

Saxton Bampfylde

TAKE

A spotlight
on leadership
in the Arts
and Creative
Industries



TAKE 5

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Arts and Creative Industries

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INTRODUCTION





During an extraordinary five-year period, the arts and creative industries have faced global challenges including Covid-19, economic crises, social movements, AI emergence, and technological integration. The sector has demonstrated remarkable adaptability through exceptional leadership that transformed challenges into opportunities.

Organisations are confronted by increasing financial constraints affecting their entire ecosystem – employees, artists, audiences, and partners – while also competing for attention in a crowded landscape. The heightened focus on diversity has placed creative industries at the centre of cultural reflection and representation.

In Saxton Bampfylde's nearly 40-year history supporting the sector, these five years have presented uniquely converging challenges. Leaders both seasoned and new have shown outstanding passion and capabilities for transformation. We're privileged to continue to appoint and support these individuals who are advancing the sector with collective determination.

Following this turbulent period, we invited leaders across five categories to reflect on their experiences and project five years ahead. Our diverse participants represent UK national and regional institutions, first-time CEOs, international organisations, and commercial enterprises – spanning foundations, festivals, museums, and music production.

We explored five key areas:

- **Leadership experience and evolution**
- **Financial and funding landscape adaptation**
- **Diversity interpretation and authentic implementation**
- **Audience engagement and relevance**
- **Technology's role and potential**

We are grateful to those who shared their insights openly. While condensed, we hope these perspectives inform the sector's future development – a future guided by authentic, passionate individuals who will continue shaping its history.

To produce this piece, we spoke with 29 senior leaders across the arts and creative industries from the UK and internationally, running national, regional, and global organisations. We aimed to reflect the broadest levels of diversity through our selection of leader interviewees.

Our questioning was open-ended to give participants the opportunity to express their opinions and to provide their individual views as well as organisational experience. We conducted these interviews over a period of six months from July 2024 to January 2025.

We have asked those who participated to be referenced as contributors, but kept all quotes utilised anonymous.

Thank you to our contributors



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LESSONS IN LEADERSHIP



What makes the grade between good and great

The landscape of leadership in the arts and creative industries has undergone a profound transformation over the past decade. For individuals who have led one or multiple organisations over a number of decades, in those years of experience they will have undergone inevitable evolution at a personal and professional level. For those entering leadership roles for the first time, there is an excitement and ambition to make a difference. The rapidly evolving cultural, technological, and social environments of today require leaders to continuously reinvent their approaches. The distinction between good and exceptional leadership now hinges on the ability to embrace change, challenge traditional paradigms, and develop innovative strategies that resonate with emerging global dynamics. Successful leaders must now blend institutional knowledge with forward-thinking perspectives, recognising that the creative industries are no longer defined by static models but by constant reinvention and adaptive resilience.

The recent years have been characterised by an unprecedented series of challenges, each demanding extraordinary adaptability from leaders across industries. These consecutive crises have pushed leadership capabilities to their absolute limits, compelling leaders to fundamentally reimagine their approaches and strategies. What has emerged is a profound testament to human resilience and innovation.

“It can’t be perfect every time.”

In an environment of constant change that has come, at times, with alarming speed, so many of those we talked to reflected on how this period provided a space that encouraged personal introspection. Driven by a need to assess their own values and retool in a time of crisis, this period of change has brought many to acknowledge their own human limitations. One commentator observed: *“You need to accept that you are never going to get it right all of the time. You need to listen and explain yourself more than ever, but we are still human and need to sleep at night.”*

As leaders we need to be comfortable with not always getting it right”.

The fear around ‘cancel culture’ is real, but with a clearly defined sense of values and an ability to listen, adapt, and accept that changing one’s mind isn’t a fragility – it in fact shows courage. *“The world is changing much quicker than we can keep up with, so being able to change one’s mind and adapt is going to be increasingly important”.*

Our leaders reflected on how courage is demonstrated in multiple ways: new programming, commissioning works on complex (and sometimes uncomfortable) themes, or challenging and embracing artists’ approaches. This courage requires trust and the ability to empower a wide range of people to take informed and considered risks.

“Empathy is everything today”

In the past five years, challenges have existed at all levels of society. Employees, artists, customers, partners, government and funders have all experienced their own unique challenges, and it has become vital that leaders demonstrate their empathy in response through greater dialogue. As one commentator said: *“I can only anticipate it accelerating that you need to be a leader who can both listen and respond with integrity”.*

This deeper need for open and collaborative discussion, both internally and externally, was evident in our conversations. Not only is it needed, but also welcomed, and brings increased comfort in what can often be a lonely position, by encouraging a greater sense of shared responsibility across teams or stakeholder groups. *“You need to be showing how you are actively responding to the challenges of the world, rather than wishing they would go away”.*

The nature of the challenges have often been clear and this has developed a much greater expectation of integrity and openness from leadership: *"We owe honesty to co-workers, about our organisations and to individuals, highlighting successes and shortcomings, and be honest about those in ourselves as leaders"*. This extends into audience engagement and programming; addressing difficult subject matters and encouraging transparency and conversation where it is most needed.

"Greater success comes working with, not against, one another."

