THE DIGITAL IMPERATIVE

Finding the way to take IT further

An interview with James Whitebread
Chief Technical Officer
Royal Opera House

Introduction

If technology is inevitably going to continue to be the driver of significant change, then is IT infrastructure up to speed or falling behind?

In The Digital Imperative initiative commissioned by Foundation IT, organisations which are really focused on their relationship with their people, customers, and suppliers will be talking about what they consider to be the mission–critical issues to get right, and how they identify ways of taking IT further.

Their views will form a series of papers leading up to the preparation of a digital book. This is one of the interviews to be included.

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Demonstrating digital maturity

"An opera begins long before the curtain goes up and it ends long after it has come down." Of course the world renowned soprano Maria Callas was referring to the actual process of performance (her last at the Royal Opera House was nearly sixty years ago) but her words have some resonance for their chief technical officer James Whitebread.

"Before, I'd been involved in private equity where you work at whatever pace is necessary to get a deal over the line, but in the opera house the distinctive challenge from a technical point of view is that the show has to go on seamlessly each night at a specific time," he says.

To make it happen, some 900 people are based at the company's iconic Covent Garden building (including orchestra, chorus, admin and hospitality), while at Aberdare there's a costume warehouse, dependent on an inventory management system keeping track of one million items. At Purfleet, there is a facility where the Royal Opera house manufacture stage sets; IT facilitates utilisation of the component parts so there's as much re-purposing of existing assets as possible.

James Whitebread

"The pace of both IT and business is quickening, so the role of a chief information officer or chief technical officer is to help their organisation understand the opportunities," says Whitebread.

"It's also to amplify the voices of the departments, which otherwise can lose the ability to push projects forward, because their workload makes it so hard for them to find time to look at the future beyond it addressing their prime remit.

"So for the IT professional there's the need to establish relationships with each department, with every stakeholder

group, to see where we can tip the needle in the right direction with projects which deliver specific organisational benefits.

"It's about being able to identify their issues and to see how IT can transform their tasks with a view to deliver a better work and customer experience and to improve revenue generation. It's about listening and translating the needs of the organisation.

"Digital transformation comes from understanding what IT brings to a business case in order to enable effective business change to take place facilitated by technology. An IT professional really needs to be business not technology led, a mindset which I would describe as demonstrating digital maturity.

"How do we evaluate new technology? Let's take robotic process automation as an example. We look at it through the prism of technology, then see if that has value for us by establishing where it could be applied to our advantage; there is a symbiotic relationship between technology and business improvement.

"What I would say is that evaluation is no longer just about scoping a project; it's a continuous progress. It would be complacent to think that as a business evolves the technology behind it won't need to adjust and change.

"This is why resilience is intrinsic to an infrastructure that is going to be capable of enabling an organisation to grow and scale on demand and is always ready to serve its needs."

"What that means," says Whitebread, "is that digital transformation is not a journey but a necessary process of continual change. There will be ebbs and flows in the pace of change, but the mindset has to be that this is going to be continuous. An issue for an organisation can be not just trying to work with legacy systems but a legacy mindset.

"The continuous change mindset has to be applied to how we evaluate technology. Because 3-D printing doesn't lend itself to prop creation at the moment, that doesn't mean it couldn't deliver what we need in the near or distant future.

"Alignment is that crucial piece of the puzzle, with sponsors – people from each part of the organisation who you could describe as IT champions – directors, trustees and the organisation itself.

"Our approach to this is to make sure that IT which might be considered the preserve of a particular department is appreciated across the organisation. Take a new HR tool. It has to be every department which knows the outcomes and the reasons for its application, the benefits to the organisation not just those using the system, so that everyone is on the same page, not just the HR and technology teams in this instance.

"Otherwise there can be a tendency to focus on digital transformation in specific operational areas, but then a lot is left on the table if the driver is, say productivity, rather than strategic alignment with overall business improvements including customer engagement.

"I see the role of IT professionals as supporting the organisation with the technology not primarily supporting the technology, which means an IT team has to embed itself in the organisation rather than being a department within it."

"The introduction of new technology in itself isn't hard for IT professionals to deliver, especially with software as a service providing a shortcut," Whitebread suggests. "It's the alignment between the organisation and technology which brings the challenge.

"That is being addressed by IT people being trained with both technical and business analytical skills. These are attributes needed for effective digital transformation.

"We challenge everyone in the team to compare and contrast products and concepts we could be using, and I now hear conversations not just about the features of a particular technology but what its impact might be on the business."

"Some of the best learning can come from your peers," says Whitebread, "talking to them at events and specialist networking groups where you can share ideas and establish relationships which can turn out to be invaluable.

"I also believe that personally it's important to maintain certifications because it's a way of making sure I continue to baseline my own skills so I know if there is any additional training I need to put myself through. Learning is also a continuous process which doesn't stop because you become a chief information officer. In a fast moving environment it's a necessity in order to keep yourself relevant."

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Providers of a managed IT infrastructure service (IaaS) that helps creates and enables growth in uncertain times.

Our solutions include Managed Infrastructure, Secure Cloud Storage, Disaster Recovery, Managed Desktop & VDI, Managed Backup, Incident Management, Compliance Management and Security Managed.

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About DECISION magazine

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

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