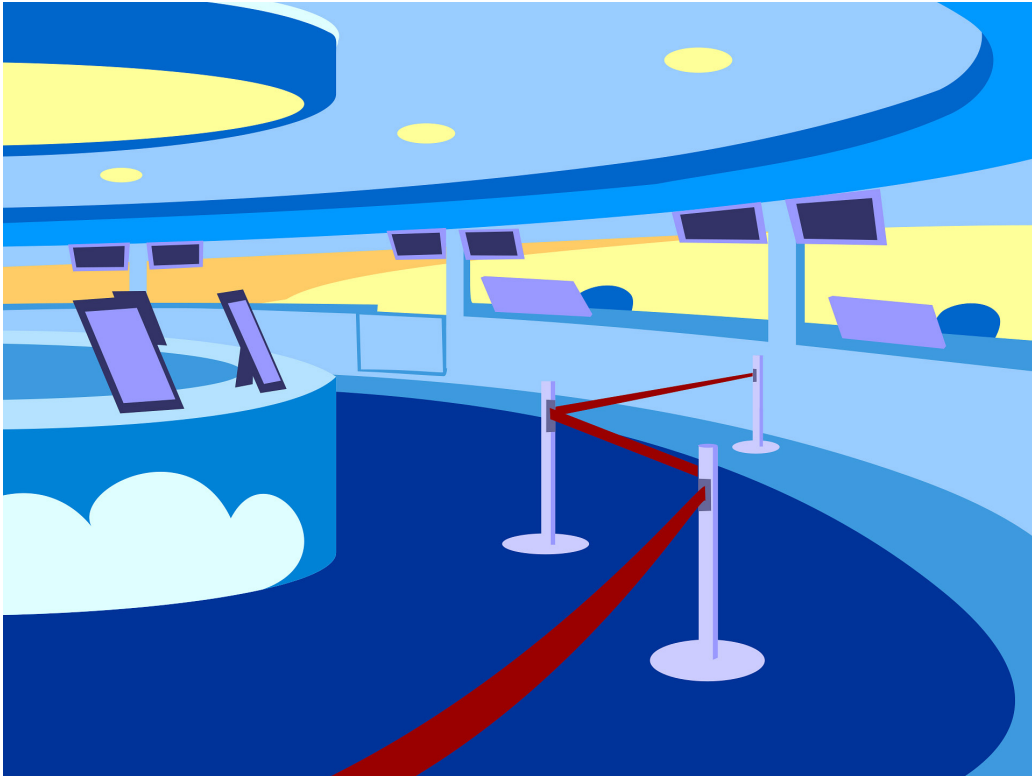# THE WAY FORWARD

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

**An interview with
Matthew Cleaver, Chief Executive,
Anvil Arts**

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.

Getting more value from the box office

"Nothing beats a live performance. Nothing." Maybe an odd utterance for film director Jonathan Demme (The Silence of the Lambs) to have made, but let's put a word in for the supporting cast. Because increasingly, the role of technology is taking centre stage (albeit behind the scenes) to give arts organisations more of a fighting chance to make it happen in financial terms as efficiently as possible.

But the real impact of technology isn't always on the stage or the concert platform. "Let's start with the box office," says Matthew Cleaver, chief executive of Anvil Arts, with a 1400-seat purpose-built concert hall, ninety-five seat studio, and a 400-seat receiving theatre in Basingstoke. Since opening in 1994, the trust has sold over five million tickets.

"Technology can provide us with live and granular information. We can now look at sales patterns for each event in real time with daily or even hourly reports, so we can be immediately pro-active rather than just having historical data after the event. It means we know if and where we need to adjust our marketing if necessary in order to meet our financial targets.

Matthew Cleaver and the entrance to the Anvil

"Then there's the value technology can bring to the transaction of buying a ticket. Today that ticket is no longer just the means of identifying that someone has paid to be a member of the audience and providing them with a reminder of their seat number.

"What is also happening as a consequence of issuing an e-ticket on line is that there is an opportunity to communicate with the customer much more during the process of that transaction.