That increased emphasis on open interaction and conversation was acknowledged as a positive outcome of this recent period when leading an organisation. This includes everything from programming and curating to engaging with artists and outreach initiatives; from talking to funders and government to identifying collaborative partnerships. In a world of siloes and division across so many platforms, a greater spirit of working together has emerged, *"where there is increasing polarisation the arts have the opportunity to bring people together and we need to take advantage of that; not work against one another"*.

This open and collaborative approach has quite clearly brought about a shift in leadership style, as *"the old school way of doing things is no longer viable"*. The tradition of command and control does not resonate today, nor will it in the future. There are new leaders coming in, but also new generations of employees, artists and audiences. More vocal, sometimes more challenging, but certainly more expectant of being heard and included in some capacity of decision making.

The responsibility to create inclusive spaces for a wider variety of people, be they virtual,

in person, or through other platforms, has become a clear focus for leaders, expanding on what their organisations and institutions can offer. After Covid, many leaders reflected that they had the opportunity to offer people *"a place for reconnecting and respite"* and that this has significantly informed their leadership approach. It also creates greater engagement opportunity, exposing more people to art and creativity.

"Embrace the questions, don't fear them."

In order to keep evolving, leaders need to be curious, creative, compassionate and agile. They need to maintain interest both in the short and long term. One leader summarised it beautifully: *"We serve as a steward for artists, collectors, and institutions, balancing their needs while staying attuned to the evolving dynamics of the industry, ultimately nurturing talent and creating a culture where ideas flourish. It is the people who make the gallery exceptional – the staff, clients and artists – and that truth resonates every day"*.

Importantly, while knowledge, creativity and passion for the subject and the sector remain crucial, there is a huge pressure for financial acumen and entrepreneurial thinking from leaders. This has leapt up the leadership criteria list, alongside the adoption of or openness to new technologies – not specifically in artistic creation – but particularly in delivering efficiency and engagement.

The past few years have brought substantial and systemic shifts, and this was reflected in many ways amongst our cohort of interviewees. *"Change is here to stay, but we remain human and, while committed to always doing the best, we need to cut ourselves some slack and roll with it as best we can"*.

TOP 5 TAKEAWAYS

- The unique set of challenges faced in the past five years has required all leaders to think differently, regardless of organisation, geography, or funding model.
- People are at the heart of the solution more so than before – from staff to visitors, artists to partners, donors to educators.
- ‘Cancel culture’ presents a real risk but cannot be a cause for paralysis, preventing the sector or its leaders from tackling challenging subjects.
- Innovation is essential – in programming and curation, technology and asset use, diversity and education.
- Finding harmony between business demands and artistic vision has become essential, yet identifying the perfect balance grows increasingly difficult.

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THE FUNDING CONUNDRUM



Non-zero sum game

“We are in a very peculiar place”

More experienced leaders often shared the view that *“funding challenges have existed, in one form or another, for decades”,* with the recognition that there are *“more amenable periods and more hostile ones”* when it comes to identifying income streams and securing finances. For newer leaders, the current funding context has brought a rather challenging start to their tenures. One shared: *“I hadn’t heard the term polycrisis about ten years ago and now I hear it all the time, and that is so much of what the funding situation feels like”.*

The last five years have seen a combination of both external and industry specific obstacles that have led to challenging economic circumstances for all creative organisations. As a result, there is now even more pressure on income generation and, for our leaders, to ensure financial sustainability. This applies universally, without limitation by geography, institution, sub-sector, or public/private ownership.

This is a collective challenge; everyone has been impacted by the pandemic, inflation, and energy pricing. For many, not just in the UK, both government and charitable funding have decreased. The way audiences engage, and where and when they spend money, has shifted. While that brings a feeling of *“all being in the same boat”*, it also brings increased competition for public, political, partner, and philanthropic investment in its varying degrees.

“Thinking smarter about every penny we spend.”

The need to be adaptable as a leader has never been more necessary, and the ability to develop or enhance commercial income streams is crucial – *“it has become most of the job to be honest”.*

One newer leader spoke enthusiastically about the development of their own skillset to oversee all activities, including income generation: *“in some ways, it is demoralising, but it is also motivating to show we are having an impact and measuring better”.* This encapsulates the motivation to make an impact across all aspects of cultural leadership, including programming, commissioning, engaging with audiences and stakeholders, tax-efficient investment and banking, partnership building, and embracing new technologies.

Leaders everywhere are having to *“plan better, understand numbers more, and show accountability and accounting”.* A greater emphasis on commercial activities, in addition to the creative or curatorial elements of the job, is a priority for all we spoke to. For some this felt business-as-usual to a degree, and for others it is a steeper learning curve. All were very clear that they must rise to this challenge and have invested much personal and professional time in doing so.

Many concluded that the importance of income generation and finance should not be the preserve of senior leadership alone. While ultimately the responsibility of the Chief Executive or Director, there was a clear message that introducing a broader commercial understanding across teams has made a positive difference, bringing greater autonomy as well as innovative thinking across so many areas.

All the organisations we spoke to have increased their business development or engagement teams, which requires clear explanation given the restrictions in hiring across other areas. Transparency with staff teams about financial impacts, such as the increased National Insurance contributions in the UK, and how these have affected the bottom line, was considered important.

