

MediaTech's Next Chapter: Talent, Growth & Industry Change

Matt Stagg in conversation with Sadie Groom (Bubble Agency & Rise) and Charlotte Wheeler (MPTS)

IAMT Studio Visual Podcast Series

Duration: 17:22

Hi, welcome back to the IAMT podcast. I'm here, Matt Stagg. I'm here with two people I not only admire, but also I consider friends. So I'm here with Sadie and Charlotte. I wonder if you can just give a quick overview of where you are, who you are — sorry — and what you represent. And then we're going to talk about Rise, which is an amazing initiative. Charlotte?

Yes. So yeah, I'm Sadie. I'm the founder of Rise. I founded it, I think, back nearly about 10 years ago now. So we're an initiative for gender diversity in the media technology industry, and also now in the AV industry as well.

And I'm Charlotte Wheeler, and I've been running the trade show in the UK for the last 22 years, and it's now MPTS. And this version of the trade show — because we've had quite a few versions of the trade show in the UK — is 10 years old this year. So we're really looking forward to celebrating that success.

And you're involved in Rise as well, like very heavily, and we're going to touch on Rise first and then we'll move on to what I think is very much up there with IBC, maybe just above now, I would say, in Europe. So, for me personally, what's Rise? Where did it come from? Where is it going?

How did I start it? So I was on the board of Women in Film and TV, and I noticed that two of our board meetings were the same time as NAB and IBC, and I was like, "Well, that's weird, because you're not looking after the women in the technical part of the industry, and, you know, the engineers and the sales people and PR people like me." And so I just thought, "Oh, I'm going to do something about it." I'd also noticed that after I had my son, who's now 16, that, you know, I was getting a lot of comments about being a woman in the industry and being a mum, and somebody called me a marketing girl.

Didn't they call me one the other day?

So they — and I just thought, you know, I run a very successful global PR agency. I'm not a girl. And it just, it really annoyed me, and then I sort of started looking into it. I did some research, found out that there was less than 2% female CEOs in this sector. And so I started a group. We did a couple of chats. It was called FBI, which was Females in the Broadcast Industry, and it was a really dodgy name, and then we thought, oh, we want to expand into the US, so we probably better not call it that. And then I thought, what do we want to do? You know, for me, Rise has always been about seeing women being able to rise through their career, but also to keep women in this sector — and, you know, to make it attractive for people to want to come into this sector.

And, you know, I remember meeting a girl once... See, I said a girl. That's really bad. A lady — It's okay. We can edit it out. Privacy's restored.

But she was a — but she was... Her privacy got — yeah. So, but she'd come to IBC for the first time and just said, "I don't like it. All I do is look out over the beach bar and there's just — it's just men."

It's an intimidating environment for young women, I would say.

It's intimidating. It really is.

And Charlotte, I was — because you... Well, you're both very, very obviously successful women. Do you still get people — do they just come in... Do they treat you differently as a woman still, or is that the old guard, my age, you know, middle-aged white guy with a... Yeah.

I mean, for me, I can definitely say that we probably still lose business at Bubble because I'm female. So, you know...

Yeah, I mean, I don't want to diss the men in this industry, because there are some amazing men — like you.

Oh, I see. I did that. Is this in script?

How much was that?

Yeah, that's going to cost you.

You know, who are great friends, great supporters of mine and always have been, but I think if you haven't got a certain level of confidence — give as good as you get — when you join this industry... You know, I was 28, 29 when I joined. And I'd come off the back of working on the national motorbike shows. So, you know, I wasn't going to struggle, maybe. I wasn't going to struggle. But, you know, it's not to say I didn't have the odd pat on the bottom and, you know, the word "girl" and "sales girl". And, you know, and I think — am I the only female that runs a trade show in this industry?

I think you are.

Must be. And I mean that, and that's no mean feat. I mean, running a show is, you know... And in fact, probably some of the people you have to deal with that are customers of yours still have some kind of attitudes like that.

Yes, yes. And that doesn't sit well with me.

No. I mean, I was amazed, and I'll say this because it's only just came out. So I was here last night and we had the awards, and two of the women who work here said, "Oh, last night, there's a guy in here who's not a member, and last night he was getting, like, a bit handsy and drunk, and would you be all right to sort it out?" And obviously, not all heroes wear a cape.

