State of Play survey 2021

Management & recruitment practices in TV

Preliminary report of key findings

Publication date: 11 January 2021

Introduction

The State of Play survey was undertaken between 6th December and 18th December 2020.

The purpose of this study is to provide a fuller picture of the experience of the TV labour market than has previously been available, with a particular focus on those who work in unscripted content. Casualisation and the growth of non-standard forms of employment have increasingly come to characterise the TV sector over the past two decades. Whilst some of the consequences of these changes have been plain to see, what has been less clear until now - particularly among those working at its coalface - is what can best be described as an underlying shift in work culture. A work culture can be understood as the collection of attitudes, beliefs and behaviours that determine a work environment. It is this which is our focus here. By examining in some detail perceptions of the style and effectiveness of management practices, and the consequent well-being of its workforce, we hope that a clearer picture will emerge about the industry's essential state of health, in order to inform current conversation about how this might be improved to the benefit of the sector as a whole.

The survey has had 1184 responses. Those who responded came from the whole range of production roles, 53% of which described themselves as working in editorial roles. Most respondents reported having more than ten years of experience working in the industry (57%). The majority of respondents have management responsibilities as part of their current role (70%).

A more detailed report will follow. This will break down in detail the make-up of those who responded to the survey, and it should be noted that it was a self-selecting group. However, at this initial stage, it is possible to say that of those who took part, just 6% identified themselves as disabled, and 14% identified as being from a Black, Asian or minority ethnic group.

This preliminary report was produced within three weeks of the survey's closing. It is therefore focused only on the key findings from the quantitative data. In addition to a more extensive analysis of the quantitative data summarised in these pages, the survey has produced a wealth of qualitative data – far more than anticipated. Initial inspection suggests that this represents an extremely rich level of detail, nuance and insight into the key themes indicated by the headline findings of this preliminary report.

We anticipate the publication of the full report from this survey in Spring 2021.

Context

The effect of the Covid-19 crisis on those working in TV was immediate and brutal. Whilst many other industries have been hit hard, the speed and magnitude of the pandemic's effect on TV's largely freelance workforce at the start of 2020 surprised many - not least, the UK government. The fact that the term 'freelance' covers a range of complicated PAYE, sole trader, and Personal Services Company arrangements led to large numbers of the workforce being ineligible for any support at that time. What began as alarm about the vulnerability of this workforce has, within a period of ten months, evolved into a much broader conversation about a whole range of systemic employment-related concerns and management practices, exposing some highly problematic aspects of TV work culture.

The timing has been significant. Covid-19 has occurred against the context of broader public concern about many of the issues now being highlighted. A swell in support for Black Lives Matter, which followed in the wake of #MeToo, was a reminder of how limited the industry's progress in diversifying its workforce has been, despite endless 'initiatives' over two decades. By 2017, TV's gender pay gap - another running sore – suddenly became the uncomfortable subject of public scrutiny. In February 2020, just as the pandemic was taking hold, The Film and TV Charity published *The Looking Glass*: a report that revealed an alarmingly high number of those working in the TV, film and cinema industries experienced mental health problems, suggesting that this state of affairs was attributable to poor working conditions (such as over-long hours, high levels of stress, poor work-life balance, etc). Meanwhile Bectu's Unseen on Screen campaign has provided a glimpse of a work culture that tolerates bullying and intimidating behaviour.

Like an x-ray revealing skeletal fractures, the pandemic seems to have exposed an array of problematic structural and operational features of the TV industry, not in themselves new, but historically overlooked or individually dismissed as being 'just the way the industry works'. Covid-19 has brought a dawning realisation that, although the UK's film and television sector has reportedly been expanding at more than three times the rate of the wider economy, and generating an annual trade surplus of almost £1 billion, this expansion may have been at the expense of its most valuable resource: its skilled workforce.

By examining the reported experiences of this workforce in greater detail, we hope to contribute to the considerable effort now underway within the industry to 'build back better'. The research is a collaboration between **Bournemouth University**'s Faculty of Media & Communication, the television union **Bectu**, and the freelance Producer-Directors' association, **Viva La PD**.

In the following pages the key findings from the quantitative data of the State of Play study are set out in a series of headline summary statements, each accompanied by bulleted relevant statistical survey results.

What we know so far

Covid-19 has highlighted a widespread loss of confidence in the TV industry as a place of suitable employment.

- 68% have considered leaving for an alternative career in the last year.

- 55% were already considering such a move before the onset of Covid-19.

- When asked if, knowing what they now know, they would still have pursued a career in TV, 35% said 'no'.

The overall standard of management in TV is considered to be poor, and this is thought to have multiple negative consequences.

- 59% thought teams are well managed on productions only half the time or less.

- The impacts of poor management experienced by respondents were thought to be:
    o A stressful working environment – 91%
    o Excessively pressured schedules – 85%
    o A negative impact on mental health – 84%
    o A negative impact on physical health and safety – 58%
    o Budget over-run – 49%

Lack of management training is perceived to be a significant problem by managers themselves.

- 70% of those respondents *with management responsibilities* said that they had not received adequate training in the practical and legal aspects of managing people.

Management practices could be improved through the implementation of some strategic initiatives.

- Respondents felt that the following would improve management practices:
    o Earlier commissioning of projects – 77%
    o Compulsory management training for senior team members – 73%
    o Better HR support – 63%
    o A third-party reporting body – 57%
    o Fewer freelance senior managers -33%

More than 93% of respondents claimed to have experienced or witnessed some form of bullying or harassment.

