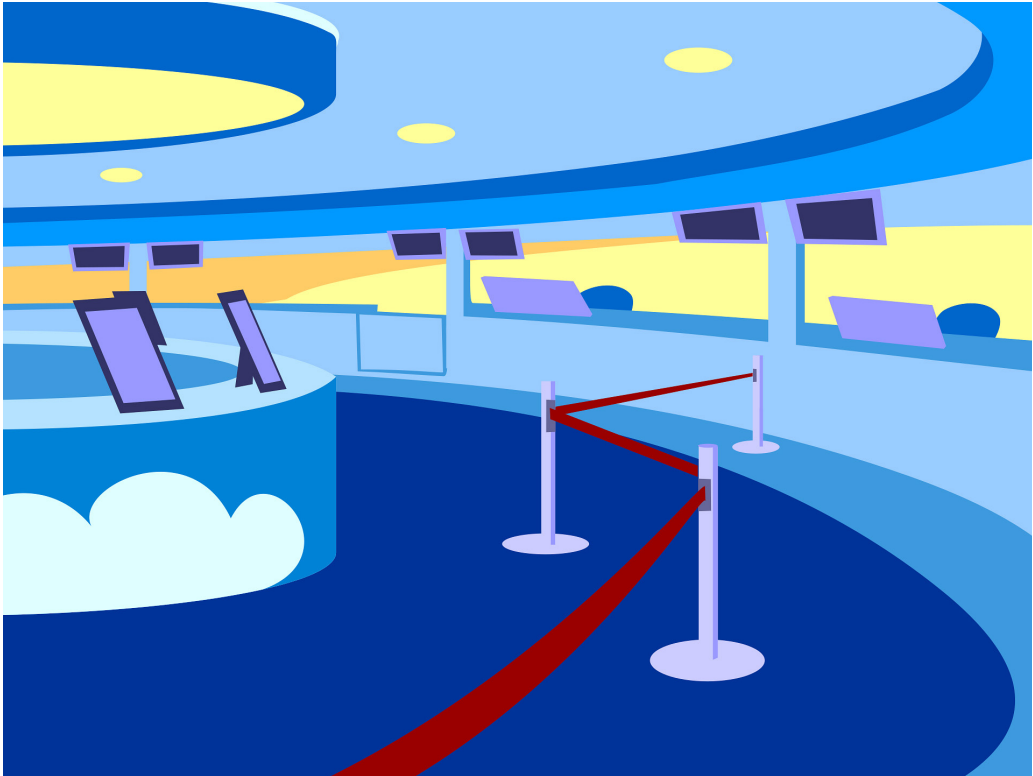


THE WAY FORWARD

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



An interview with
Tom Bird, Chief Executive
Sheffield Theatres

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.



This is what gets results

'It's not what you do, it's the way that you do it, that's what gets results.' Musician Jimmy Wilson wasn't trying to be prophetic back in 1966, but there's a parallel with how the arts are managed today.

"It's not about data but what we able to do with it," explains Tom Bird, chief executive of Sheffield Theatres (The Crucible, Lyceum, Playhouse). "If the right technology is in place, data will inform us about the future, from what we should be programming to how much marketing spend we will need to invest in a particular show.

"That's as well as factoring in the analysis of customer surveys, with AI providing a summary of the key takeaways. Technology will continue to revolutionise the way we can use qualitative data. Before we only had what you could describe as anecdotal evidence, and we only really knew for sure that if we put on a Shakespeare at this time of year in the past it sold 'x' number of tickets, although we didn't necessarily know why.

"Now to make informed decisions we can look at data sets in granular detail, taking into account demographics to give just one example.





Tom Bird (photo: Esmie Mai)

“We have three different Christmas shows and need to be able to segment audiences for analysis. It’s being able to access meaningful information about behaviours. Let’s take Shakespeare at the Crucible. We can identify who has previously been to see another of his plays and when. Technology means we can target a potential audience based on actuality. Who are the real advocates of live theatre in our audience, who are buying top price tickets regularly? With technology, we know.

“Of course, the creation of accurate data is essential, but not every arts organisation has the resource to generate that about the customer. I know it’s hard for touring companies with no box office of their own because each venue is responsible for





ticket sales, so for them to assemble the data can be nigh on impossible.”

As would have been dynamic pricing for the venue without technology. “Being able to change the cost of a ticket to a particular show to reflect demand is something that theoretically we could have done before,” says Bird, “but it would have been a time consuming manual task. With technology, parameters are set and the system can automatically do the calculations.”

Another consequence of technology is that Sheffield Theatres no longer issue paper tickets, and it’s not really about the cost



saving. “Where it gets really exciting is that the customer can select and order their interval drinks when they are booking their seat, and what happens is we can experience a higher volume of sales than if people had to queue at the bar when they arrived at the venue to order for the interval.

“What technology can deliver is this incredible gift, to enable arts organisations which are under increasing financial strain to be agile and audience focused because the data is there to guide us. Already it wouldn’t be considered unusual for an arts organisation to have someone in the post of data analyst.”

But there’s something of a caveat Bird introduces. “This might sound old-fashioned,” he says, “but I’m not too comfortable with technology determining creative decisions, because it doesn’t take into account human chemistry.

“Our experience and human empathy would enable us to identify someone who should be given a chance in a lead role, while based on data, ironically, artificial intelligence might take a more conservative view.

www.sheffieldtheatres.co.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 Tom Bird 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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