Bournemouth University

Where have all the PMs gone?

Addressing the production management skills gap in UK TV

SUMMARY REPORT

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INTRODUCTION

Production management is a crucial element of television production and can offer a highly rewarding career. Nevertheless the television industry experiences perennial issues with recruitment and retention in this area, leading to significant skills gaps. While the recent downturn in commissioning may temporarily increase the availability of PMs, it is ultimately likely to exacerbate the problem, as more and more experienced PMs take their very transferable skills elsewhere and cuts to junior roles disrupt the talent pipeline. A longer-term perspective suggests that as the industry recovers, meeting its the production management needs will continue to present a challenge.

The problem is often regarded as primarily one of recruitment, however, retention is arguably a larger factor. Experienced individuals are regularly lost to alternative television careers or leave the industry altogether. This 'brain drain' explains why successive initiatives aimed at building up the production management workforce have failed to resolve the ongoing skills shortage.

Through exploring the motivations and experiences of PMs and ex-PMs, our research has sought to better understand:

- how and why individuals are attracted into production management roles in the first place.

- why PMs (and people in more junior 'feeder' roles) leave production management or leave the industry altogether.
- how the industry might attract more individuals into the production 'talent pipeline' and, critically, retain the skilled and talented individuals who already have experience in these roles.

KEY FINDINGS

- A lack of visibility or negative image both within and beyond the industry impacts on recruitment to this department.

- A range of factors meanwhile impact on the retention of experienced production staff. The primary reasons given for leaving, or for thinking about leaving production management are:

    - that production management is undervalued, under-estimated and underpaid in comparison with equivalent roles in other departments, with staff experiencing a lack of appreciation and respect from employers and co-workers.

    - that production management staff are over-loaded, under-resourced and expected to 'mop up' extra responsibilities without the requisite resource or compensation.

    - that production management staff are expected to work excessively long hours and to be 'always on', resulting in a poor work-life balance and unhealthy lifestyle.

    Additional reasons included:

    - the difficulty of reconciling work with family commitments.

    - a lack of training or opportunities for career progression.

- There is a gendered dimension to many of the inequities and challenges experienced by production managers, both at a practical and at an attitudinal level.

- There is often a corrosive cultural divide between production and editorial which is passed from senior to junior staff, underpinning many of the issues raised by production managers, and impacting on effective working practices in programme-making as well as individual experiences of work in the industry.

- While there are many examples of good practice across the industry, and a number of recent moves to address some of the concerns raised, there is still much to be done before the industry can be satisfied PMs are treated equitably and with due respect, and that employers are able to recruit and retain the workforce they need.

CONCLUSION

The experiences of our respondents, both those currently working in production management and those who have made the decision to leave, provide insights into some of the reasons behind the perennial production management skills gap. They throw light on some of the tensions and inefficiencies that can plague productions, as well as showing the toll production management work can take on the well-being and prospects of individuals.

Our research has uncovered many examples of positive working practices and effective working relationships. Since embarking on this project, moreover, we have seen a number of encouraging developments, including the inclusion of production management in industry awards and the introduction of family-friendly policies by some employers.

There is still much to be done, however, before the industry can be satisfied that production management is recognised and understood both within and beyond the industry, that PMs are treated equitably and with due respect, and that employers are able to recruit and retain the workforce they need. This cannot be achieved without addressing ingrained working culture and practices. The challenge this represents for the wider industry should not be underestimated.

RECOMMENDATIONS

To address the issues outlined above, action needs to be taken by a broad range of stakeholders and decision makers.

- **Job definitions:** employers need to ensure that job description and contracts are adopted that reflect an appropriate range of responsibilities for production management roles, drawing on the guidance provided by support organisations (Bectu, BFI, Screenskills).

- **Rates of pay:** employers need to ensure that production management staff are hired at equitable rates reflecting their seniority and responsibilities and in accordance with Bectu guidelines.

- **Production budgets:** commissioners and executive producers need to recognise the production management requirements of each project and make realistic provision in terms of teams and rates.

- **Informed planning and decision-making:** production executives and/or heads of production need to be involved wherever possible in the early planning and decision making that shapes a company's approach to working practices and the distribution of resources.

- **Public recognition:** organisations involved in the sponsorship and provision of industry awards, need to ensure production management is appropriately represented in the categories available for nomination. Press releases and opening credits should likewise recognise the contribution of senior production, in line with senior editorial staff.

- **Career advice and education:** screen educators and careers advisers at all levels need to raise the profile of production managers and promote the career opportunities available in production management.

- **Training and development:** employers and support organisations need to provide accessible and affordable training and development opportunities for professionals at all stages of the production management talent pipeline, including returners.