Prioritising innovative partnerships has become more necessary, but leaders felt this investment must be articulated as part of a longer-term vision and not a quick fix.

“We have to sweat our assets harder”

Attracting new audiences and improving accessibility to drive revenue remains a top priority for all our interviewees. Since the pandemic, we’ve seen significant changes in audience demographics, visitor numbers, subscribers, buyers, booking patterns, and engagement levels. These shifts have fundamentally transformed financial planning throughout the creative sector.

For organisations with physical venues, the diversification in their use has seen a big shift. The opportunity to engage with new audiences, or existing ones in a different format, has proven financially successful for many. *“There is a real opportunity to raise awareness, deepen connection and encourage return visits or membership”.*

An excellent example of a building transformation comes from a capital project in Scotland, undertaken during the pandemic. The venue was deliberately configured to ensure it could be adapted if such a situation arose again. It also considered the use of outdoor space (not always easy in Scottish weather) with theatre pieces and sets specifically designed to be shown outside in all conditions, which proved incredibly popular to a very broad (and new) audience travelling long distances for performances.

Venues are costly to heat and maintain which remains a huge challenge, but some examples of partnership working identified how these operational costs could be reduced by sharing resources. One leader said that their organisation had *“undertaken interesting technology*

collaborations to reduce IT bills but also increase skills across the team”. While this type of partnership might not always be an option, there were several other examples that showed partnership working led to greater outreach across communities through shared education outreach events, local pop-up events and family days. These all had a positive impact on generating income and widening the engagement of new demographics.

The approach to retail and catering was also discussed and is still a key area of commercial interest for those with physical spaces. There was a mixed view on the exact approach to take, with some reducing both catering and retail offerings allowing visitors to bring their own food and drink while reducing overhead costs, while others focused on maximising their offerings. *“We’re aiming for visitors to come more frequently, buy from the shop or café, and we need to work extra hard to ensure a quality offering”.*

The focus on merchandising or licensing has increased, particularly for larger, global institutions. For commercial organisations, expansion into new geographies, working and collaborating with interesting and emerging artists or on issues-based projects is bringing greater awareness and new revenue streams.

For one UK regional organisation, the drive to engage with new artists is enhancing the ability to derive more income from retail, in this case through limited edition prints. This can be a difficult balancing act and requires artist generosity and trust in widening exposure and connection.

In terms of audience development, many leaders talked about the positive impact of expanding membership and patron programmes. They were also clear that this shift was not limited to the typical member demographic; there has been a noticeable increase in the diversity of

these groups, all aligned with innovative programming, artist collaboration, and multi-platform technological engagement.

“A good location, good vibe, and good reputation will attract good partners”

The ambition to attract and work with corporate partners is not a new concept in the creative industries, but it is an area that has come under considerable scrutiny in recent years. With a more socially aware and vocal public, staff, and artist groups, there is significantly greater pressure to demonstrate alignment of shared values with sponsors and corporate partners.

Organisations looking for partnership support must articulate their *“civic, social, and environmental values”* to bring in the right partners, but that also must align with the *“scale and ambition of the exhibition and curator to allow engagement with as wide an audience as possible”*. All agreed there needs to be a thorough evaluation of sponsors before they're able to provide much-needed cash injections.

Broadening and diversifying audiences creates more partnership opportunities, though this often results in managing numerous smaller collaborations, which can be resource intensive.

However, these partnerships frequently foster valuable synergies and mutual support, ultimately creating greater positive impact for all involved.

Throwing the *“baby out with the bathwater”*, as one commentator put it, will not achieve anything. There needs to be greater transparency when entering partnerships, not just between partners, but also with staff and the public, and importantly a clear recognition of the vital place funders have in the arts ecosystem. *“We must be careful*

that we don't make all partners seem bad or justify these relationships all the time. We need them. It must be the right partnership, but it's incumbent on us to work that out”.

“This is a global issue. It is one day at a time on the finance front.”

The international context for income generation has similarities and differences with the UK. There are still multiple challenges, and an innovative approach to commercial income generation is critical, even in locations with greater government funding.

One US-based commentator said: *“we start from scratch every year, so we really focus on every penny”* which means a much greater push to find supportive partners in individuals, corporates and foundations; government funding is far less commonplace. Fundraising in the US is aided by better tax incentives for philanthropic giving, but boards also have a very clear duty to help raise money and support commercial activity. This creates a *“very invested and accountable”* governance model.

In parts of Europe where government funding remains strong in comparison to the UK, organisations are still facing a reduction from pre-Covid levels. Tax raises have also impacted cash flow, so additional revenue streams have needed to be identified. As in the UK and US, there is an expectation that leaders are responsible for driving both commercial and artistic activities and seem to be spending most of their time on the former.

In Australia, government funding varies across the country, but corporate sponsorship has grown considerably in the last five years. The importance of community and reflecting the nation's history is key to not only more diverse programming but is helping to drive more creative partnerships.

Leaders felt that their local communities valued the arts and saw the importance of cultural institutions: *"I have never had to argue our value. They see the economic impact we make on the city"*. Culture brings visitors, creates jobs, and drives economic engagement, as well as adding, of course, to a much wider cultural and social mix. This was something our international leaders stressed in conversations with governments, partners, donors, and financial institutions. They felt it was more successful to showcase the benefits of investing in culture, rather than railing against reductions.