"E-ticketing enables an arts organisation to provide directions to the venue, information about running times, and could allow the customer to order interval drinks in advance.

"If an e-ticket is presented at a food and beverage point-of-sale, it can provide data about what else a customer is buying and when.

"Technology also enables an arts organisation to effortlessly incorporate fund-raising into the ticket purchasing process, which just wouldn't have been possible before, by including a donation request and outlining what that will go to support, such as community initiatives."

"There is real excitement about the possibilities technology can deliver to arts administration," says Cleaver. "I've noticed in the last few years the realisation of the importance of the convergence of functions and the role of technology in making that happen. The necessity is having interlinking systems such as diary management for staff rotas feeding directly to payroll and so eliminating a whole lot of data entry, which frees staff to be deployed to other tasks which are more beneficial because they will be customer facing.

"Social media of course means we can widen the nature of the audience relationship, creating a ripple effect in terms of what it means for people's expectation of living in a particular town where an arts organisation is based. It's about inclusivity enabled by technology, taking it beyond commerciality to communicate a bigger picture of the organisation and what it is doing in the community which its audience might not have realised otherwise.

"What doesn't help this is the false and unhelpful divide which can be caused by the unrelenting focus on 'stem' subjects in our education system, as if the arts and technology are somehow at odds rather than complementary."

"Many arts organisations have a particular triple focus," explains Cleaver. "We're a charity with specific objectives to meet. Absolutely we are a business. Plus we need to satisfy the requirements of external funders and investors.

"Key to it all, really in almost every scenario, is that the audience relationship has to come first, because they're the reason we're here. And enhancing that should be the prime purpose of introducing new technology.

"What we are talking about is a really interesting transaction because people are paying for a live performance which is ephemeral in that they come away with nothing but the experience.

"If it is rewarding they will come back, and like with a restaurant, it's the whole experience which will determine that. If there isn't another concert hall or theatre in our location then apart from the cinema, our competition is people staying at home."

Technology can be deployed front of house to enhance the experience. For a concert of Viennese music by the Philharmonia Orchestra, large touch screens were set up in the Anvil foyer to show scenes and provide information about the architecture, coffee shop culture, and musicians in that city.

"It was an interesting extension of the audience experience because it provided a visual insight into the atmosphere which influenced the creation of the works they were going to hear," Cleaver explains.

Main auditorium at the Anvil

"If there is a potential risk it's that harnessing technology can be at the expense of the digitally disadvantaged. That isn't the only issue. For example, with streaming live events we are waking up to the environmental aspect, the power consumption of big platforms that increased streaming of life events will require.

"There's also the general issue of potential algorithm bias in artificial intelligence which arts organisations are going to have to address if they want to be as inclusive as possible. How is this going to play out if algorithms drive you down a particular path?

"We also need to keep in mind there can be an arts version of 'just because technology makes something possible, it doesn't mean that's the best course of action to take'. In the pandemic, so many arts organisations had to embrace streaming because it was the only way to get their work out there. Regional arts

organisations spoke of being able to reach an audience far wider than would have attended a venue in person.

"But with a few international exceptions, today it doesn't make economic sense at all to have that as a prime focus. My understanding is that streaming audiences began to fall away as soon as live performances returned. What people missed from streaming was experiencing so much more sensory information when they are physically there at a live performance.

"I think that is because the whole experience is enhanced by being part of the audience. At a comedy show we all laugh out loud at a punchline, a moment enhanced by 1000 people laughing all around us, rather than being one of 1000 individuals sitting alone in their living rooms."

So according to Cleaver, for an arts organisation it's mission-critical that new technology doesn't conflict with delivering the best possible experience for the audience. "That in turn comes down to staff training" he says, "because if you properly introduce a viable system which meets the right criteria, then you won't get resistance from them based on any natural inclination of not wanting change.

"The constraint isn't just money but having the expertise to assess what's out there, and then the time and resource to implement it."

www.anvilarts.org.uk

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 Matthew Cleaver 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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