The AmbITion Approach: examining action research into organisational practice

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Abstract
Digital technologies have had profound impacts on the whole value chain of the creative sector. Arts, cultural, and heritage organisations and practices are under pressure to adapt to digitisation rapidly, so that they are fit for business in a digital economy. They currently face a major significant challenge: how to adapt to and cope with emerging digital behaviours as they impact traditional artistic, audience development, organisational and business practices.

The AmbITion Approach, a new change management methodology, was applied to over 25 Scottish creative enterprises. The approach is cross-discipline: combining action research with design thinking and management consultancy methods, and is a framework for strategic organisational development and change. Doctoral research is studying the concepts, methodologies, and tools of The AmbITion Approach.

This paper considers research methods and implications for practice in the field of digital technology management in the creative and cultural industries. It highlights aspects of participants' experiences, with case study examples of when action research has become industrial/sectoral practice. The paper identifies and discusses the methods of how new practices were shared more widely with the creative industries, and how research was therefore embedded in the outputs, outcomes, and new on-going practices of businesses within the sector.

Keywords: *Action research, digital disruption, emerging technology management framework, open innovation, qualitative research methods, CAQDAS, cultural and creative industries.*

Introduction

Recent government policy documents show that already emerged digital technologies have caused great disruption in the creative industries (Department for Culture Media and Sport, 2013). Recent studies show that most SME and microenterprise scale organisations have struggled to successfully become digital businesses: developing digital product, service, and experiences in an ad hoc manner, rather than strategically embedding digital across the organisation (O'Connor 2009; Searle 2011). Capability, capacity, and confidence in change management is an important aspect of organisational development in a dynamic business and technological environment.

Background

Empirical research into current innovation approaches concludes that their impacts are creating new products and new businesses and markets. Whilst this creates the potential for brand new products and services, only a few organisations receive support. The recent approaches fund radical change in the few, and do not support the widest adaption across the sector of existing organisational and business models – the focus has sidelined core adaptation skills within the traditional incumbents (Arts Council England, Nesta, & AHRC, 2013).

Making change management methodologies attractive, accessible, and appropriate to all scales and operational models of creative and cultural enterprises has demanded a blend of learning approaches. A new, cross-disciplinary approach for emerging technology management has been developed, improved and modified since 2008 – *The AmbITion Approach* (Rudman, 2012). As part of a national digital development programme for the creative industries sector that ran between 2009 - 2014[1], the approach has been tested and its impact evaluated through applied doctoral research.

The AmbITion Approach takes organisations through a novel cross-disciplinary approach that blends the traditional methods of strategic change management consultancy (Deming, 1993) with action research. Action research methods seek to create action, and knowledge or theory about that action through iterative cycles of gathering data, feeding it back, jointly analysing the data, jointly planning action and implementing it, evaluating jointly, and so on (Reason & Bradbury, 2008). Action research is especially appropriate for sectors where experiential learning and reflective practice are norms in organisations, such as the creative industries (Coghlan, 2010). The methodology uses a social science approach to study the resolution of important organisational issues, working together with those who experience the issues directly (Lewin, 1946/1997). Additionally within *The AmbITion Approach* some of the tools, attitudes, and techniques of design thinking are utilised (Design Council, 2005). Figure 1 below shows the blend of cross-discipline methods that make up *The AmbITion Approach*:
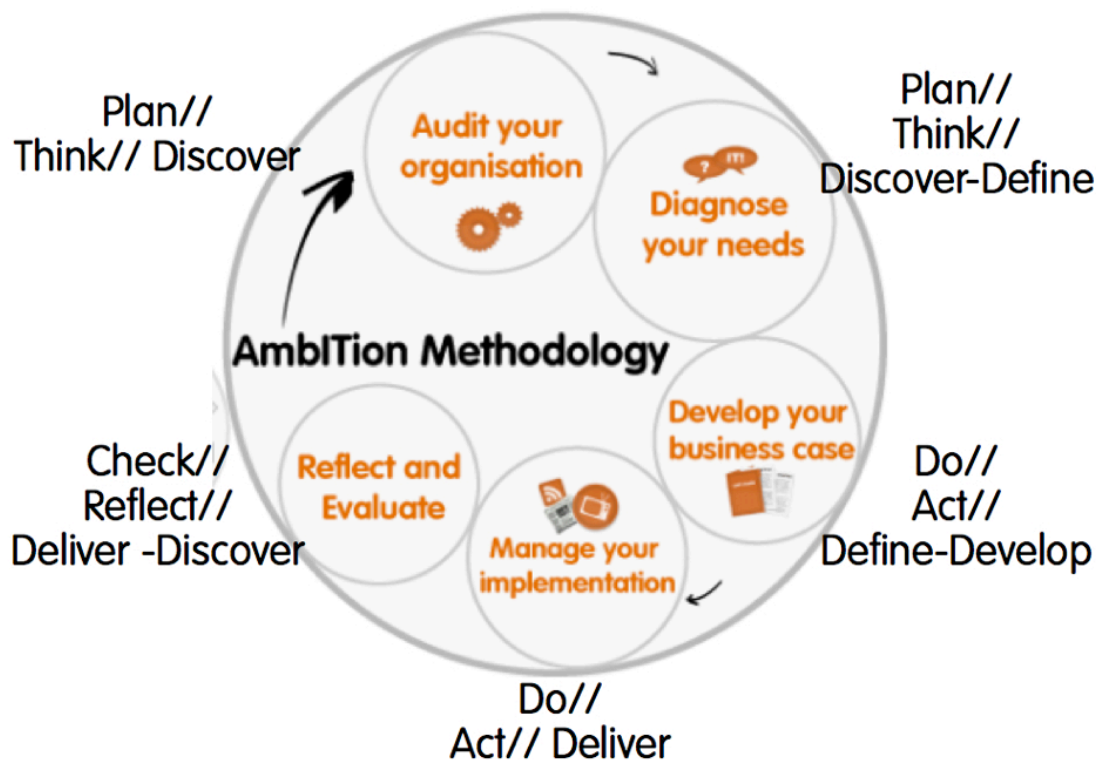