None of our interviewed leaders entered the arts and creative industries to focus on financial and commercial matters, yet this has become an unavoidable reality in their roles. Interestingly, many reported learning to embrace this aspect of their work -some even finding enjoyment in it - perhaps because of the intellectual challenge it presents.

"We will succeed better if we work together."

The shared challenges of a difficult funding landscape created opportunities for leaders to exchange experiences and support each other. As one interviewee stated: *"we need to figure out as a sector how to work more collegiately"*.

This collaboration could take various forms: creating joint artistic or commercial partnerships, sharing experiences and lessons learned, or approaching funding bodies and government collectively rather than as individuals or small groups.

When it comes to funding it is very clear that the arts and creative industries have had to adapt in the last five years. It's not been easy, but it's also brought innovation and creativity. It would be a wonderful legacy to see this as *"an amenable period"* marked by a bringing together of many different parts of the sector in new and innovative ways for mutual benefit.

TOP 5 TAKEAWAYS

- Funding challenges are not new for this sector but are becoming more acute and require greater focus and clearer demonstration of ROI.
- Commercial acumen has become a fundamental component of leadership in all parts of the culture sector both in the UK and internationally.
- Partnerships are pivotal and must be approached with transparency – whether that be with artists, corporates, governments or donors.
- A collective and collegiate approach to demonstrating the sector's value to society, economy, and community is gaining ground, as is encouraging others to share and learn from one another for longer term gain.
- Utilising physical, digital, and reputational assets more creatively and commercially will continue to be vital in the sector.

3

DELIVERING ON DIVERSITY



View the world through a different lens

“We should expect it’s a given and shouldn’t be exceptional”

While the theme of diversity and inclusion is not new, there has been a more concerted focus on the subject in recent years. We asked our leaders to reflect on their own organisation’s approach to, and interpretation of, diversity, and how it has been considered and prioritised.

One leader was clear that EDI was a key priority but nevertheless acknowledged: *“there is a centuries-long history of systems that protect and support the arts, but they have also excluded people as much as they have included. We inherit that kind of elitism”.*

Regarding diversity and inclusion, we observed a widespread commitment to these principles across all organisations, both internally and significantly, in their external engagement. Leaders expressed that they don’t want *“to only be speaking to a narrow and more privileged portion of the public”*. Organisations now view diversity and inclusion as fundamental to their operations, with numerous examples demonstrating how these values can be integrated throughout various aspects of their work.

Addressing representation authentically demands deliberate attention to, and acknowledgement of, diversity. Organisations cannot simply assume these principles are automatically embedded or prioritised. As one commentator pointedly observed: *“We didn’t have an EDI working group before I joined. Our background has long been focused on social justice, so maybe we took diversity for granted. But I believe we need a specific focus on it”.*

Every leader we interviewed emphasised aligning their organisation’s diversity initiatives with both the local and global demographics they serve, as well as the

historical contexts that have shaped these communities. Many highlighted the importance of staff diversity and *“lived experience”*. They have been actively enhancing recruitment strategies to ensure broad representation across their teams.

“Our people are the best showcase”

Over the past five years, our interviewees have focused on creating inclusive hiring practices, from implementing flexible work arrangements to reassessing required skills and building new recruitment frameworks. However, the reality of achieving the desired tangible impacts from this work is not straightforward, as the talent pool itself is comparatively specialised. One leader who has broadened their approach to recruitment by looking to other sectors to understand how they recruit, described the process as: *“the same sport, but we really are trying to fish in different pools to expand who we can bring in”.*

One leader warned that more needs to be done to ensure the long-term sustainability of EDI agendas, particularly around diversifying teams. They observed: *“if we can’t be engaging and bringing people in to change it from within, I do worry that it might become simply lip service to diversity”.*

“It’s our responsibility to expand the entry points to the arts”

Momentum for change certainly seems to be gathering, with a focus on the importance of education and engagement in its broadest sense being consistently highlighted. Extensive educational programmes for young people in schools and communities are either already in place or developing, and are reaching many tens of thousands each year.

This is hugely important at a grassroots level, but it was felt that it must also extend into secondary or further education for the greatest impact. One organisation talked about a desire to have much wider engagement with technical colleges and the need to showcase different career paths and opportunities in the arts.

Collaborations with universities, and particularly early engagement to remove *"barriers to people coming into the industry"*, are examples of work that is currently underway and is seen as crucial in changing perceptions and encouraging a greater sense of genuine inclusion. One issue our leaders identified as a frequent challenge in attracting recent graduates are the salaries available in the arts sector, compared to say, careers in STEM.

One leader talked about her experience of coming into this sector in the 1980s, at a time when female leadership pathways were far less prevalent. She acknowledged that her personal experience *"really has been a motivation"* for her and recognises that more must still be done to encourage and support women at a middle management level to raise their profiles and encourage their advancement into senior roles.

The shared consensus across all our leaders is a recognition that *"education is at the heart of transformation"*. True diversity will only be achieved by expanding awareness, supporting education, and creating an environment that is accessible to people from a wide range of backgrounds and experiences.

