Case Study

Wollongong's Merrigong Theatre Company Aims for Best Practice Venue Management With New Central Bookings System

The Merrigong Theatre Company manages one of Australia's busiest regional venues, the Illawarra Performing Arts Centre (IPAC) while producing and presenting its own diverse selection of theatre, dance and children's programs each year. Located one hour south of Sydney, IPAC is Wollongong's premier performance venue, host to touring theatre productions, comedy and music shows, and other special events. In June 2014, Merrigong expanded its scope, taking on the management of Wollongong's key civic and community venue, the Wollongong Town Hall.

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Key Challenge

Between IPAC and the Town Hall, Merrigong is responsible for four performance spaces ranging in size from 80 to 800 seats, numerous meeting and rehearsal rooms, foyers that are available for events, a cafe and a restaurant forecourt.

Demand for the venues is high. The main auditorium at IPAC is in use more than 80 per cent of the time, while usage of the smaller theatres sits at around 50 per cent. Even the Town Hall, which Merrigong is yet to begin fully marketing, is booked 20 to 30 per cent of the time.

In addition to physical space, Merrigong also hires out crew to support shows along with a wide range of back-of-house facilities including lighting, power, staging and audio-visual equipment. This means that almost every booking requires input from a variety of Merrigong's 20 full time staff.

Until recently, the theatre company used an on-premise software system to manage venue bookings which had met the organisation's prior requirements but what with an increase in events staged and a drive to improve operational productivity, a decision was made to review new platforms which could realise potential business benefits.

Trevor Ahearn, Director of Operations, Merrigong Theatre Company, explains, "When I arrived here 12 months ago, I found that there were a number of inefficiencies in our venue booking software as information could exist in half a dozen Excel spreadsheets that were held on IT systems spread around the building. Although the software was highly capable, it was also underutilised by staff.

"I quickly realised that we needed a program that could be used easily by multiple people across the business for many different things. We wanted a central repository of knowledge for all events," says Ahearn.

Aware also that mandatory use of the software wouldn't solve the problem, Ahearn decided to replace the solution with deployment of the cloud-based, user friendly and simple to use Priava venue and event management software.

"Priava had the kind of functionality and reporting we needed. Apart from being far more suitable for our needs, it also gave us impetus. By bringing in new software, we had an opportunity to look at how we deliver our business and to consider new ways of doing things. We could introduce new processes," Ahearn notes.

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Working in the cloud

Having previously worked with event business management systems, Ahearn had a clear idea what he wanted from Priava right from the beginning. "You need a really solid plan of how you are going to use a system such as this because without planning, you won't get half as much value out of the solution," he advises.

Since deployment, the new software has been well received by Merrigong staff, particularly among the services and technical teams, which Ahearn says, "have the application open all day, every day". Other groups, such as finance, "dip in and dip out", accessing and adding to information as they work on upcoming productions.

Flexible working

The flexibility brought by the cloud has proven to be an eye opener for many. "One of the beauties of the program is that because it is in the cloud, we can access it from anywhere. I was in Cairns, 3,000 kilometres away the other day, and I was able to log in to the system. Sometimes, when people need to concentrate on getting information in the system, they find it easier to work from home. Priava gives us tremendous flexibility and this was a key reason for taking on the program," Ahearn says.

A central repository of booking information

The ability to maintain all booking and venue information in the one system is providing major benefits for the organisation. "It has tidied up the events delivery process for us, but it does require a bit more work when setting up each show," Ahearn admits.

In the past, everyone working on an event could end up maintaining their own spreadsheets serving their own narrow interests. Priava has replaced all these individual sources of information with one centralised repository, available to all.

"People now have to plan and put all their information into the system well in advance of any event, and this takes away a lot of the pressure, the stress and the last minute fire-fighting that can occur," Ahearn states.

Easy creation of estimates leave no surprises with invoices

One of the most noticeable effects of the new emphasis on planning is the ability to generate estimates prior to the client arriving at the venue, something that simply wasn't feasible when dealing with multiple spreadsheets.

"We didn't have the systems in place to allow estimates to happen, but now we literally press a button, the system spits out a report and we can tell someone how much their event will cost," Ahearn explains.

This up-front information is saving time with fewer invoicing queries being received after each event. "There are less instances of people coming back to us, asking why they have been charged for this or that. They know in advance what they are going to get and how much it is going to cost," he says.

The quotes also provide an opportunity for Merrigong to demonstrate on paper that the organisation understands the client's event, and that it has the equipment and skills required. "We're finding clients have more confidence that we can deliver their event," Aheard adds.

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Increased staff productivity

There have also been staff productivity gains since the deployment of Priava, Ahearn says. "When we used to have only one or two people using the event management program, all queries led back to that person. Now, we can pass questions to the relevant discipline and get answers immediately."

With post-event debriefs almost non-existent, staff have found they can turn their attention to the next show much earlier than in the past.

"Lots of little time-wasting moments like these have evaporated," Ahearn asserts.

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Reporting to suit all needs

Priava has provided Merrigong with a swag of report templates that combine information from across the organisation, and which can be filtered to suit a variety of needs including schedules of events customised to suit the needs of each team involved in a show.

"We can split out artistic and technical contacts, crew and equipment, to create reports with everything everyone needs to know about an event. We can craft reports and visual charts that give exact and clear information to any part of the business," Ahearn notes.

"It's very easy to find events, to find contacts and to access reports in the software. Anyone who has an admin log-in can edit and create their own reports quite easily. This makes the software very easy to tailor to particular business needs," he adds.

Summary

Ahearn believes the strength of Priava as a venue management tool and the efficiencies it has helped to usher in at Merrigong indirectly attributed to the organisation's decision to take on management of the Town Hall earlier this year.

"We brought on Priava at a time when a few things were coming together. It gave us the impetus to streamline processes, to find efficiencies and to restructure our staffing so it made more sense. This clean-up of processes gave us the opportunity to consider the capacity we had to take on another venue."

"Now, we are planning to build the Town Hall business. We're still figuring out what this venue wants to be and can be, so we're taking careful steps for the first little while," Ahearn concludes.

Benefits

The Priava Cloud benefits Merrigong Theatre Company by:

- Providing a single source of event and booking information

- Enabling the generation of quotes prior to events

- Reducing last minute fire-fighting and stress due to unexpected client requirements

- Support for flexible working – system can be accessed from any location

- Saving time due to fewer post-event invoicing queries and debriefs

- Improving staff productivity by reducing duplication of effort

- Providing comprehensive, accurate information about every venue and every event