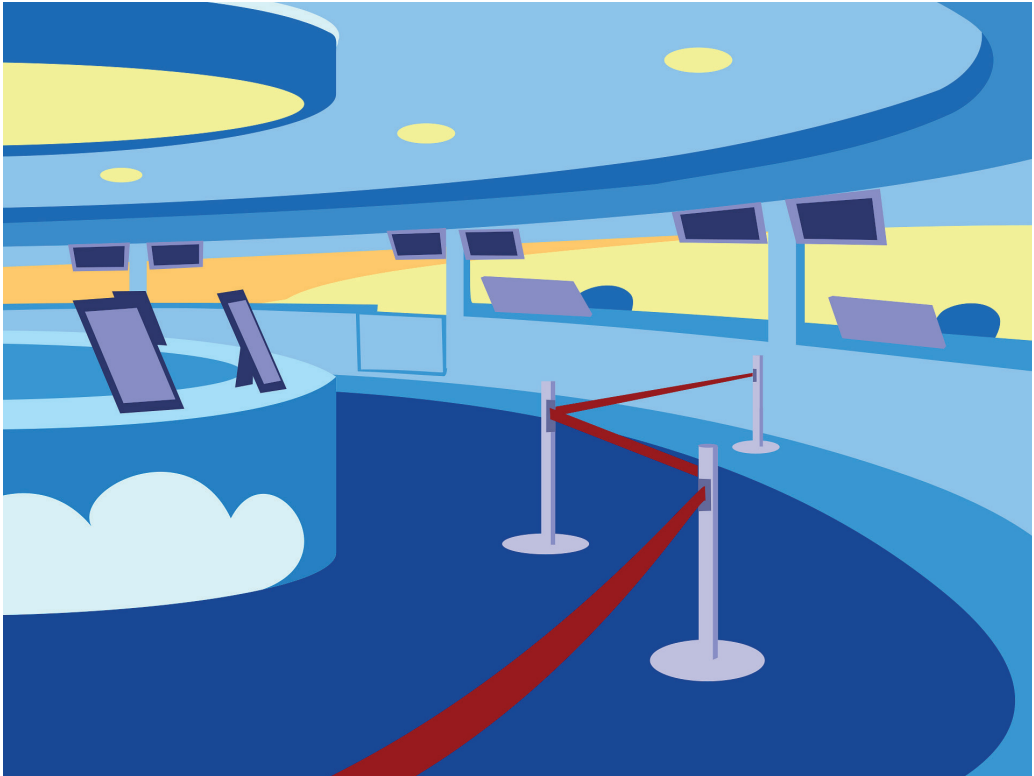


# THE WAY FORWARD

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



An interview with  
**Caroline Routh, Executive Director/Joint CEO**  
**Stephen Joseph Theatre**

Extract from a report commissioned by:



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.



# Actual rather than anecdotal

“In the end, you can always convince yourself that a version of the truth is the truth itself.”

Playwright Alan Ayckbourn wrote *Communicating Doors* back in 1994 before data became, well let's say mainstream, but it's appropriate to mention because its première took place at the Steven Joseph Theatre in Scarborough, whose joint chief executive Caroline Routh has a view on why the digital age provides an instant truth which can be used to improve performance off stage.

“A focus of data should be to enable a venue to better know its audience,” she suggests. “The commercial benefit should be gaining a better position from which to sell more tickets.

“It's about being able to capture granular data and then apply segmentation tools so we can communicate with people specifically about programmes which we know they are going to be interested in.

“As a subsidised theatre it isn't entirely about following the money because we have multiple stakeholders with different



*Caroline Routh*

obligations they expect us to meet, but what technology does is to make information actual rather than anecdotal, so for example we can accurately calculate our input to the local economy.”

It also enables a venue to maximise its yield from each ticket in ways which just weren't practicable or possible before. “Data demonstrates to us that a show which ran for a slightly smaller run had a £1 per seat high yield, so technology can enable us to determine how many performances we should put in for a particular production, with decisions being made on data,” Routh explains.

“And we realised technology allows us to apply dynamic pricing when we see a show is selling well, so we can benefit from a demand fuelled price structure when less tickets are available, or if we need to improve sales.



“We could do the detailed calculations manually but it would be a lengthy, labour-intensive lengthy process and we wouldn't pick up nuances, such as the impact of particular concession tickets.

“Now we also have clarity about the interval drinks an audience for a particular type of show will want to buy so we can have the right level of stock in place, and the customer is able to order their pre-order drinks while they are buying their tickets online.

“From gathering customer information, how often they come to the theatre for example, we can improve fundraising activity by identifying those with a propensity to give and using tools which will enable us to encourage them to become a donor.

“But while the starting point of fundraising is the data, success comes from building a relationship with people and personal touches which are appreciated, such as hand-written thank you letters. You will lose the goodwill of people if they are digitally anonymised.”

Just at the moment, Routh is less enthused about the potential impact of artificial intelligence or digital performances on the theatre. “We have used AI to generate imagery but I feel that what happens in a theatre is about people and live performance,” she says.

“Covid-19 meant companies had to resort to digital performance. Their audiences were glad it was made available, but you have no idea how much they wanted to get back into the building! What



was missing was the sense of occasion, the connection which can't be replicated sitting by yourself in your living room."

Society does though seem to be divided into two camps, senses Routh. "Those who have stepped into the digital age and those who were born into it. The new generation thinks about things differently and will question why something is being done in a particular way."

Not that she sees this as a negative. "What that does it to provides fresh thinking," she avers. "I can give you an example. I remember we originally set up a particular email with an online form, but now the information provided can be automatically filed, reducing four processes down to two."

What concerns Routh is that technology shouldn't create any form of barrier between the theatre and its stakeholders. "My pet hate is when organisations make it difficult for people to get in touch with them," she explains.

"In itself a theatre can be a barrier because it can still be seen as elitist, so it's really important we don't put any more obstacles up. It's a reason why every member of staff has an email address they can be contacted on directly."

As yet there is one particular area where technology hasn't quite managed to provide a sufficient helping hand. "I think there are still issues around scheduling software," Routh suggests. "Too much human intervention is required to manage all the juggling





to ensure not only whether a particular space is free that week or day, but that all the necessary resources around it can be put in place as well.”

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## 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.

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*The interview with Caroline Routh 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.

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