Figure 1: blend of cross-discipline methods making up The AmbITion Approach

Research Methods

From 2011-2014, a longitudinal study evaluated over twenty five organisations undertaking *The AmbITion Approach.* As a way to encourage digital development within the creative industries sector, the approach

was embedded within a national development programme within Scotland (AmbITion Scotland[2], 2012-2014). As a digital development programme for a dispersed geographical region, the programme was run online, and operated as a virtual project.

All data from the businesses that participated was collected digitally through online forms via the website. Online research tools gathered documentary and numerical data from the enterprises including thinking and planning processes; implementation and action frameworks; and reflective and evaluative documentation of each organisation's journey through *The AmbITion Approach.* The tools were designed as a core part of the programme's online infrastructure. They were developed by the researcher to explicitly deal with the ethics of using the material for research, and to automatically create numerical forms and digital analytics, as well as organizing a great deal of digitised reflective text (c. 30,000 words from over twenty businesses).

The doctoral studies have tested and evaluated the impact of the approach through a framework of mixed methods – both qualitative and quantitative studies have been applied to analyse the data. There is no prescribed standard for approaching qualitative projects, however, the general method of classic grounded theory is commonly used as a methodology for the analysis of qualitative data (Glaser, 1998). Glaser's classic grounded theory methodology was cross-referenced with Miles & Huberman's steps of qualitative analysis (Miles & Huberman, 1994), to form the framework method for analysis of data in this study:

Stage of research method	Glaser's classic grounded theory	Miles & Huberman steps of qualitative analysis	Timeframe during this study
1	identify area	Data reduction	Pilot study, 2011-2012
2	collect data	Data reduction	2012-2014
3	analyse data by comparison and interpretation into open codes which emerge from the data,	Data reduction/organisation	2014
4	develop theoretical codes which conceptually connect within categories	Data display and explanation	2014
5	align categories with research themes or concepts	Conclusion drawing, and testing their plausibility	2014

Figure 2: Timeframe, reflecting the application of the data analysis framework longitudinally

Digital technology has shaped the development of action research based processes in the past (Koch, 2006), and IT played a major role gathering and processing data in this study. SNAP Online survey software, Google Analytics, and Computer Assisted Qualitative Data Analysis Software (CAQDAS) software NVivo 10 were the softwares used to organise and query the data.

