

Context

At the time that I applied for an IDMN bursary in February 2009 I had been working as a dance manager for almost 20 years, with the last 12 years of those being as an independent. During my time as an independent my work had evolved to encompass:

- Project development and management
- Company/artist development and management,
- Consultancy in the areas of organisational review, board development and business planning
- Teaching and training
- Coaching and mentoring

I had also in that time set up CUE in 2001, as a formal framework through which I - and my partner - undertook our work in our various roles.

The bursary application grew out of my recognition that I was at a pivotal point in my career, specifically:

- I had not long ago downsized CUE partly due to viability and quality of life issues but also because I felt the instinctive need to regroup, reduce my commitments and take time to plan for the future.
- I was in the final phase of a project that I believed to be my most testing piece of work to date: I was anticipating that by the time of the premiere of this project in March 2009 that not only would I have exercised every management skill and quality I had within me but that I would also have acquired a wealth of new skills and knowledge.
- I had over the past 18 months had the opportunity to interface with sectors other than dance; my work with New Art Club, whom I had been involved with for 10 years, had brought me into contact with the comedy sector in a professional capacity and I had also made contacts and interfaced professionally with the worlds of TV, commercial music and film production.
- My view was that I was very much a 'Jack of all Trades', something that I enjoyed but had happened without any great business plan behind it. Whilst I could have continued in that vain I wanted to assess if that was how I could play to my strengths or indeed if there were other areas of my practice that I should focus on so as to better serve me and those I engage with professionally
- Having earned approximately the same annual income for the past 10 years, which is in fact no more than a small inflationary increase on the salary I had when I left Motionhouse in 1997, and being far the wrong side of 40, it seemed sensible to review my income generating potential.

In light of the above I applied for the IDMN bursary in order to undertake the following:

- reflect on my career to date and evaluate my strengths
- compare the models of operation of independents in other sectors
- assimilate the findings of the above two into a plan for the next phase of my dance management career; its focus, its operating and financial model
- undertake any training that may be necessary in order to move into my next phase.

Activity undertaken

To address the above I engaged in a 20 day research and development programme that comprised

- Shadowing and questioning 'independent'¹ peers and colleagues in other sectors [see attached Appendix]
- Networking
- Desk based research / reading
- Exercises and reflection to interrogate my own self, work and practice
- Coaching with June Gamble

Interestingly my bursary programme coincided with a substantial shift in my work portfolio in that I was offered the role of Executive Director with Lone Twin in July 2009. When in October of that year the company was awarded the Artist taking the Lead commission for the South East region and thus had stability in its own operation as well as a project that needed extensive management until July 2012, I decided to further downsize my portfolio and settled down to work with Lone Twin and New Art Club only and maintain my training/coaching/mentoring commitments. I thus quite quickly found myself with a quite tenuous foothold in the dance sector, which felt quite dramatic given dance had for so long been such a dominant professional focus.

Complementing my bursary was the opportunity I was offered to be part of BAC's 'Independents' pilot scheme: a CPD programme for independent practitioners that fed into my interest in exploring the concepts of 'leadership' and 'independence'.

What have I learnt

I embarked on my research programme optimistic that in tandem with moving my own career to a new place in terms of 'what' I was doing, that I was also going to find a perfect model for working independently in the dance sector; a model that borrowed from others sectors and that would allow me, and others, to model our practice so that it was perhaps more lucrative and more stable with 'better' career prospects. Within both of these aims I remained clear, as I have long been, that working closely with artists to produce work was vitally important to me; I've never wanted to be a 'consultant' or a 'trainer' as exclusive roles.

As I reflect on the past 18 months, whilst my career has moved to a new place, its perhaps not one that I had anticipated and whilst I have acquired a wealth of new information and knowledge this has engendered new approaches to work rather than a new business model.

I have below set out some themes/areas where I found food for thought in my research; where I have identified I could make changes in my practice; or where there might be things of value to the wider IDM community. Individually none of these points is world-changing but together they have certainly marked out new contours for how I work.

