



Technology in action



Kicking off our new series of technology case studies Ursula Seymour looks at how Lift, a London-based theatre production and presentation firm, uses IT to help it run a busy programme of creative events in the capital

Although technology is not a key part of what Lift (London International Festival of Theatre) is about, it is at the heart of the smooth running of the organisation and is deployed as a creative tool too.

Part of Lift's work involves reporting on the effects a play or film has on an audience and helping people to share their thoughts and feelings after the event. Good communications are a must for the company, so it has recently invested in a wireless network.

Lift uses Apple computers: full-time staff have desktop PCs, while a further eight iBooks and several spare desktop systems are shared by the rest of the workforce. The choice of Macs was a deliberate one. "Our clients feel that Macs give them more scope for creativity and are easier to use," explains Lift's learning co-ordinator Tiffany Ball.

Keeping the system simple is essential – with temporary members of staff coming and going, it's vital to be able to sit down and start working straightaway.

"All the files are shared so we have to have a logical filing system," says Ball. This is also important as files may have to be retrieved long after a temporary member of staff has left.

One of Lift's most recent innovations is a wireless network, which was set up by its freelance IT consultant. This allows employees to use their pool of laptops anywhere in the office, which offers real freedom. "The great thing about wireless computing is that now we can use [the notebooks] offsite," explains Ball.

The network was set up using an AirPort Extreme base station, Apple's latest version of its wireless networking technology. It supports both 802.11b – the most common standard, which runs

at 11Mbps (megabits per second) – and 802.11g, which uses the same frequency but runs at a faster speed of 54Mbps.

The decision to opt for Apple's AirPort Extreme was simple – it provides futureproofing should Lift choose to upgrade to the faster 802.11g wireless system. For the moment, though, the iBooks can only use standard AirPort wireless cards, so they are currently running on an 802.11b network.

Wire-free working

Lift could invest in its notebooks and wireless network thanks to a £20,000 grant from Niace (the National Organisation for Adult Learning) and the Learning and Skills Council. This money was given to support Lift's Project Phakama initiative, which runs weekend workshops for young refugees and asylum seekers aged between 14 and 24.

These workshops twin the youngsters with creative professionals, such as dancers, filmmakers and musicians, who help them to tell their stories and share their experiences regardless of language.

The notebooks are loaded with educational software which the refugees use to help them learn English. They are also equipped with webcams which are used to make films of their experiences.



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Lift was so impressed by wireless networking that it plans to incorporate it in a future performance by Project Phakama participants called *Strange Familiars*. The company will equip the venue with its own network, allowing performers to use the notebooks, as well as streaming the event to their counterparts in South Africa and recording audience reaction to the show.

Software solutions

But the hardware is just half of the picture and Lift relies heavily on a range of software tools. "Top of the list is Outlook Express. We could do nothing without this. We are an international organisation so email helps us overcome time differences and the cost of phone calls. When the server goes down, the office virtually stops work," says Ball.

Like most offices Microsoft Word and Excel are key tools, but Lift's marketing department also uses the design package QuarkXPress to put together brochures, posters and other promotional material. FileMaker Pro handles the database and Lift has just begun training its staff to use Apple's video-editing software, Final Cut Pro, and eMagic's Logic Audio music production tool.

As with any modern business, Lift runs a website at www.liffest.org. This is a central part of the organisation, offering an online ticketing service and access to its archive of information about past events. Ball says that the latter facility is

essential, as the only other place all this data is kept is in paper files at the office – not that easy to search.

Website wonders

Lift's website also provides a useful marketing tool, allowing the company to publicise upcoming events, such as its new Family Friendly Season, which runs from 1 May to 21 June this year.

Of course, like any organisation that relies on technology there are the occasional glitches and crashes but Lift has a three-fold support system in place.

First port of call is Ball herself, who handles basic computer problems and initial staff training on the software, hardware and file system. This presents one area of concern: Ball says it's hard to find the time for thorough training with so many part-time staff joining and leaving the office. "People don't always have time to learn how to use the database properly. Training and induction time is another issue," she explains.

For more serious problems, or when it comes to a complex project like installing the wireless network and configuring the PCs to use it, Lift calls on the services of a freelance IT consultant. He is employed on an ad-hoc basis, offering support and some in-depth training on new systems. For hardware support Lift has a contract with specialist Macintosh maintenance company Amsys. ■

Lift: the lowdown

Set up in 1981, Lift (London International Festival of Theatre) commissions and presents existing work from around the world. It has evolved from a biennial event showcasing artists from around the globe at London venues to its current state, programming events involving international acts all year round.

Its work has three strands: it holds performances for the public; it holds courses for teachers and businesses that explores creative ways of educating and working; and it reports on the effects of plays and films on audiences.

Lift's offices are based in London and it has eight full-time employees, with a further eight regular part-timers. There is also a floating body of staff employed for specific projects or via student placements.

- Address **19/20 Great Sutton Street, London EC1V 0DR**
- Telephone **020 7490 3964**
- Box office **020 7863 8012** or book online at **www.liffest.org**
- Hardware used **One iMac set up as a dedicated FileMaker database server; one Power Mac G3 set up as a file server and backup server; one Power Mac G4 used by in-house designer; two eMacs; eight iMacs; eight iBooks with integrated AirPort wireless networking cards; AirPort Extreme base station**
- Software used **Microsoft Outlook Express, Word and Excel; FileMaker Pro; QuarkXPress; Apple Final Cut Pro; eMagic Logic Audio**

