

What the industry and Government can do to ensure British film and high-end television adapt for the future

Evidence for The Culture, Media and Sport Committee's
British Film and High-End Television Inquiry

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addressing sub-questions:

What should be prioritised to ensure a strong skills pipeline and retention in the film and high-end television industry?

and

What needs to change to ensure the industry is supporting inclusivity and sustainability?

Executive Summary

- Working conditions and a lack of career support in the industry pose a threat to its inclusivity and sustainability.
- A significant contributory factor is the dependence on a largely freelance workforce within television production.
- Hiring practices are largely unregulated and often exploitative, in response to unrealistic budgetary pressures on producers.
- There is a lack of strategic investment in the continuous professional development of the workforce, and a similar lack of support for, or investment in sustainable careers.
- Workers in television production experience high levels of bullying and harassment, often facilitated by the structures and cultures of the industry.
- These factors result in poor mental health outcomes and poor retention of experienced workers, particularly impacting on diversity across the workforce.
- A lack of management knowledge or experience, at all levels, tends to exacerbate many of the problems described above.
- As does the lack of any regulation or control on commissioning or production practices to counter exploitative hiring or management practices.
- It is recommended that the DCMS oversee the institution of an industry-wide code of practice on working conditions together with standardised terms of employment, and a kite-marking system for ethical employment practices. In addition it is recommended that DCMS work with industry and other government bodies as relevant to develop and promote CPD for all television professionals.

About the authors

The authors of this submission are based within the Centre for Excellence in Media Practice (CEMP) at Bournemouth University. They have an ongoing research interest in employment in the UK television industry and have published widely on the subject.

1. Introduction

- 1.1 Despite the dramatic growth of the high-end television sector since 2015, the future success of this sector is far from assured. Indeed, recent evidence of strains in the system (particularly since the pandemic) has raised serious concerns about the industry's long-term sustainability. Notwithstanding the attraction of 'creative work' for the many young people entering the industry, the sector suffers from a serious retention problem among its more experienced work force.
- 1.2 Reasons for the high levels of drop-out by mid-career are complicated, but seem to be correlated with poor employment practices, inconsistent patterns in the flow of work and problems of work culture. These same factors also militate against attempts to diversify the workforce, a project particularly characterised by high attrition levels. Multiple initiatives to promote inclusion over more than two decades have failed to make a significant impact beyond entry-level roles.
- 1.3 Ensuring a strong skills pipeline and retention in the film and high-end television industry requires more than simply tweaking the volume of entry-level supply. It is the systemic issues that underlie these problems that need serious attention by both Government and industry.

2. Understanding the context

- 2.1 **Significance of the industry workforce** – Whilst tax breaks, infrastructure and studio/location access are all important, the critical USP for production in the UK is its talent base. Yet, the sustainability of this workforce has not been properly attended to and shows worrying signs of vulnerability.
- 2.2 **A freelance labour force** - It is impossible to appreciate the current challenges of this sector's talent pipeline without recognising the significance of this being a highly skilled but largely *freelance* labour force. In recent decades (since at least the turn of the century) employers within this industry have therefore shouldered little responsibility for worker supply, training, career development or general welfare. The autonomous status of freelancers has generally excluded them from the benefits of more conventional employment arrangements (in terms of the expectations and responsibilities placed on employers).
- 2.3 **A unique dependency** – Unlike other industries, the film and television production sector is uniquely dependent upon this army of skilled autonomous workers who form *the majority* of its labour force. Freedom from conventional employer responsibility comes at a cost to both the freelancer and the employer. The sector therefore, is marked by a unique set of challenges that call for unique remedies. (Wallis and van Raalte, 2020)
- 2.4 **Lack of engagement with the talent pipeline** - One serious consequence of this arms-length employment model is that there is *little coordinated effort on the part of employers* to invest in or engage seriously with the sector's talent pipeline or future employment needs. Whilst there is an assumption and an expectation that talent will be ready and available when it is required, when it is not required, it has been of little