- Of those who claimed to have experienced or witnessed some form of bullying or harassment, this had taken the form of:

    o being expected to work excessive hours – 86%
    o being undermined by more senior staff – 65%
    o being bullied, harassed or belittled by more senior staff – 54%
    o being subjected to sexism – 34%
    o being bullied, harassed or belittled by a fellow team member – 28%
    o being subjected to sexually inappropriate behaviour – 24%
    o being bullied, harassed or belittled by on-screen talent / contributors – 22%

- The impact of bullying and harassment on individuals was reported to have included the following:

    o 67% reported that the experience had affected their mental health.
    o 46% reported that the experience affected the quality of their work.
    o 42% reported that the experience made them want to leave the industry.
    o 20% reported that they had actually left productions before the end of the contract because of these experiences.

Most incidents of bullying or harassment go unreported, or are not satisfactorily resolved.

- 37% respondents *had* reported incidents of bullying or harassment.

- Only 11% of those who had reported such incidents considered that the matter was satisfactorily resolved.

- 61% had experienced or witnessed such incidents but *not* reported them.

- The most common reasons for not reporting bullying or harassment were:
    o 42% felt it would negatively affect their career prospects.
    o 31% were afraid it would make matter worse.
    o 30% didn't feel the necessary processes existed to report or address such matters.
    o 27% didn't think reporting the matter would help.

Recruitment in TV remains heavily based on people who you know.

- How respondents got their first career break in TV:
    o 37% through an unpaid placement or work experience.
    o 23% through personal contacts.
    o 16% applied to a formal job advertisement.
    o 12% through a paid placement, internship or scheme.
    o 12% by other means.

- How respondents got their most recent job:
  - 32% were appointed by a senior team member they'd worked with in the past.
  - 20% were returning to a series they'd worked on previously.
  - 17% got the job through other personal connections.
  - 14% saw the job advertised – largely on free or subscription-based specialist sites.
  - 17% by other means.

'Nepotistic' recruitment practices are widely perceived to result in poor appointments, and negative outcomes.

- 76% of respondents reported having had first-hand experience of people getting jobs for which they are less qualified than others, due to their personal connections.

Recruitment practices in TV are overly casual, and generally perceived as being unfair.

- Feedback on job applications was poor, as reflected in respondents most recent experiences of making an unsuccessful application:
  - Of applicants who did not make it to interview, 85% did not hear back.
  - Of unsuccessful applicants interviewed, 32% did not hear back.
  - After an unsuccessful job interview, 68% of applicants received no feedback.

- 73% respondents felt that recruitment practices in TV are unfair.

A majority consider the way in which rates of pay are 'negotiated' and 'agreed' to be unfair.

- 55% respondents felt that they received a fair rate only half the time or less.

A significant majority want to see standardised guidance on appropriate work rates.

- 83% would like to see standardised guidance on appropriate rates for TV work.

A significant majority would like to see an employment agreement on minimum standards.

- 80% of respondents would like to see an agreement in place that set out minimum standards on overtime rates, hours, pay, health and safety conditions and welfare for freelancers working in unscripted TV.

Approximately half want more flexible working arrangements.

- 95% of respondents (718 respondents to this optional question) think there should be more opportunities for flexible working in TV.

- Where respondents had requested such arrangements, 75% had been fully or partially successful.

- 57% of those who felt the need for flexible arrangements had not felt able to request them for a range of reasons.

There is a dearth of appropriate training and development opportunities for freelance staff.

- Only 19% of respondents said that they felt they had received the professional training and development they needed.

- Of the 46% that reported having been offered some training (aside from mandatory H&S etc) less than half said that they had found it useful.

Where we go from here

The previous section presents the key findings from the quantitative data of the State of Play study. Whilst the headlines are clear enough, the findings (as currently presented) will inevitably prompt many further questions. There is more analysis to be done, for example, in order to understand the way in which different factors affect different people. Our next step, therefore, will involve a more detailed examination of the quantitative data, as well as an analysis of the extensive amount of commentary also provided to us by many of the survey's respondents. A cursory glance through this data reveals some truly shocking accounts of mismanagement and mistreatment as well as some critical insights into the lived reality behind the statistics.

'Fair rates of pay' is an obvious example of an issue where qualitative data will help us to understand better what is going on here. Why, according to the quantitative data, do just over half of the workforce feel that they received a fair rate of pay only half of the time, whilst so many want to see an employment agreement on minimum standards and standardised guidance on appropriate rates? An initial review of some of the qualitative data gathered suggests that the face-value rates may not in themselves be the (only) issue. The problem is more complicated. Agreed rates come with varied expectations about what is, and is not, covered by a pay 'deal'. A 'fair rate' ceases to be fair at the point at which it includes significant amounts of unpaid overtime, for example. This raises the broader related question: to what extent do these non-standard forms of employment work to undermine the reach of policies like the National Living Wage, maternity and paternity rights, automatic pensions enrolment, or standard sick and holiday pay arrangements? The qualitative data should shed light on these broader questions too.

In the subsequent phase of this study, as well as clarifying and expanding on the themes presented here, we will also investigate the extent to which these - and the wide range of concerns that have been voiced so publicly over the past ten months - are fundamentally connected. What, if anything, is the relationship between the rates/employment conditions issue, and the diversity problem; or the mental health crisis, and chronic skills shortages; or casual recruitment practices and the industry's high levels of attrition; or the lack of professional development and training, and poor management practices including a persisting culture of bullying? To employ a metaphor of medical intervention: as the range and seriousness of various symptoms become ever more apparent, it is important to be clear whether this is a patient who needs pain-killers and some strategic stitches, or one who needs surgery for a potentially terminal condition.