Relationships and Contracts with Clients

The dynamic of the relationships I have had with artists has always fascinated me and whilst I've almost always preserved good relationships with clients I've certainly come a

¹ I also included smaller enterprises numbering 2 – 6 employees/associates

cropper on the thorny issue of remuneration. Principles that I came across in other sectors, which are usefully informing my practice now:

- Agents representing artists typically take a 10% - 20% commission of all the contracts that the artist undertakes: even if the agent hasn't brought in or secured the work in the first instance. i.e. the agent/representation is recognised as a core foundation stone of the client's ongoing potential and ability to gain work and this fundamentally affects the economics of the relationship
- Commission is not for project management; this is invariably an additional fee
- Funds come into and are held in an account that the agent/manager holds and the agent/manager then pays the client their share
- Clients are not signed by agents/managers until proven; and in comedy, music and other more commercial fields, the client is only proven when they can actually attract an audience i.e. they have been thoroughly and widely tested in the public domain and are generating revenue. In the subsidised dance sector, funding or particular stakeholder relationships in many ways endorse a client and establishes them before they have any real proven earning potential: this generates a much more complex scenario in regard to navigating what the viability of a client is.
- If an artist/act with anticipated potential is signed before they are generating revenue then the contract is loaded in the agent's/manager's favour [guarantee plus percentage] so that when potential is realised the agent/manager genuinely does recoup their investment and is the first to do so.

Roles / Self Sufficiency

- In the majority of my work as an IDM I have been one of a team of collaborators: one of many reliant on the output/activity of my client[s] to generate revenue that is then distributed across the team. Moreover that output is in itself relatively limited i.e. productions, tours and education projects. Only in training and consultancy work is what I present the direct and tangible generator of income that comes directly to me and even within that I have been reliant on my services being brought in as an element of another organisation's programme. In my research I came across a variety of independent producers in film and music who were able to generate their own product: with digital technologies at their disposal they were very self-sufficient i.e. one man, low overhead, business units. Furthermore what they produced had market potential in the longer term; through sales or royalties. Whilst these individuals are creative in their own right and have skills very different to mine this reinforced for me the value of having a strand of work/practice that is not dependent on a complex web of collaborators but where I am a self-sufficient package in my own right i.e. at the centre of the process and where the work I produce has a long shelf- life.
- The other reflection within this general theme is on the mobility and fluidity of some independents within more commercial fields; whereby they have associations with various different groups of colleagues [not 'clients'] with whom they make things happen. This mercurial quality thrives in contexts where individuals can make decisions quickly.

Decision-making

- Shadowing peers working in commercial fields, underlined how much simpler decision- making is when funding is not a consideration. Funding slows down planning and programming processes and also politicises them whereas when

market forces are those of the buying public, one can cut to the chase much more quickly.

- Following on from this the complexity behind the programming policies of subsidised venues and projects seems to have given rise to an increasingly widespread culture of deliberate delay; where artists/bookers are often held hostage by programmers decision making. As in the commercial sector, when its simply a case of availability of a space and a promoter/agent/manager being able to commit to pay the venue hire fee or split/deal booking a tour is a relatively simple process which costs everyone less time, it enables a logical tour to be put in place and for momentum to be established which benefits media coverage, income generation, public awareness and allows for other activities to also be scheduled. One can build a real business plan not a largely theoretical one.
- Amongst the people that I shadowed and interviewed where a number who had for one reason or another interfaced with the dance sector [music videos, choreographers for fashion shows etc...]; they invariably remarked at how 'poor'/'slow' people were to get back to them. Why is this?

Diversifying income Streams

- There is no escaping the wildly different economies of production and/or touring / distribution that play out within the comedy, film, music and dance sectors and the associated inevitable challenges around viability and effectiveness that confront producers/ project managers working in the dance sector. Whilst there is no easy solution to these challenges the diversity of income streams feeding into the portfolio of an artist/act in the commercial sector and thus on to their agent or manager is something that seems worth investigating as means to stabilise and maximise the return on the costs and time of generating a product in the first instance i.e. using the core activity to generate multiple outputs with value beyond the time frame of the core activity.