Awareness can only grow through wide access points and meaningful engagement. This includes easier physical access to buildings and venues, in addition to greatly enhanced audio and visual description to sufficiently meet the needs of disabled and neurodiverse individuals. With a multicultural population, the translation of text and audio into multiple languages is also key.

To achieve meaningful progress, effective leaders have amplified diverse perspectives both within and beyond their organisations. Working groups composed of representatives from marginalised communities have been crucial in reshaping approaches to access, audience engagement, and programming. Through transparent processes and authentic consultation with those who have lived experience, organisations have seen tangible benefits, deepening staff relationships while fostering trust with community partners who recognise genuine commitment to inclusion.

"Just because it worked before doesn't mean it will now"

A fundamental focus of the efforts around diversity in recent years has been on programming, leading to positive change and increased representation in many of the organisations we spoke to. One leader shared that their organisation was intentionally looking beyond the more 'typical' regions for performers, producers and designers, towards sub-Saharan Africa, Southeast Asia, and Eastern Europe. While they acknowledge more could be done, this concerted effort was *"already producing interesting programming evolutions"*.

One leader, who acknowledged their distinct global perspective, having originated from a region vastly different from their colleagues, established the *'representation of all types of people'* as the cornerstone mission of their leadership role.

A crucial part of the programming conversation was about making viewers feel comfortable enough to ask questions. This is a vital part of challenging expectations, as articulated by one leader: *"We want people who don't feel comfortable in museums to feel comfortable, and we want people who do feel comfortable in museums to feel challenged and ask questions"*.



The impact of technology on programme and content engagement has been transformative, particularly following the pandemic's disruption of established patterns. Digital platforms have democratised access, diversified audiences, and created innovative methods for interaction across multiple media platforms. This evolution represents not just a temporary shift, but a fundamental re-imagining of how people connect with programmatic content in our increasingly digital world. (More on this in Chapter 5)

Success in attracting younger audiences was reflected in organisations prioritising technological innovation: *"We were founded on an ethos of making, discovering, and collecting art much more accessibly, particularly for a new generation"*.

While there remains a focus on diverse and socially reflective programming, one commentator did warn that there is a *"careful line to be drawn between box checking or tokenism"*. Efforts must be authentic and aligned to organisational strategy and values if they are to truly *"rebalance what is an inherently uneven landscape"*.

The last five years have been pivotal in pushing all organisations to become more accountable for how they demonstrate their own diverse and inclusive culture. Prospective candidates at all levels are more likely to be looking for tangible evidence of inclusive hiring and management practices, a clear sense of career development, as well as considering an organisation's commitment to diversity and representation across its programming and cultural offering.

As a final note in this chapter, we feel it is important to highlight that these interviews took place largely before President Trump's return to office, and the newly emerging policy approach to rescinding EDI initiatives. At Saxton Bampfylde, we are dismayed to be witnessing some impact of this with our US clients but it's too early to say how this will influence the sector internationally. EDI is a topic that we sincerely hope remains a key priority for the sector.

TOP 5 TAKEAWAYS

- Equality, Diversity and Inclusion is a central tenet of the cultural sector, and increasingly important as polarisation becomes more commonplace.
- Education and early engagement is a key focus for the successful diversification of staff, visitors, and artists, helping to remove long-held barriers to engagement and access.
- Programming and curatorial approaches have evolved to be more representative.
- Inclusive approaches to recruitment and retention are seen as a core leadership responsibility, reflecting the importance of representing and serving a diverse population.
- Accessibility is crucial to ensure the broadest level of inclusion.

4

AUDIENCE ENGAGEMENT EVOLUTION



Art of being many things to many people

In previous chapters, we have explored challenges which have significantly shifted the landscape of the cultural sector. One of the overriding themes of the last five years is *“the importance of adaptability and meaningful connection”* and the idea of being *“public-centric”*.

This emphasis on connection was a highlight of all discussions, and the drive to increase engagement with as wide an audience as possible was illustrated in many ways. In an increasingly crowded and competitive environment, the pressure to continuously innovate and evolve has become *“a new normal”*. This presents challenges as organisations are required to *“be many things to many people, while being true to ourselves”*.

“It has to start with your staff”

Organisations have undertaken extensive internal and external research to understand evolving audience engagement patterns. These investigations examine where and why audiences connect with content, how cultural and technological shifts have altered these patterns, and what adaptations are necessary for future success.

The growing prominence of senior specialised roles across digital, audiences, and engagement reflects the increasing strategic importance of those areas. This trend coincides with enhanced data collection capabilities and more sophisticated audience analysis methods through digital innovation.

These advancements provide organisations with clearer insights into engagement patterns, program effectiveness, retail and catering performance, and the impact of diversification through technology and alternative channels. As one leader aptly noted: *“If you don’t come to the gallery, how is the gallery coming to*

you? We really need to understand that better and make it happen”.

Beyond senior-level appointments, there is also an emphasis on broader staff involvement in attracting, maintaining, and building new audiences. If there is a genuine passion from staff with a true sense of enfranchisement, it creates *“open and welcoming environments”* that make audiences more likely to return and re-engage.