- concern, interest or investment. As is commonly stated: ‘this is just the way the industry works’ (Wallis and van Raalte 2022).
- 2.5 **‘Bulimic’ flow of work** – Work in film and television is chaotically feast-or-famine, both at an individual level and industry-wide. The high demand for content in recent years (mainly from the streaming services) ended dramatically with Covid. The post-pandemic backlog of work and the sudden resurgence of demand led to another work frenzy with growing consternation about talent shortages. Within months, a slowdown – variously blamed on inflation, declining advertising revenue, the BBC licence fee freeze and the Alliance of Motion Picture and Television Producers (AMPTP) strike – has sent high numbers of freelancers back into unemployment.
 - 2.6 **Talent pipeline leakage** – The talent pipeline is characterised by significant wastage. There is an *over-supply at entry-level* with growing levels of attrition as experience is gained. Whilst considered to be a highly desirable career choice among young graduates, the industry has a serious retention problem among its more experienced workers. According to the Film and Television Charity, the number of ‘missing’ experienced older workers is estimated to be between 24,000 and 35,000 (depending on which estimation method is used)ⁱ.
 - 2.7 **Why people leave** – Research into the reasons people leave this sector is still in its infancy and early indications are that it is a complex problem. The bulimic flow of work (feast-or-famine) indicated above is clearly a factor. Our own research has highlighted some of the work-life stresses and pressures that have become part-and-parcel of freelance media employment and work culture (see Wallis et al 2019; and van Raalte et al 2021a). Many freelance workers report that they feel a profound sense of *lacking support*.
 - 2.8 **Lack of support** - Lack of support and a sense of isolation are attributed to a range of problematic characteristics that include: absence of work-life balance; poor management practices (especially in relation to the absence of professional HR resources); lack of effective communication and feedback; lack of career development opportunities and a tendency to silo; higher than average levels of poor mental healthⁱⁱ; burn-out; and precarity (van Raalte et al 2021a).
 - 2.9 **Lack of visibility of the problem** – These are industry-wide issues and there is often little incentive for the individual employer to invest in or support the careers of those who are not being directly employed by them. Moreover, few freelancers leave mid-project: most who are lost to the industry are lost between jobs. In this sense, retention has little visibility as a problem, particularly to the individual employer, who simply experiences a ‘skills gap’ when recruiting for their next commission.
 - 2.10 **Toxic work cultures** – As a number of recent high-profile cases have illustrated, bullying and harassment are commonplace within the industry, facilitated by a number of the structural and cultural factors that distinguish UK television. The authors’ work in this area has highlighted the link between workplace bullying and three significant contextual features: job design and work organization, organisational culture and leadership (see van Raalte, et al, 2023).
 - 2.11 **The maternity penalty** - Lack of career support and a sense of isolation along with the other characteristics listed above, are commonly cited by women in particular as reasons to leave the sector. Many women find long hours and unpredictable schedules incompatible with childcare arrangements, while others look in vain for flexible working, job share or part time opportunities that might allow them to continue in their roles. By definition the women who leave, often reluctantly, due to family responsibilities are often exiting just those mid-level roles (such as Production Management) where the most severe shortages are generally reported.