Outcomes of the bursary programme

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The time and research framework that the bursary has provided has been invaluable and I can say with confidence that the bursary aim of shifting my management practice has been achieved. I've had the opportunity to:

- step back from the coal-face and reflect upon and address issues which otherwise get swept under the carpet in favour of day-to-day 'doing'
- initiate changes that needed to be made in my practice regarding terms of engagement with clients
- open up to new information and experiences
- extend my range of contacts and start establishing my profile in new areas
- seed new opportunities
- boost my confidence through being reassured that the skills I have are transferable to other sectors
- map out my future direction and the principles that will inform decision making about the work that I generate and/or take on in the future

² Also to note: a more incidental but equally valuable outcome of the bursary is an enquiry into the nature of female leadership, currently on the back burner but something I'll return to.

The dovetailing of the bursary time-line with other changes in my professional life has been fortuitous in many ways and has accelerated shifts in my practice; but equally these have combined to remove me from day-to-day involvement in the dance sector. Which brings me to one of the questions that was asked during my bursary interview, namely *“what did I perceive as some of the risks associated with the pursuing my bursary programme?”* To which part of my answer was *“that I might decide that working in the dance sector was not where my future lay”*.

What Next

As noted earlier in this report when I started out on my bursary programme I viewed myself very much as a ‘Jack of All Trades’ – a producer, a project manager, a mentor, a consultant, a book-keeper, a company secretary etc... and I wanted through the bursary programme to be more proactive and selective in the work that I took on as well as finding a better balance between workload and remuneration.

For the immediate and medium term future I don't anticipate having regular day-to-day work in the dance sector: this is determined by my current work commitments together with the experience of my bursary, which is opening up opportunities in new areas. A further factor in this is that I'm aiming for the work that I do to be determined by the skills required, the challenges and rewards offered rather than the art form/discipline involved. By the same token, the more limited engagement I am having with dance I am enjoying much more than I was 2 years ago – be it as an audience member at a show or as an occasional mentor/coach/adviser to dance artists. This feels very positive and a much better place from which to be anticipating my future involvement in the sector.

So the factors that inform my practice now and that will do so in the foreseeable future include:

- More rigorous and consistently applied rules of engagement with clients to achieve a healthier economy within the relationship
- Increased attention to my needs without loss of empathy for clients/colleagues
- Working with colleagues / clients on projects where there are opportunities for ‘commercial’ enterprise:
 - projects which operate without subsidy
 - projects which lend themselves to repeat distribution / distribution in different forms
- Opportunities for putting myself at the heart of the process e.g. developing, marketing and presenting work within the sphere of training, mentoring and consultancy, that I am the ‘owner’ of or ‘co-owner’ of
- Projects which exploit my skills and expanding experience of working across sectors and industries.

In terms of my future work in the dance sector, the mentoring, training and consultancy work is where I anticipate focussing my attention and where the learning of the bursary can most usefully be followed through.

In conclusion; there is no doubting the value of the bursary to me individually and I extend thanks to the panel and the network for their support and I now very much look forward to participating in opportunities to disseminate my findings.

APPENDIX

Individuals who contributed to my research through allowing me to shadow them and /or interview them

- Amanda Lyon: Independent Filmmaker, Director and Producer
- Caswell Coggins: Independent Filmmaker and Director
- Caroline Edwards: Comedy Promoter
- Corrie McGuire: Agent and Promoter
- David Mauchline: Agent/Booker
- Janie Jenkins: Agent - Comedy
- Jenny Moore/ Capsule: Independent Music Producer
- Julia Payne: Director / The Hub
- Paul Dosaj: Independent Producer and Director
- Martha Lane Fox: Entrepreneur
- Lorna May Webb: Agent - Film
- Sally Hope: Agent - Various