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[2] See http://getambition.com

Initial findings

The digital documentation gathered throughout participants' engagement with a change journey through *The AmbITion Approach* created longitudinal case studies of experiences. Business cases, presented in initial application forms, mapped the starting points and aspirations of organisations. Digital audits and Business Model Canvasses showed where an enterprise was at, and where it desired to be digitally. Business and implementation plans revealed the changes to be made, and online reflectionnaires and rich media case studies, created for open access publication online, reflected on the changes achieved, and the learning embedded. The documentation gathered reflected the practical actions taken and practical lessons learnt; and the theoretical knowledge gained by businesses and the sector more widely:
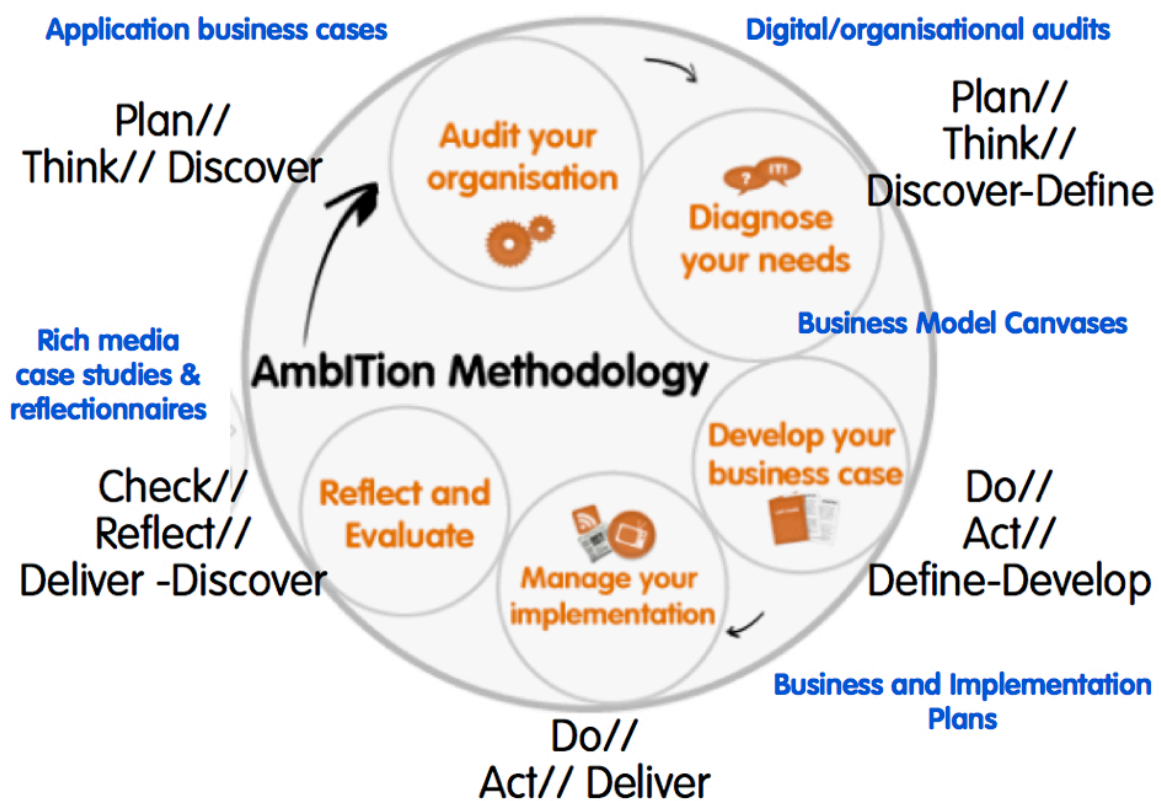

Figure 3: Case studies emerge through documentation gathered at different stages in The AmbITion Approach journey

Analysing this qualitative data highlighted aspects of participants' experiences to show digital adaptation and change achieved. Reviewing the documentation data corpus from all participants revealed common topics, concerns, and aspirations at all stages of a digital development journey. A structured coding scheme has been generated and will now be applied to all organisations' case study documentation, gathered across the longitudinal study, to show the extent to which confidence, capacity, and capability in adaptation has grown.

Discussion

Action research methods have been useful for a longitudinal organisational study, looking at the development of enterprises over time. It is the digital data collection tools and software analysis tools that have made the action research scaleable: collecting more than 30,000 words of over twenty organisations'

business case aspirations, plans, and evaluations would have been difficult to organise and achieve as a lone, analogue researcher.

It was the method of action research (think, act, and reflect on the practical and theoretical outcomes and outputs) that resulted in the case studies, which when published openly online were deemed attractive content, were viewed and so shared the learnings more widely.

Opening access to the action research-based change methodology of *The AmbITion Approach* by publishing it online ensured wider engagement with the framework, process, and all its tools. The outputs and the outcomes, the case studies from the participants, are also openly available online. On the topic of adapting to digital technologies, the rich media resources showed practical actions taken and shared practical lessons learnt; they also highlighted the theoretical knowledge gained by businesses. These rich media resources – films created by the businesses, Prezi and Slideshare interactive presentations, documentary videos - have been seen by over 17,000 unique visitors each year. The average dwell time on the getambition.com website is 3 minutes 58 seconds (for comparison, brand sites receive 2-3 minute dwell times, the BBC achieves the world's best at 10 minutes per visit[3]).

