discussions that I had with other people working in the company. Sadly, I think for many of us, depending on which department we work in, we’re somewhat siloed or walled in where we don’t have a lot of exposure with people out of our direct lane on a regular basis. I loved being able to actually have really great conversations with people who work in the company, who I may just see in passing, but have now come to know quite well.”

Participant, Hospital

Research & Contributions

These evidentiary themes link to important correlations already well established in the management literature. Building from the data we’ve gathered to date, our near term goals include using our qualitative evidence to

- lay the groundwork for more refined quantitative measurements to generalize our findings and demonstrate the broader impact of a Books@Work investment
- continue to refine the program to deliver the highest quality
- contribute to a multidisciplinary body of research on organizational learning, workplace culture and personal learning outcomes.

We will continue to interview our participants about Books@Work to keep our finger on the pulse of their experience, keeping it fresh, relevant and alive.

“[Books@Work] helped me with my children and the homework they can’t understand, learning the keys and concepts of the words that are in there. That helped me focus and learn to use the words a little bit better. If you don’t know the key points and the keywords you’re not going to get what the paragraph is actually telling you about.”

Participant, Hospital
Since our inception, we have read over 250 unique titles across a wide variety of genres. But there are narratives that work particularly well. Often these fit into genres that serve to open conversations, but also match the interests of the particular group. Importantly, we have found through our research that effective narratives have strong, relatable characters, an identifiable forward movement in the story, and a thorny issue or dilemma with which to grapple. Examples include dystopian novels like Drew Magary’s *The Postmortal*, historical novels like Sebastian Barry’s *A Long, Long Way*, classics like Willa Cather’s *My Ántonia*, multicultural voices like Edwidge Danticat’s *The Dew Breakers*, and powerful non-fiction narratives like Isabel Wilkerson’s *The Warmth of Other Suns*.

Interestingly, we choose books because they are easy, portable and accessible. But a good narrative can be an oral story, a film, even visual materials. Books@Work is about this narrative, it’s only incidentally about the books!

The communal experience is so good because everyone is coming from a different lens. Then when you put all those things together you see this prism of light and experiences. A couple of teammates brought up things that just blew my mind. I thought I understood this, but then once they gave me their perspective, it was like, ‘Wow, I never even thought to look at it that way.’

Participant, Healthcare Company
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Our donors, partners, participants and professors give life to Books@Work. Your dedication to lifelong learning helps individuals, families and communities. You are making learning accessible and inspiring. Together, we are empowering participants, and encouraging role models for learning at multiple generations.

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