Institutions that embrace organisational transparency and celebrate their teams are experiencing tangible positive outcomes. This approach is particularly crucial given the significant shifts in audience demographics across age, social, and ethnic dimensions. The advantages of more equitable and visible decision-making processes must be integrated as a fundamental element of leadership strategy and organisational culture.

Embedding a commitment to engagement across all staff teams is important, especially when developing new audiences and directly addressing accessibility. One leader noted: *“My whole team is absolutely committed to Access First – we have to prioritise that in all we do”*. Organisations are increasingly considering how audiences can be *“physically and emotionally engaged”*, a strong shift from a more didactic form of programming.

“Need to nail the programme”

The importance of programming, curating, and identifying artists who can capture, inspire and stimulate audiences is front of mind. Our leaders reflected continuously by asking the question: *“who is this for?”* Relevance is key with an ever wider remit: *“We can’t call ourselves national if we aren’t incorporating all demographics and ethnicity in this country. We can’t be safe”*.

The increase in younger generations engaging in culture is making its mark on programming. One leader told us that 20% of their audience was now aged 20-29 – “a very substantial shift since the pandemic” – and it is only increasing. These are the future collectors, sponsors, artists and visitors, and their influence is significant: *“There has to be real thought put into the future and what we can learn from these new generations; not just what we think we should be offering. It is absolutely vital to staying relevant”*.

It was suggested that younger generations today are more engaged with cultural and social issues than previously. There is a constant need to capture their attention; otherwise, *“they will just ignore the organisations that aren’t true to values of diversity, inclusivity, and offering something unexpected”*. With so many more choices, this is not a risk leaders can take in their programming approach.

One interesting and innovative example of engaging audiences in a real way is the Citizen’s Jury, established by Birmingham’s Museums Trust, to directly involve local residents in identifying what Birmingham needs and wants from its museums, now and in the future. This is part of a fundamental transformation programme and highlights a very clear commitment to authentically engaging new and emerging audiences.

The drive to enhance access and engagement extends to the greater use of technology and consideration of disabilities, such as visual and audio impairments. The increased recognition of neurodiversity is also playing an important part in programming discussions and will remain a priority, many of our

leaders said. The landscape has shifted positively in this sense: *“these were always the areas that got squeezed because they weren’t considered essential; it is now a vital part of our approach”*.

There, of course, does remain a core historical audience for many organisations, who are a crucial part of an institution’s community. A challenge while diversifying audience engagement is to not alienate those long-term audiences, but to engage them in new and innovative ways. Also central to programming is positively engaging the creative community – from visual artists to musicians – who lie at the heart of the creative industries and are often at the sharp end of difficult economic time.

“We need to support artists’ vision while balancing expertise and innovation to allow us to maintain a leading position in a fast-changing industry,” reflected one leader. These artist relationships are increasingly viewed as strategic, long-term partnerships. This approach involves delivering diverse content across various formats, price points, and genres for growing yet often targeted audiences, while providing valuable platforms for artists’ work. This strategy is also essential in attracting commercial and community partnerships with aligned values, creating symbiotic relationships that deliver commercial, social, and cultural benefits with meaningful, measurable impact.

All of our leaders reflected on the challenges faced in decision making around programming: *“it is a process that we’re ferociously trying to get right. It has to be driven by the ideas and passion, and the wants of our wider communities, or we can’t say we are getting it right for everybody”*.

“Reconsidering the ‘local’ and ‘international’ paradigms”

With an increased focus on audience engagement, leaders are looking at specific considerations around audience demographics, technological capabilities and national, or international boundaries. For some, there is a greater emphasis on attracting local communities, for others, there are opportunities for attracting a wider national or international audience. All share dramatic changes in the way that organisations considered audiences pre-pandemic.

For those with a *“finite, but fundamentally important local population,”* it is essential for the cultural experience to have a *“rhythm of change”* that brings people back. However, even with a localised focus there needs to be a national, and often international, appeal that will encourage people to visit or participate. A blend of hyper local and internationally relevant is often the aim. When entering new markets or countries and engaging with collectors and artists, it is also vital that the dynamics are balanced as best as possible to reflect an organisation’s evolution and position appropriately for a wide audience base.

We also spoke to leaders of organisations who are more focused on bringing back local audiences to ensure greater representation of their cities and communities. We have seen initiatives in terms of offering benefits to local communities, making sure they feel welcomed and authentically engaged.

There is no question that a broader adoption of technology in the past few

years has helped widen national and international audience engagement and has, for many, become a core part of programming. This was of course a critical necessity during Covid, and required a steep learning curve for nearly all the organisations we spoke to. The silver lining is that the sector is much more technologically advanced than it would have been otherwise, and we’re seeing some real innovation across all areas of organisational leadership. We explore this further in Chapter Five.

“Removing barriers to entry has never been more crucial”

Financial constraints make completely free access for all arts organisations impossible. While entry fees create participation barriers, they also encourage organisations to diversify ways to reach audiences beyond ticket sales. Some organisations offer younger people reduced midweek tickets, while others engage through subscriptions, memberships, social media, or newsletters providing first access to new collections or music releases. All organisations we spoke to stress the importance of free content available as part of an overall offering.

