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Help Your Board Get Digital



Who is this How To... guide for?

Anyone who needs to convince or influence their board about the importance and efficacy of an arts organisation developing digitally.

Why is this resource necessary?

ICT is just a tool - the plumbing of an organisation. Should it even be discussed by the board?

Many arts organisations' boards see IT and digital development as something that should happen behind the scenes, a tool that should just be working to make sure that essential things happen - like finances and internal communications.

Last November, research was undertaken with the boards of 5 national arts companies in Scotland¹. The research found that 78% of their board members defined themselves as digital migrants, and 70% had never downloaded or watched video content from the internet. The 22% digital native board members conversely felt that they had little knowledge of technology/digital developments. Although only a small sample, this together with what I know anecdotally about boards means I think they often need help in "getting digital".

Many businesses still misunderstand IT. But look at this quote from Steve Prentice of Gartner, the IT Consultancy:

"Company boards don't recognise what IT is or what it does anymore. It used to be a thing that you used to increase productivity or automate processes, but that's been done. Even Chief Information Officers, who thoroughly understand enterprise IT, have been left behind by social IT - which they can't control. Today's technology is about communities."

He's saying that the tools have escaped the toolbox! Every business is now digital: even the hairdresser on the high street is a digital business because their clients talk about their experiences of their haircuts online via social networking sites like Facebook and Twitter. Culture sector customers are online and are talking about culture and cultural organisations. That information is readily available and accessible anywhere and everywhere. We can't control the message anymore! This means fundamental changes to business models. Because of social technologies, the channel to market for our product (art, events) is different, feedback loops and expectations are different. It will not pay to have a simplistic view of digital development. Successful organisations today need to operate in a refined and subtle way, and this means that digital needs to be part of an organisation's overall business strategy. That means boards need to have a really good grasp of digital. And if you're the organisation's digital champion, or digital native, then it may fall to you to influence this.

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Plan B is to hang in there and hope that the economic situation gets so dire that the board has no alternative but to explore how digital can save the business. On the basis that “hope is not a strategy”, then making sure your organizations “gets IT” now seems to make most sense.

So: be bold and challenge the board on their poor IT/digital governance!

Who are the board, and what do they want?

A board of directors is a body of elected or appointed members who jointly oversee the activities of a company or organization. The body sometimes has a different name, such as board of trustees, board of governors, board of managers, or executive board. It is often simply referred to as “the board.” The board is responsible for governing an organization: governance is about ensuring an organisation’s sustainability and resilience. Therefore, even if the board has no digital natives in the team, board members will be interested when digital can positively impact the general areas/drivers of governance:

Economics

Can investment in IT or digital development create new revenue streams; new products; and new customers; new channels to market? Ludus Dance, a dance-in-education company based in Lancaster, began online booking for their dance classes. Because customers could see what they were going to experience before they bought, and because buying was made simple through an online transaction customers could make at home or work, Ludus were able to increase their revenue, and grow their audience. See the Ludus Dance case study on getambition.com and read the How To...make money out of digital developments guide.

Operations

Can investment in IT or digital development create cost efficiencies or cost avoidances? Computerising some operational tasks takes routine administration work away from staff, allowing them to concentrate on activity that enhances the product/customer service/increases audiences. For instance, when New Wolsey Theatre implemented a Customer Relationship Management System together with a new content management system driven website, much previously manual content and customer data upload was done automatically, being driven by the new online box office system. This freed up the box office manager’s time from the routine tasks of uploading content to multiple systems; and provided him with detailed figures for each night’s attendance. Better Management Information allowed him to focus on marketing events that were selling less well, and he found he had the time to create new rich media video content (interviews with actors and directors) which in turn attracted new younger audiences to the theatre. Investing in better more joined up systems can also save staff time and money.

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Dada used funding from AmbITion to standardise their software. Most staff had specialist software for accessibility purposes, which was hard to support internally, so a lot of money was spent on external ICT support. Standardising softwares whilst still ensuring accessibility reduced the maintenance requirements and freed up staff time to concentrate on audience development. See the New Wolsey Theatre and Dada [AmbITion case studies](#) for more details.

Compliance

Can IT or digital developments help your organisation comply to legislation or compliance eg. local government legislation on accessibility to your content/ funders' regulations on cultural entitlement?

CSR/mission of the organization as defined in the company's memorandum and articles/ express terms of the charity

Can IT or digital developments help your organization offer more cultural/educational/volunteer/ participative opportunities?