- 2.12 **Issues at entry-level** – Despite the wide range of subject disciplines this sector draws upon (from industry-focused Media Production degrees to those of Humanities, Science and Social Science) it tends to position its entry-level talent at the bottom ('the runner' position). There may be pros and cons to the prevailing culture of 'paying one's dues' but it is certainly not sufficient as a strategy for helping to establish long-term media careers. In-house graduate schemes have largely disappeared, and there is a sink-or-swim approach to career development which favours the already well-connected. All this does little for the inclusion of a more diverse workforce (Wallis et al, 2022). Lack of career development support can also result in the promotion into key decision-making roles of individuals with narrow experience in terms of understanding the mechanics of different production areas and genres.
- 2.13 **Workforce inclusion and diversity** – Inclusivity remains an issue notwithstanding assorted initiatives over many years. Equality of opportunity is important in its own terms but doubly so given the influence of media in cultural terms. New entrants from less privileged or well-connected backgrounds find it harder to get a 'foot in the door'. Moreover, while those fortunate enough to find a staff role at a large employer (eg ITV) will benefit from robust HR processes, at small indies with fewer than 200 employees there is very little protection against either 'soft' barriers such as bosses who hire 'in their own image' or hard barriers (eg. lack of support for disabled colleagues (van Raalte et al 2021b), lack of accountability in terms of pay gap etc.) Members of minority groups are most likely to find their career running aground, therefore, simply because they are not insulated against the impact of precarity.ⁱⁱⁱ
- 2.14 **Continuing professional development and training (CPD)** – There is little structure or consistency in approaches to continuing professional development, career support and guidance for freelancers. There is a marked lack of any training that extends beyond the basic technical or statutory safety requirements of a particular job. Currently, training of all but the most rudimentary kind is not only considered to be the responsibility of the individual (rather than a concern of the employer), but actively prohibited by HMRC rules. Moreover, employers have no incentive to invest in staff on short-term contracts. This leaves the individual being required to foot the bill for both the direct cost of the training and the indirect cost of lost income incurred from the time taken to undertake it. This sink-or-swim approach undermines diversity of all kinds, favouring those able to draw on such resources from elsewhere (such as from 'the bank of mum and dad')^{iv}.
- 2.15 **Inconsistency in adoption of good working practices** – Whereas some commissioners are unwilling to commission from companies known to allow poor working practices (such as being known to have a culture of bullying), others turn a blind eye. 'Buy-out' contracts (where employment is agreed on a fixed-price often costed on the assumption of a 14-18 hour working day and seven-day working week) are not uncommon across the industry, as are other ways of avoiding the working time directive. The fact that freelancers routinely receive their contract weeks or even months into their period of employment makes them especially vulnerable in this respect.
- 2.16 **Management practices** – Management skills are not valued in general across the industry. Many with management responsibilities reporting that they are 'winging it' and others are reluctant to think of themselves as managers at all. Most managers are themselves freelancers and are often untaught and unskilled in basic competencies (such as effective communication, constructive feedback, performance management, professional development or the allocation of resources) or essential knowledge (for example of basic rights and good practice in relation to equal opportunities mental

health issues, disability, flexible working etc) (van Raalte et al 2021a; van Raalte et al 2023; van Raalte et al forthcoming).

- 2.17 **Commissioner culpability** – These problems are exacerbated (and sometimes caused) by an arms-length attitude on the part of many commissioners (who are commonly among those whose production experience is narrow, and in some cases extremely limited). For example, short timeframes when greenlighting projects, resulting in staff having to be hired at speed and without proper induction or paperwork in place, is often cited as a major factor in poor employment practice and in poor project planning, which ultimately makes for unnecessarily stressful working conditions as well as project over-spend (van Raalte et al 2021a).

