

OLLY DAVIES

Head of Marketing & Development at Fringe Society



“

We have started talking with our staff about what they think will and won't work and how it fits into their needs. Myself and other senior leaders have deliberately stepped away from these discussions so as not to steer the conversation. Managers should remember sometimes the most useful thing you can do is allow your staff the space to think, feel and reflect.

”

WHAT NO FRINGE?

Queen Victoria described it as a 'city so beautiful it breaks the heart again and again'. Well this year Edinburgh certainly broke our hearts, when for the first time in seventy years the Edinburgh Festival Fringe Society took the difficult decision that the world's biggest arts festival would not go ahead as planned.

So how do you handle the effect of this on your staff, your audience and the arts world?

Pre Covid-19, Olly Davies, Head of Marketing & Development at the Fringe, describes the Society as 'running on rails, with set outputs and deadlines that remain broadly similar year-on-year.'

This year's crisis forcing a national lockdown upended this entirely.

“

We fundamentally experienced a shift from process-driven activity into an almost entirely agile way of working, with little in the way of deadlines other than what we self-imposed. ”

If ever there was a time for The Fringe to 'improvise and be creative' this year called for Davies and his team to put on the performance of a life time.

The Fringe Society is the charity that underpins the uncurated arts festival by supporting artists in getting their work seen, assisting audiences in accessing Fringe performances, and promoting the spirit of fringe festivals globally. Without an actual event though, how did Olly Davies and his colleagues intend to achieve this?

“

Instead of assisting in the delivery of a physical festival, we worked to raise as much money as possible for performance artists and venues, and find digital ways for them to showcase their work. ”

To manage a more agile approach, The Fringe staff convened in daily digital standup-meetings, using communication and workflow tools like Slack and Trello. The mass move to home-working, while challenging, also allowed for more cross-organisational and cross-departmental working as teams were no longer confined to specific office buildings.

In parallel to this turnaround in digital working practice and outputs was what some of Davies's colleagues called the "trauma" or "body blow" of the festival cancellation and the limited time to process it. It was down to Davies and his senior management colleagues to manage workflow, mitigate the impacts of lockdown and oversee the effects the festival cancellation had on staff wellbeing.

So how did he adapt to this new way of managing effectively and ensure team collaboration?

“

In a shared office, a manager has visual and physical cues about when pressure points are building in individuals and teams however, this disappears when working partly or entirely remotely. During this time my people management and interpersonal skills became key - as well as the ability to adapt them. I set up regular one-to-one meetings with my direct reports and had Covid-safe face-to-face time whenever it was possible. ”

When asked what he felt were the most important factors for success during times of disruption Davies emphasised that technology was just a channel, that enabled his teams and the people that the Fringe Society works for to stay in touch.

Davies and the Fringe Society are managing internal conversations about changing methods of work alongside ongoing debates about how much society values the arts - and the extent to which it values digital iterations of the performing arts. Their view is that for the time being, whether for safe and optimal work conditions or the state of the arts profession, the future is blended.

FIND OUT MORE



managers.org.uk/managementtransformed

fringe
society

CMI
Chartered
Management
Institute