Matt Stagg, that was...

No, and I was like, "I'll sort it out any way you want," because I still find it absolutely amazing that in this day and age — you know, you've seen IBC. And I just think it's not just you guys. It's everyone. I mean, call it out. Banter isn't banter if it's making someone feel upset.

If it makes you feel uncomfortable, if it makes you want to remove yourself from the situation and then go away and cry, that's not banter, that's bullying. That's harassment. I mean, it's... I've been lucky because I think, you know, I am quite confident. And what was it Ben Davenport said yesterday?

Oh, he was — he was scared.

He absolutely — intimidated — scared when he first met me at the Production Show in 2003. And I was like, "What?" But apparently I am. But then I'm also, you know, career-driven, and a mum, and I want to show my girls that you can have a career in any industry. But it does involve confidence. But I also — I respect people, so I expect to be respected back. And you may not like what I do or what I say sometimes, but...

Vice versa.

Now that's very interesting. Now I'll put this to both of you: people say, "You know, I was a bit intimidated." Now, that's just you being you. And do you think sometimes the — you know, the level — would they have been intimidated if it was your personality and they were talking to a man? Is it just that you're just you, and it's like, "Oh, there's a strong woman here." That's intimidating. Do you think there's some stuff like that still?

Yeah, definitely. And, you know, we have to be confident in what we do. But I think, you know, we still get that — people, you know... But all I want to do is be able to show people that women can do this, and we can be successful. But we do have to work a lot harder at it. And I'm not technical. I'm not an engineer, you know? But I probably —

I don't mind people being intimidated.

Yeah. So, you know, I think that — yeah. I think, why not? It's not — you know, it's not a bad thing.

One of the things I want to bring into it — and I know you do a lot at MPTS to try and bring in a lot of younger people going in. And that's not necessarily females. You know, we have a massive skills gap. You know, we're losing the old guard. Some could say good or not. Yeah. But now I'm not talking... I can go along. But also, we're not as attractive as we were as an industry. You know, I talk to people and they go, "Broadcasting? Yeah, I work for Apple," or, "I work for Meta."

Well, they go for Google, and they get their free pick 'n' mix and, you know, they get all the free lunches.

How do you address that? And what can you do to bring people in? And I mean, we need more females in. Like, absolutely. Who wants to sit in a room with people who all think the same as you? How's that going to progress business? But how are you using your platforms to be able to bring people into this industry?

So what we're seeing, or, you know, the trends that I'm finding — I mean, first of all, there isn't a skills crisis. There's a jobs crisis. But I have been seeing a lot more jobs on LinkedIn in the last few months than I have in about 18 months. And I really try and pay attention to that, so that, you know, it kind of gives you a little bit of hope that there are some green shoots. So yeah, it's not skills, it's jobs. There's a freelancer crisis. But then on the other hand, the industry is once again

— you know, it's a massive shift. You've got the creator economy and AI. So people need to understand how are they meant to be sort of upskilling and reskilling if they're in a tech role to be able to survive in AI, and what do they need to understand, and learn about the tools, get on board with the tools. But then you've got these young people, the creators, who are — you know, all the broadcasters are bringing in new commissioning plans. They're not commissioning traditionally. They're commissioning YouTube. BBC have got a brand new YouTube strategy. LADbible — you know, all these people are building studios. Flight Story Studios, they are hiring young people. And also young people who have grown up gaming and coding — AI in this industry should be really attractive to them.

But I think one of the issues that I see is how — is work experience. So, you know, all kids have to do work experience when they're in that year before their GCSEs, you know? I mean, my son was really lucky. I managed to use all my favours in the industry. He did — you know, he did BBC Sport, and he did Liverpool Football TV, and he did dock10. But that's just because I did it. But I had to do it all through my company because he's not old enough to be able to go into the BBC or a studio or anything like that because of health and safety. You know? And it's like, you know, I've got friends' children who are going, "Oh, I really want to work in post-production." But they can't because none of the post houses will take them on, and they think it's a pain in the butt. And, you know, and it is — they've got the insurances — and so I think that's a massive issue.