As we’ve mentioned in previous chapters, the not-for-profit organisations we spoke to are collaborating with commercial organisations, charities, and educational institutions to provide subsidised access, which in turn has successfully increased audiences and generated new interest. Removing barriers and allowing audiences to feel *“this really is a place for them”* is driving tangible impact. Finding the ‘right’ partner remains

critical but also presents an exciting project for teams who are helping to attract new and interesting partners.

Where there is a mix of free and paid access, the need to drive footfall and income remains a challenge. Organisations are thinking of thoughtful and inspiring ways to encourage voluntary giving, and curated content is a major part of this strategy.

However, for some, offering free admission is not only part of their founding principles; it is a way to offer a safe or warm space to visitors, even if they only nip in to use

the facilities or come for 20 minutes on a regular basis. One leader described their own experience of regularly visiting a gallery throughout their time as a student: *"to this day I feel like that collection is partially mine"*.

Ultimately, whether free or not, being able to instil a notion of belonging and sense of being part of a community for a day, an evening or a lifetime, is what our leaders and their teams want to encourage. All have immense passion for the organisations they lead and want to share their cultural offerings with as many people as possible.

TOP 5 TAKEAWAYS

- Putting audiences at the forefront is an essential tenet in the transformation of consumer engagement. Audience engagement has changed substantially which has led to major innovation across the creative industries.
- Leaders increasingly emphasise employee autonomy in personalising audience experiences, creating welcoming environments, bringing lived experience, and eliminating perceived elitism.
- The push for meaningful engagement while ensuring economic viability has created clearer approaches to local, national, and global audience outreach, enhanced by technological innovation, creating valuable opportunities throughout the sector.
- Programming has seen much innovation, enhanced by technological capability, but also wider engagement with artists and partners from different regions and with diverse histories or backgrounds. An ambition to take risks, show difference, and push boundaries has driven change and put greater emphasis on co-curation.
- Widespread economic and social barriers demand creative leadership solutions to reach diverse audiences. This is especially crucial for attracting new, younger patrons who will support the sector's future.

5

TECH - ENABLER OR CHALLENGER?



Technology everywhere, all at once

Technology surrounds us and, despite imperfections, has become essential to most people's daily lives. In arts and creative industries, where human creation, inspiration, and interpretation are central, increasing technological dependence might seem paradoxical. Nevertheless, our leaders all emphasised technology's vital role, sharing numerous examples of enhanced opportunities while acknowledging significant challenges.

"In the arts we are technological magpies"

The use and integration of technology as a tool to improve production and extend artistic possibilities has existed across the creative industries for years. More recently, AI has evolved to improve important functions across the organisational framework, as well as influencing how audiences engage with a cultural programme.

Technology is welcomed, for the most part, but in recent years the explosion of social media, and more recently, the hyperfocus on AI, has created unique challenges. *"It's like oxygen, it is everywhere, but it is also very complicated and evolving constantly"*. This requires leaders to place greater focus on their organisation's approach to the use of digital content and AI, while ensuring that this aligns with national government and the regulatory policy (where applicable) specific to technology and communication. This has created a sense of urgency from some: *"we can't be left behind, but it is moving so fast I do wonder sometimes how we catch up"*.

AI is presenting some interesting developments in terms of how information is presented, helping to consolidate narratives in exhibition making and greatly enhancing cataloguing efficiency. It is also being used to improve the analysis of digital content both internally and externally. Its use must,

nevertheless, be carefully considered; AI is a technology still in its infancy with broader ethical and social implications.

"It depends how you harness it"

Technology was arguably the greatest enabler during the Covid period – allowing people to remain 'connected' whilst physical interaction was very limited. A number of the leaders we spoke to explained how technology was having a big impact by creating efficiencies operationally for their teams. Examples include enabling more flexible working models, reducing administrative burdens, and *"improving operational cadences and targets"* which is vital in a constrained financial environment. Technology is also helping to gain clearer visibility on finance and expenditure.

The ability to obtain detailed metrics on audience engagement, user and visitor data, and geographic interaction trends has led some leaders to become self-proclaimed *"data obsessives"*. Greater investment in technology does come with associated costs, including the creation of new roles across the digital spectrum. We found that the benefits gained from investing in digital capability vastly outweighed the costs, and as with many of us, cultural organisations are only at the start of the AI journey.

"It broadens programming scope and reach"

The pandemic meant that engagement with culture through a digital platform became the norm, at least for a period, but its impact on programming has been transformative in the long-term. *"We created an immersive experience using different types of technology that were unlike anything we have done before"*.

Others spoke about their growth in broadcasting and online interaction, developing new audience opportunities, artistic interface, and partnership collaborations across a much wider arena: *"It demands more from us creatively but also means we must operate in the popular and the radical to keep attracting audiences"*.

The emphasis on attracting younger generations, as well as new audiences and consumers, was central to this. One interviewee put it very clearly: *"we need to use digital as they [younger generations] do, otherwise we cannot stay relevant"*.

"The nature of creativity remains human"

The discussion emphasised how technology, particularly AI and social media, enriches creativity by offering fresh, global perspectives on emerging trends. There was widespread agreement that *"digital and AI-driven innovations will shape the future of art consumption"*.