Can IT or digital developments help your organization with Corporate Social Responsibility – perhaps by becoming greener through the use of smart and efficient technology? (Examples of greener working practices in relation to ICT can be found at [Envirodigital's](#) website).

Building your case for the board

Considering your organisation's board's focus and responsibilities, as outlined above, as you put your proposal for digital development to them together will help you build a strong case. Your proposal should include the following:

- Outline what the idea is, how you want to change the structure, and what the cost and impact will be. Outline what the benefits and Return On Investment (ROI) will be.
- Create a benchmark, measuring where you are now, and think about what tools you will use to measure improvements in the future. Will you measure social media? Just your website? How? Google analytics? AmbITion has a great How To... resource on measuring your online impact.
- Outline how you will implement the change, thinking about how the implementation will change the behaviour of the staff, the organization and the audience.

AmbITion has a great resource about How To... Implement digital developments – use it to help create your plan.

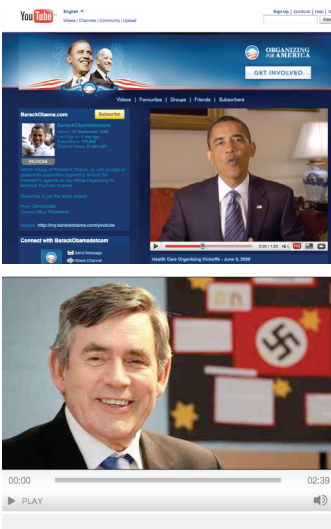
You may also want to create a Technology Plan for the board – see the Creative & Cultural Skills resource on AmbITion's website.

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Other ways to influence the board's mindset is to show them the potential of digital and take away the fear barriers:

- invite a digital native/audience member in to a meeting to talk to the board and show how they use technology. If your organisation has an older audience, invite a silver surfer in!
- try to ensure the board or SMT regularly addresses ICT as an agenda item.
- provide a hands-on workshop to introduce a digital technology like Twitter or RSS (there are good resources on both these subjects on getambition.com).
- provide comparisons of those who do it well and those who don't (a great example I like to use when trying to get organisations to consider using video as part of their social media strategy is to encourage board members to spend 15 minutes online looking at Barack Obama and Gordon Brown on websites like YouTube. Then get them to talk about what they liked and what they didn't; how they felt; whether they felt influenced; whether they wanted to participate).

Your board might need further convincing that existing and potential audiences are changing their cultural behaviour. Here are some links that will enable you to give them more evidence on socio-economic or cultural behaviour changes around digital:

What's the government thinking and doing?

- [Digital Britain](#)
- [National Office for Statistics on internet usage](#)
- [OfCom](#)

What are the funders thinking and doing?

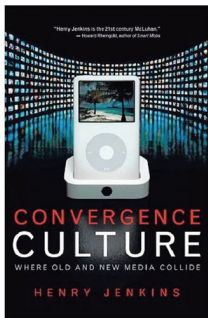
- Arts Council England's [Digital Opportunities research programme](#)
- Corporate priority area for ACE: [digital opportunities](#)
- Digital development programmes Like [Ambition](#), [AmbITion Scotland](#) and

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the work of [Mission Models Money](#) have good sign posting and commentary.

What are the world's leading business thinkers saying?

- Clay Shirky
- Seth Godin
- Charles Leadbeater
- Financial Times
- Gerd Leonhard, Media Futurist

What are other creative industry businesses doing with their products/businesses?

- think about organisations with similar content
- think about organisations with similar audiences

What are other arts organizations doing?

Tell the board stories of arts organizations that have successfully changed. Highlight the benefits, outline what the risks were and how they were mitigated.

[AmbTion's case study resource area](#) has some great stories.

And Finally...

(If you feel you're still banging your head against a brick wall at the end of implementing this How To... guide, then I believe Darwinism will take care of the detail. In time, the sector staff that "get IT" will gravitate to those organisations that have a similar mindset. They in turn will create a vacuum that will draw staff that do not "get IT" to those organisations that see IT as no more important than catering services. Organisations with board-level strategy on IT and digital development will move from strength to strength. Conversely, those organizations who do not embed IT and the boardroom, may go the way of the dinosaurs!)

Reading List (to recommend to your board)

- Grown Up Digital, Don Tapscott
- Convergence Culture, Henry Jenkins