

New mechanisms to support a freelance workforce: expanding human resource management practices in the TV industry

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The subject of this paper concerns the experience of people who work in TV. For the most part, in the UK, this is a highly skilled but contingent (or freelance) labour force. But I'll begin with some context.

In 2019, the film and TV production spend in the UK was over £3.6 billion – hailed as one of the UK's great success stories. Yet such was the calamitous effect of Covid-19 that by April of 2020, the UK's Creative Industries Federation was warning of the loss of half of the country's creative businesses and a future 'cultural wasteland'.

It provoked a rare moment of industry self-examination. But this wasn't *just* about Covid. A number of systemic employment-related concerns that had been simmering for a long time were swept up into widespread expressions of discontent and loss of trust. Ways of working that had hitherto been justified as inevitable – 'just the way the industry works' – started to be openly and widely questioned: *why* does this have to be the way the industry works?

It was within this context that my colleague Christa van Raalte and I set out to examine in greater detail the nature of what many were describing as an unsustainable way of working. Our own earlier work in this field had already highlighted a long-term skills retention problem within TV, with high levels of attrition by mid-career. Our aim became to understand better the experience of this TV labour market, particularly those who work in what I'd call the bread-and-butter of TV production - the unscripted (or non-scripted) sector of factual programme-making.

In partnership with the sector's union, Bectu we undertook a large-scale anonymous survey (over 70 questions, 13 of which were open-ended). We had 1184 self-selecting respondents who came from a wide range of roles, from editorial, to production and craft. Most reported having management responsibilities and most with more than ten years of industry experience.

A preliminary report, produced within three weeks of the survey's closure, focused on key findings from the *quantitative* data, and our full report – State of Play 2021 - drawing extensively from our analysis of the rich qualitative data, was published in time to feature at the Edinburgh TV Festival in the August of that year.

My purpose here is not to review the detail of our findings (our report is in the public domain) but rather, to highlight its underlying theme and consider its practical implications. This theme can be characterised in the terms in which issues raised were frequently articulated: namely, that this (albeit freelance) workforce expressed a profound sense of *lacking support*. As one contributor neatly summarised it: 'It's great to have job autonomy, but too often this leaks into feeling unsupported in your role.'

This complaint, echoed many times in different ways, seemed to imply multiple causal factors suggestive of poor management (or no management at all) and included poor communication, lack of feedback, no career support and no training or professional development.

Such a situation of course – and the predominantly freelance nature of this workforce – is a state of affairs that has to be understood within the context of more than two decades of deregulation and the casualisation of employment. Long gone are the days when working for the BBC was compared to a career in the British Colonial Office!

Perhaps surprisingly, literature on the skilled contingent workforce is thin, with very little on effective support (beyond some work on labour market collectivism). One useful lens (not much applied to the freelance status) is the idea of 'perceived organisational support' as it's come to be understood within organizational support theory. Simply put, this is a recognition of the social exchange which occurs between employer and employed *beyond* the purely pecuniary contract. The way in which workers perceive how their contribution is valued and the extent to which their well-being is considered, have both direct and indirect ramifications for performance and sustainability.

But there's also an ethical consideration here. The developing field of what's come to be known as the 'ethics of care' is particularly salient in this respect. Rather than foregrounding impartial general moral principle, the ethics of care foregrounds a context-bound and relational perspective on moral regulation. This way of looking at the world as it's been developed and expounded over the past 40 years by thinkers like Carol Gilligan, Nel Noddings and Joan Tronto has gained significant ground beyond the academic province of normative ethical theory. Today's applications of the ethics of care have found expression in the fields of health, education, economics, politics, ecology, and is clearly evident in shifting social attitudes and mores, and in the interpretation of the notion of 'duty of care'. This raises important considerations when it comes to how employment is experienced - even that of the freelancer.

In reflecting on our data it seemed clear that, whilst the employment experience of a freelancer will certainly differ from that of a staffer, there are many Human Resource Management principles and practices that might be borrowed or adapted to help alleviate at least some of the pressure points that our respondents were so vociferous about, and that we have identified as *lack of support*.

So the question that we have subsequently been exploring (and attempting to answer) is this: *In what way could existing management protocols and practices be adapted and applied to ensure the more effective support of a largely freelance workforce?* I'd like to turn briefly to describe to you where we currently are in answering this question and taking our work forward in relation to this notion of support.

Our intention is now to deploy an action research design to produce and test a career counselling-oriented intervention that we have been developing, provisionally called The End-of-contract interview. It's important to say that this is not intended to be a silver bullet for the entire problem of industry retention. Rather it's purpose is to be a modest, specific, and practical intervention that could be implemented swiftly, and in the process, provide further insight into the subjective experience of skilled contingent employment and the management of a freelance career.

Setting out specifically to address issues of feedback, two-way communication, career support and training, the main purpose of the intervention would be threefold:

- 1) to provide the individual with an opportunity for a subjective review of the project that is nearing completion, informed by constructive feedback from colleagues or associates;
- 2) to facilitate mediated feedback to the employer where this could contribute towards improvements on the part of the production company; and
- 3) to provide an opportunity for the discussion of matters related to the individual's overall career development and progression.

The essential idea here was born out of a careful examination of two practices commonly used by industries where more extensive HR processes are standard: the performance review, and the exit interview. Neither of these are directly transferrable to a freelance context, but both have contributed to our thinking in the development of this intervention. Our plan is that it should consist of four steps: a collective briefing at the start of the employment contract; a short preliminary meeting towards the end of the employment contract; a preparation period; and the End-of-contract Interview proper. (I can unpack this in more detail should anyone be interested.) Over all we expect one-to-one 'contact time' to be about two hours.

The essential features of the End-of-contract interview based on our research and subsequently on extensive dialogue with industry professionals, can be summarised as listed here:

- **Optional** - Not everyone will need or want to participate. This would be a service offered for those who ask for it.
- **Confidential** - For the intervention to have any value there has to be complete honesty and therefore trust in the process.

- **Conducted by third-party** - Again, to help to engender trust and to facilitate confidentiality. Time pressures, the necessary expertise, and the need for consistency are also reasons for this to be done at arms-length.
- **Multi-sourced** - We recognise the value in adopting the principle of '360-degree' feedback as far as is practicable.
- **Career focused** - An essential element would be time spent considering the career aspirations and plans of the interviewee, not to provide advice but a framework for review and possible planning.
- **Facilitated** - The aim is to facilitate the provision of feedback and to provide structure and expertise for a career-focused conversation.

So... drawing on the principles of action research – a qualitative, inductive and interpretive methodology – we're planning the overall shape of this next phase of our research to consist of three cycles: a design-develop-test protocol to adapt (and if necessary remodel) the intervention in a highly controllable way by starting very small and iterating with growth.

Right now we're in the process of identifying a key industry partner for the next step which will be a prototype design phase.

The retention issues that, ultimately, we're attempting to address remain complex and have implications for many aspects of the freelancer's experience. There are unlikely to be quick fixes. The point is to find as many ways as possible to help make working in television a more positive experience and a television career one that is both sustainable and conducive to trust.

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