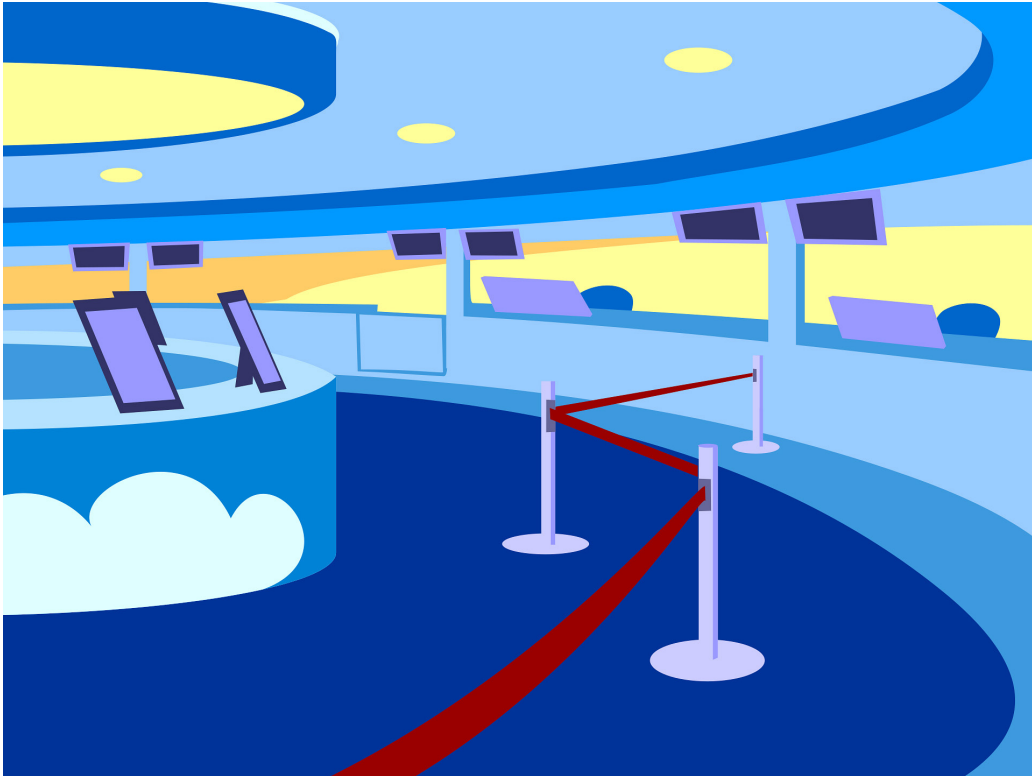# THE WAY FORWARD

## HOW DIGITAL TRANSFORMATION OF THE ARTS IS HAPPENING 'BEHIND THE SEEN'

**An interview with
Mathew Russell, Cultural Consultant
Former CEO, Queens Theatre, Hornchurch**

Extract from a report commissioned by:

iplicit

**Powerful Accounting Software**

# Introduction

We're going back stage, or to be more precise, back office.

And instead of looking at the digital revolution in the arts through the prism of on-line performances and production values, let's look at the impact of technology in being able to transform the finance function and administrative tasks.

That's in terms of the use of data for strategic through to granular decision-making rather than score-keeping, at how the customer experience can be improved.

In a report commissioned by iplicit, the cloud accounting software company, to be prepared and published by DECISION magazine later this year, the chief executives and chief financial officers of arts organisations across the UK will be highlighting the issues, sharing their thoughts on the way forward.

This is one of the interviews to be included.

# Adding complexity to responsibility

"Cultural organisations are more complicated than some might think. A theatre, for example, will have a completely different range of audiences for particular shows."

Mathew Russell, cultural consultant and former chief executive of the Queen's Theatre, Hornchurch isn't making the point as a negative. "It is the responsibility of a publicly funded theatre to offer something for every single person in its catchment area," he believes.