When discussing technology, particularly the transformative impact of AI, defining creativity's boundaries emerges as a

central challenge. Does AI threaten human creativity or enhance it? Our leadership cohort offered divided perspectives—some recognised its potential while others expressed concern. As with many sectors, it remains premature to predict AI's ultimate influence on arts and creative industries.

One interviewee felt: *"the fusion of physical and digital spaces is increasingly important, and we are committed to embracing this shift while staying true to the physical experience of art"*. We heard several examples of people embracing a more traditional approach to physical play and interaction in exhibitions and galleries, appreciating the chance to disconnect from devices and technology.

All interviewees agreed that humanity will remain central to the creative process – it is intrinsic to what makes us human and drives engagement and inspiration for audiences everywhere. This was captured so succinctly by one of our leaders, quoting their teenage child's view about AI generated music: *"If someone couldn't be bothered to write it, why should I bother to listen to it?"*.

TOP 5 TAKEAWAYS

- Technological evolution has brought substantial opportunity, heightened by the pandemic and provided new platforms and ways to engage that are driving new programming and curatorial approaches.
- The operational enhancement provided by technology, from staff working models to data collection and analysis, as well as upgrading financial and logistical systems has brought a range of benefits that support leadership and their teams significantly.
- Human creativity cannot be replaced, but to back away from the opportunity presented by technology also inhibits wider creative enhancement.
- The explosion of AI and more entrenched use of social media presents interesting avenues for engagement, but also requires clearer boundaries and a focus on ethical and transparent usage.
- A very real sense of keeping up and moving with the times has become more acute on the technological front and this is starting to inform recruitment strategies and skills identification more broadly.

CONCLUSION

Our extensive discussions with global leaders have revealed pivotal trends that are reshaping organisational success. Drawing from these deep conversations, we've identified the following themes that are likely to define leadership effectiveness in the coming years:

Adaptability

Being able to demonstrate an ability and willingness to shift mindset and approach will be crucial. Horizon scanning will continue to be important, as will listening to and engaging with key stakeholders, including funders and staff teams.

Creative curiosity

Cultivating intellectual curiosity will be essential. By staying attuned to broader societal trends and complex issues, organisations can fuel innovative programming and meaningful engagement with the critical questions being raised by staff, funders, and the communities they serve.

Courage and risk-taking

Authentic leadership demands the courage to challenge conventions, empower teams, and create space for bold innovation. It means embracing vulnerability, trusting the creative potential of your teams, and having the confidence to push beyond established boundaries.

Values-led authenticity

To show a clear set of personal values is fundamental to great leadership and will become even more so when developing teams and managing the challenge of change in as transparent and honest environment as possible.

Commercial understanding

Strategic leadership requires a comprehensive approach: understanding the complex economic ecosystem, identifying innovative revenue streams, and skilfully balancing diverse stakeholder interests while maintaining organisational sustainability.

Partnership building

Cross-sector collaboration has become essential for cultural institutions. By forging strategic partnerships, organisations can unlock innovative solutions, enhance economic resilience, and amplify their collective influence by shaping broader societal and policy conversation.

Developing approaches to inclusivity

With the power to transform lives, leaders must deliberately dismantle barriers of participation. There must be a commitment to creative inclusive environments that welcome and empower audiences, employees, and artists alike.

Leadership is an evolving journey, and the arts and cultural sector has undergone profound transformation in recent years. We are committed to supporting visionary leaders as they chart innovative paths forward, embrace change, and reimagine the future of cultural expression- whatever the coming years bring.

About us

Where visionary leadership meets cultural excellence

At Saxton Bampfylde, our Arts, Culture & Creative Industries Practice stands at the intersection of artistic vision and organisational excellence. For nearly four decades, we've partnered with the world's most prestigious cultural institutions to identify transformative leaders who not only preserve creative legacies but pioneer innovative paths forward.

Our specialist team combines deep sector knowledge with unparalleled search expertise, understanding the unique challenges facing today's cultural landscape, from digital transformation and audience development to funding diversification and community engagement. We recognise that tomorrow's cultural leaders must balance artistic integrity with commercial acumen, tradition with innovation.

We take pride in our exceptional track record of placing diverse leaders who bring fresh perspectives and inclusive approaches to cultural institutions. Our commitment to diversity has transformed organisations by connecting them with leaders from varied backgrounds, experiences, and viewpoints who drive both excellence and meaningful representation.

Through our global partnership with Panorama, we have global reach. This allows us to identify exceptional talent across international borders, connecting cultural institutions with leaders who bring world-class expertise and diverse global perspectives.

A snapshot of our track record:

Antony Gormley
Studio Director

BBC
Chair

British Museum
Director

**City of Birmingham
Symphony Orchestra**
Chief Executive

Chineke!
Trustees

Frieze Masters
Director

Grammy's
Executive Director, MENA

National Gallery
Director of Digital Innovation
& Technology

National Theatre
Joint Chief Executives

**New Museum of Architecture
and Design, Helsinki**
Director

SXSW London
Chief Executive

Tate Modern
Director

The Courtauld
Trustees

Turner Contemporary
Chair

V&A
Director of Collections

Young Vic
Artistic Director

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