- **Family-friendly policies:** employers, as well as support organisations, need to embrace and promote a range of family-friendly strategies and initiatives including part-time work, job-share and training for those returning to production management after a career break.

- **Raising awareness:** Employers, talent managers and organisations involved in supporting new entrants across all departments need to facilitate a broad working understanding of the full range of roles and expertise involved in making film and television, providing a variety of cross-departmental experiences wherever possible.

- **Working culture:** employers and their senior staff in all departments need to model, promote and enable a positive working culture that embraces dignity and diversity and adopt positive working partnerships that recognise and value the input of all team members. Bullying and harassment, including sexism and disrespect for family commitments, must not be tolerated or facilitated.

- **Management training and development:** managers and leaders at all level s need to receive appropriate training and support in order to recognise and implement good leadership practices that encompass and promote equitable treatment, support and respect at work for all.
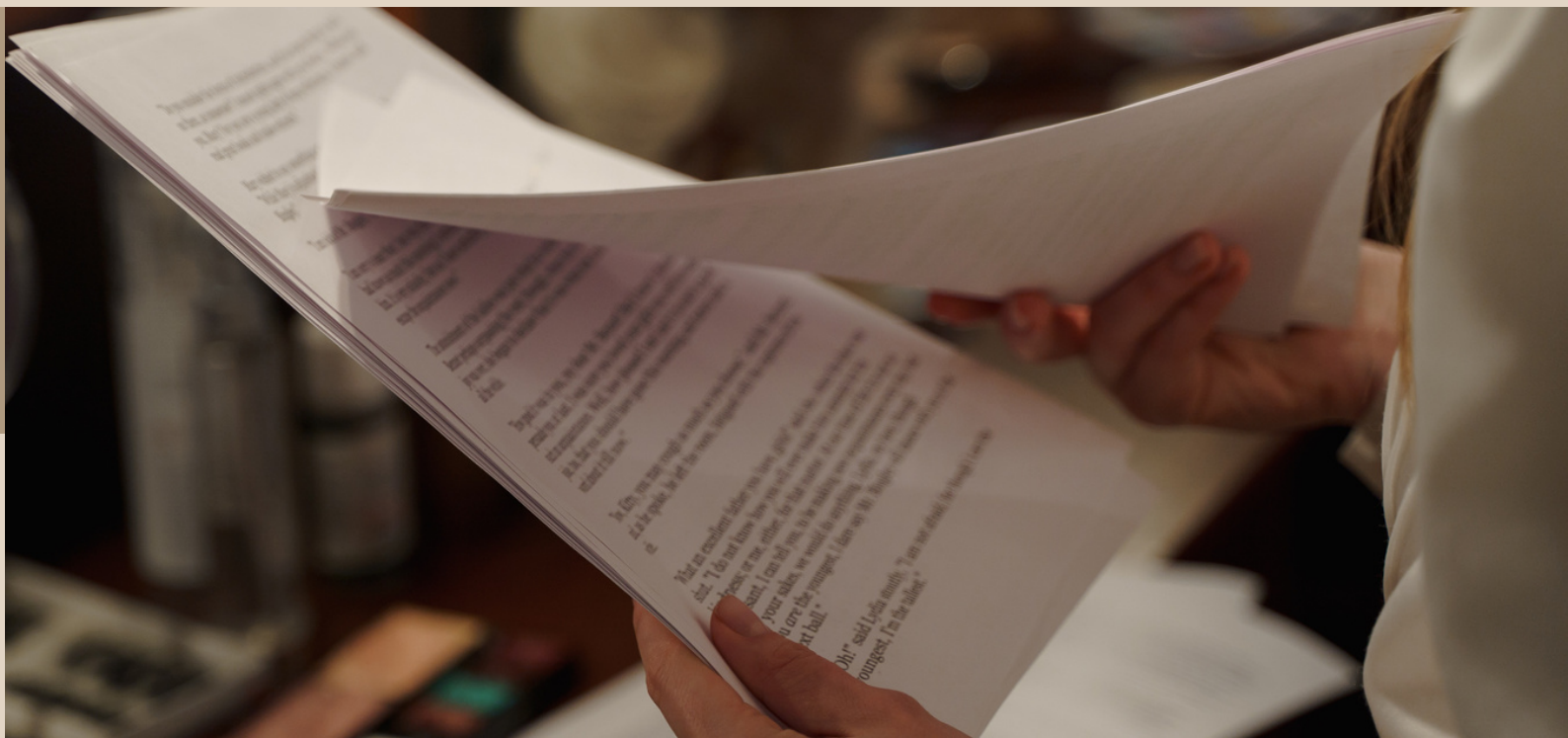
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9530/

This project was funded by
the British Academy and the
Leverhulme Trust