3. What needs to change

- 3.1 **At entry level** – The lack of effective early-career support or training is particularly problematic. Graduate traineeship programmes – of which the television industry in particular was once justifiably proud – have largely been dismantled (although there is some attempt by a few employers to reinvent them). Year-long contracts at early career stage should be standard, allowing time for individuals to find their feet with a reliable income and some stability at this vulnerable career stage. This would allow individuals to gain broader experience and a more holistic understanding of production across roles and genres with considerable benefits to the industry further along the ‘talent pipeline’ (see Issues at entry-level above). It would also allow for a more strategic approach to skills development planning and for addressing diversity concerns.
- 3.2 **Continuing professional development and training (CPD)** – There is a pressing need for a more structured approach to continuing professional development, career support and guidance for freelancers. Employers, the DCMS and third-party organisations such as the BFI and ScreenSkills (the sector’s skills body) need to work together more effectively to provide not only targeted training but longer-term career advice, as well as information, funding and employment-related incentives to encourage and facilitate take up of training opportunities.
- 3.3 **Mid-career support** – We know that employer-supported training, CPD and career support are also vital as careers develop, and the retention problem increases with age and experience. Freelancers need access to support measures similar to those provided by HR departments for staff in a more conventional employment arrangement.
- 3.4 **Management training** – There is a need for effective management training. Most managers working in television production have little or no training in this capacity. While there are a few excellent training schemes available, these are accessible only to a very small minority of people. A healthy position would be one in which the majority of managers at all levels of television production had a good understanding of their role and responsibilities as well as of good management practice.
- 3.5 **Minimum standards for working conditions** – An industry-wide agreement as to what constitutes acceptable working conditions, particularly with regard to hours, is essential. Employers need to take a level of genuine responsibility for worker well-being; arguably in the case of small, wholly owned subsidiaries, the owning entity (which is likely to have an HR resource) ought to share some of this responsibility.
- 3.6 **Commissioners** – Those commissioning content need to take a degree of responsibility for working conditions, ensuring that budgets agreed represent realistic schedules and resources. Commissioners also need to address greenlighting

schedules to ensure that production companies are not unnecessarily put in a position where it is impossible to hire ethically, contract staff ahead of the project or plan appropriately.

4. Recommendation to Government

- 4.1 DCMS (or its agents) should require broadcasters and other commissioning bodies, to formulate, agree and adopt a **code of practice**, whereby they undertake to enable and support good working practices within the industry and discourage the use of exploitative or unethical practices. This could be overseen directly by Ofcom or set up as a subsidiary regulatory partnership in a similar way to the short-lived Broadcast Equality and Training Regulator (BETR).^v
- 4.2 Production companies should be recognised, rewarded and reinforced through the introduction of a **kitemark**, predicated on agreed standards and protocols and a commitment to ethical employment practices of both staff and freelancers.
- 4.3 Such a code of practice should include both expectations of the companies being commissioned and **expectations of responsibility and transparency** on the part of commissioners (eg. on budget expectations and greenlighting timelines, etc.)
- 4.4 Such a code of practice should also include protocols and expectations related to flexible working arrangements and the use of **standardised employment agreements**, rates of pay etc (see recommendations from the union BECTU).
- 4.5 Coordination and strategy for CPD, training and career **support of freelancers** across the industry must be prioritised, with Government ensuring that tax regulation is not a disincentive for employers to engage with this process.

RELEVANT RESEARCH BY THE AUTHORS

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ⁱ Steele, D. (2022) *Absent friends: Scaling the film and TV industry's retention problem*. Film and TV Charity. Online: <https://filmtvcharity.org.uk/leading-change/absent-friends-report/>

ⁱⁱ A body of research related to workforce mental health has been undertaken by the Film and TV Charity in recent years. See: <https://filmtvcharity.org.uk/leading-change/looking-glass-report-2022/>.

ⁱⁱⁱ Glassdoor suggests that the average monthly salary for a freelance TV researcher is currently £2,000. Even with steady work for six months of the year, this would not provide an income on which it would be possible to live unsupported.

^{iv} A concept expounded in Chapter 5 (pp.87-107) of Friedman, S. and Laurison, D. (2020) *The class ceiling: Why it pays to be privileged*. Bristol: Policy Press.

^v The Broadcast Equality and Training Regulator (BETR) was the name given to the short-lived Broadcast Training and Skills Regulator (BTSR) when its remit was expanded by Ofcom to accommodate both equality and training. It was shut down in 2010 as part of the incoming coalition government's 'bonfire of the quangos'. See: <https://find-and-update.company-information.service.gov.uk/company/05501115>.