

**Piers Linney**, CO-CEO of cloud-based IT provider Outsourcery and a former *Dragon's Den* 'dragon', discusses rates of change, entrepreneurship and social responsibility with David Kettle.

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The arts sector is not alone in having to deal with unprecedented rates of change. The seemingly accelerating evolution in technologies, devices and platforms, along with changes in user behaviour and expectation, mean that the environment that all kinds of organisations and industries are working in is moving very fast. Entrepreneur and Nesta Trustee Piers Linney sees this every day.

"Technology is moving from a technical purchase of hardware, software and support to a service. You don't care how Facebook or Skype work — and even if you were paying for them, you still wouldn't care. You're using them as a service. And you want them to work for you."

Linney is clear about what he calls a 'systemic change' in the way that technology solutions are being deployed in business. "The model of having an individual island infrastructure that you have to upgrade and rebuild every couple of years just doesn't work." Instead, he says, we're increasingly moving towards cloud working, which is the focus of Outsourcery, the business he co-founded in 2007 and of which he's co-CEO.

The key to the move to the cloud is, he says, the fact that technology is unstoppably evolving and advancing. "The rate of change and upgrade is increasing massively, and with the rising demands for computing power and storage, it means that you can't rely on these little islands of infrastructure that companies have in their basements or data centres." He acknowledges that it's taken a huge investment to launch Outsourcery in the way he wanted. "It was about £30m just to get it started. But to be credible in what we do, it takes a huge upfront investment. The incumbents, even the big companies, are not really making that scale of investment. Which is why you need entrepreneurs, people like us, who are happy to take that risk."

# The Business of Change



There's a whole other—although not unconnected—side to Linney's activities, however. For a start, he was delighted to be asked to take part in TV business investment show *Dragons' Den*, but not for personal fame. "I wanted to be visible, because you don't see many people like me in business, especially in one of the investors' chairs. I wanted to be seen as a role model in some ways, as someone from a minority background, someone who's done all right, and a bit of a tech champion as well."

Indeed, he'd previously been approached by the government to be a business role model to young people. "I thought, why do you want me? But then I thought, actually I'm a mixed-race kid who failed the 11+, went to a comprehensive school, and went on to work in the city as an investment banker. Then I asked myself: how do I actually help other people?"

His solution is *workinsight.org*, an online platform to marry young people seeking work experience with businesses large and small that are happy to offer it. "There's been a massive demand in work experience, with schools, colleges and job centres asking for it, and all the research shows that if you have workplace experience you're more likely to get into decent work and earn more money.

"But supply has been stagnant. As an entrepreneur, if you see massive demand and limited supply, that's typically where you can make money. But obviously I'm not interested in making money here—this is a social issue, so I asked myself: how can I do something about it? The simple answer is to create a digital platform, essentially a mobile app, to connect job seekers and young people with employers, but with no selection criteria at all."

That last point is key to Linney's vision of *workinsight.org*'s social value. "One of the huge barriers to social mobility is the fact that if you're born in a certain postcode or go to a certain school or are in a certain wealth bracket, it's very hard to break out of that into a new one."

The potential benefits for young people are clear, but Linney is keen to stress advantages for employers too. "I always say technology is male, pale and stale, and if you can reach out into a much broader talent pool, the chances are you can do something about that and increase diversity."

Combining entrepreneurial flair, social responsibility and an eye for innovation, Linney's story is one of seeing technological change as an asset, not an issue. It's clearly an approach the fast-moving, dynamic world of the arts can invest in. ▀