And complain that they don't have the pipeline of people. You know? "What's your experience?" "Well, I don't have any, because I can't get it." You know? And everybody puts out a thing, and you look at a CV, and it's like, "Oh, you've got to have 25 years' experience, but we don't want an old person." You know? It's like, "How'd you get to 25?" And they're like, you know, it's...

There's also skills programmes and skills training for young people, but sometimes there's only 30 places. There's not enough funding, and there's not enough places to — you know, on a 300 wait list. So that doesn't work. And I also think, you know, universities and that — we've always talked about reviewing the education around the media and entertainment industry, is what's being taught on these courses, that these kids come out with a 30 grand debt and come into the industry, and they've been working on obsolete hardware or, you know, they've learned it the hard way.

This is one of the things that I think AI could help with, in terms of, you know, you go in and you come out with 30 grand debt and you've got it, and you're a creative and you're amazing, and your first job is in the cutting room. You know? Or logging, or your metadata. And I think that's where you can offload that stuff to AI. Give it the rubbish jobs, it doesn't complain. And then actually start to use people's, you know, creative... And that will bring people in, and they'll let them be creative. I don't know what you think about that.

I mean, I think one of the hardest things that I don't think is particularly being taught as well is people skills, because, you know, everyone's got clients, and everyone buys off people. But I think, you know, a lot of the courses, they just don't teach that. And again, people aren't getting the work experience. And I think...

Also, they're all on their devices. I mean, my girls — getting them to speak to other humans that aren't in the family, it is really difficult, because they've got no social skills. And that's not being

taught at school. And, you know, even weirdly, because they look at stuff on their phone or whatever with subtitles, now when they watch a film on, you know, the main screen, they've got to have the subtitles on.

Amazing, isn't it? But I got my oldest lad — he's 18 — I got him a job in our local pub. And it was, yeah, he wanted some money and he needed a job, and I was like, "Go and do that, because you have to speak to people." Absolutely loves it. And, you know, it's... And you say — oh, when one of them wanted to do work experience, and I said, "I can put you in touch with people, luckily, just like you did." But you're going to have to speak to them first. And it's like, "Oh, can you sort out that?" You know, and...

But it is, you know, those people skills, and, you know, I always say to people, I will only hire people who have had a job. Like, even if they're a graduate, they have to — I don't care if they've worked in a pub. I don't care if they worked at WHSmith. It really doesn't matter. They need to have gone into work. They've been having to be told what to do. Be there at a certain time.

And do stuff they don't like.

And do stuff they don't like. And, you know, that's my one criteria. My other one is I want to sit next to them at our Christmas party. Just, you know, they've got to be interesting and interested in other people. And I think, you know, we're sat in Las Vegas — it's not a bad industry to work in, is it? I mean, you know...

And we'll continue talking, as we always do, but we're going to wrap up. One thing I really want to know is, what can we do to help? You know, like — in terms of, people talk about allies — what does that mean?

Yeah. I mean, I think for me, you know, I always said when I started Rise, nothing would change if the men aren't involved in this. And so that has always been absolutely key for me. And also, we didn't just want it to be, you know, a bunch of women having a drink and moaning about men. That's not what Rise is. But that's what we did. That's what we do.

Have a sort of dinner and a moan.

Yeah. You need to get that message out there. It isn't that.

It's not. You know, we offer proper programmes. You know, we do a mentoring programme, we do the Elevate programme, we do a leaders programme, do a C-suite programme. We do all of that, but we need money to do it. And, you know, so many companies in this sector benefit from Rise and don't put their hands in their pockets. And, you know...

Well, an interesting stat that we spotted was the Rise Awards. So many people enter the Rise Awards because, you know, it's a fantastic accolade. Everyone ticks a box. I'll tick a box. But a huge percentage of them don't sponsor Rise in any way, shape, or form, but want to enter the Rise...

And I think that is a great point to leave it on, and I'm going to say there's 400 members of IAMT. Many of you are going to be watching this. Put your hand in your pocket and support Rise. We'll be back later on. And thank you so much, Sadie and Charlotte.

Thank you.

Transcript produced automatically from the episode audio and lightly edited for readability. Minor wording may differ from the recording. © IAMT — theiamt.org/studio