The scale of the online visitor statistics showed that this material was being viewed by the creative industries sector more widely, and not just by programme participants. Visitors were from locations further afield than Scotland. For example, during the month of November 2013, the Google Analytics overview of visits to the website show c. 120 visits on an average weekday, of which almost 54% were from Scotland. The dips at the weekend show that the resources were viewed most when professionals were at work (leisure sites have peaks at the weekend).
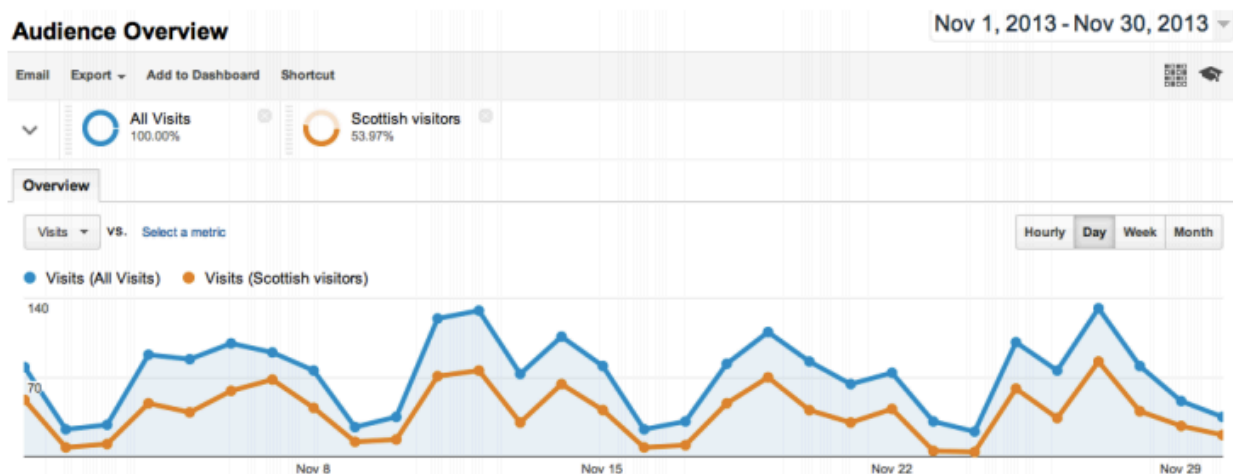

Figure 4: November 2013 unique visitor overview to getambition.com showing percentage of Scottish visitors (Source: Google Analytics, 30th November 2013)

Conclusions

Using rich media to present action research outcomes and findings has been a successful mechanism for presenting to the public results of research, and could be applied more widely by academia. However, action research as a method has only had significant efficacy in the creative industries in Scotland because of the amount promotion around the website, and organisation of the opportunity to participate in an action research-based change journey, through a funded programme.

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[3] See Smart Insights, http://smartinsights.com

This paper has considered research methods and implications for practice in the field of digital technology management in the creative industries. There is scope for the methodology to be used in any sector. Research now needs to consider how action research–based change methodologies can be packaged and presented to any enterprise in any sector facing the challenges of disruption from emerging technologies.

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Author biography

Hannah Rudman is a successful and entrepreneurial strategist and widely experienced organisational development and change management consultant, specialising in the digital opportunities for business and management and the challenges faced by enterprises disrupted by digital technologies.

Hannah has overseen the strategic digital development of over 150 creative industries enterprises, across all operational and business models via the work of her management consultancy company, Rudman Consulting (http://consultrudman.com).

Hannah advises on national and international policy around digital and organisational development, and gives keynote speeches on the topic internationally. She is an Associate Lecturer and Researcher and PhD candidate at Edinburgh Napier University's School of Computing; an Associate of think and do tank Mission Models Money; and is a Fellow of the Royal Society of Arts.

Hannah also runs a series of projects branded Envirodigital (http://www.envirodigital.com) which encourage the use of digital technologies for economic, social, and environmental sustainability. Envirodigital helped to establish the National Theatre Wales as a virtual organisation; co-produced an award winning (Best Technical Production, Critics Award for Theatre in Scotland) virtual theatre project Five Minute Theatre with National Theatre Scotland in 2011 (http://www.fiveminutetheatre.com); and is currently developing CO2 Savings software.