"The arts have never faced as many challenges at one time – the impact of the pandemic on audience behaviours, better addressing inclusivity, and all the while struggling with financial pressures exacerbated by reduced funding.

"Technology should assist us to understand the impact and consequences of decisions before we make them. There is real complexity in understanding audience behaviours, and an arts organisations needs to have the resource in terms of both technology and skill set because it can't fudge its way based on a combination of historical box office information and assumption.

*Mathew Russell*

"Traditionally customer surveys are only completed by a relatively small number of people and you can't entirely rely on the findings because they are not always a true representation of your audience.

"IT in itself though isn't the answer. The amount of data arriving in a CEO's inbox every day means they would have to open attachment after attachment to assemble all the data which needs to be at their fingertips. There can be so many different box office reports, so automation and integration would be useful to bring it all together on a dashboard to provide a snapshot which will influence decision-making."

"Technology can also help win hearts and minds," Russell believes. "If staff walk into a theatre and a live dashboard is telling them exactly what is happening with energy consumption, that really influences people because it's reality in real time – far more potent than a poster.

"An example of how technology can be deployed to increase more audience access is in audio described performances for visually impaired audiences, available for an individual attending any performance rather than one designated performance; it can be pre-prepared with a computer controlled cueing system to synchronise with what is happening on the stage.

"Creating more access using technology is incredibly powerful, but it's a specialism, and usually it's just part of someone's existing job and they're already overloaded."

"There is a risk that technology could reduce opportunities for employment," muses Russell. "Theatres still rely on fly operators, those who physically change the stage sets, and I can see where involving robotics could make that a quicker task. But regardless of the influence of artificial intelligence, there will still be a need for human oversight so we will know whether technology has been misinforming us.

"Otherwise we become totally reliant on technology rather than it being a tool. That reliance has already manifested itself. If IT goes down we can't sell tickets either at the box office or online."

"Artificial intelligence can be applied to the process of casting someone for a role, but technology already exists to identify possible names from criteria," he points out. "It's a bit like interviewing someone for a job. You can only really sense the dynamics of their personality when you're in front of them."

But Russell points out a real imperative for IT to be more centre stage as it were. "There is huge pressure building up because the arts have to do something to counteract the increasing average age of its audiences," he says. "Without data, how will we be able to identify, understand, and implement changes to ensure there will still be live theatre in fifty years time?

"Technology provides the opportunity for selling, segmentation, automation, a lot of stuff, but only if an organisation knows how best to utilise it and has the skill on board to do so. We can have all the tech in the world, but if there isn't time, resource, or propensity to understand it, that power isn't going to be realised."

mathewrussell@live.com

## About iplicit

Providing a cloud-based finance and management software solution that allows multi-academy trusts to focus on what really matters. Tailored for those frustrated by on-premise legacy software, iplicit provides greater flexibility and enhanced levels of reporting, integrating with other cloud applications for a seamless migration path from a user's existing system, enabling organisations to 'step up' to next generation finance software without losing the functionality they currently enjoy. iplicit received the Accounting Excellence award for mid-market and enterprise software of the year in 2020, and the top product for enterprise accounting/ERP in the Accounting Web software awards, 2021.

124 City Road, London EC1V 2NX
FOUNDRY, Brownsea House, Poole, BH15 1SZ

0207 729 3260
info@iplicit.com
iplicit.com

Unit F7 Riverview Business Park, Nangor Road, Dublin 12, Ireland
info@iplicitireland.com
(+353) 1 592 0850

*The interview with Mathew Russell was undertaken with Luke McKenna, specialist at iplicit in working with arts organisations.*

**About DECISION magazine**

First published in 1988, DECISION magazine reflects the business lifestyle, the trials and tribulations, the hopes and aspirations of directors and managing partners responsible for businesses with a turnover of £5million and above.

07737 308371
mail@decisionmagazine.co.uk
www.decisionmagazine.co.uk