Bournemouth University

Supportive Offboarding

Report on the design, development and testing of an intervention to improve the way the TV industry supports its freelancers

Richard Wallis

PILOT PROJECT 2024-25

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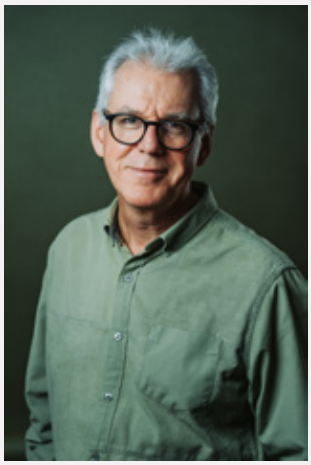

Richard Wallis is a researcher and educator based at The Media School at Bournemouth University. Much of his research has been focused on the experience of media work, media careers and continuing professional development. He has a particular commitment to the application of academic research to industry, innovation and professional practice. He also has an interest in the role of media education and pedagogy in the preparation of young people for the world of work. He holds an MPhil from Exeter University and a PhD from Loughborough University.

In a nutshell

This report presents the background, context, and key findings of a pilot project to design, develop and test an intervention aimed at improving support for TV freelancers. Supportive Offboarding is a brief, structured meeting between a freelancer and a facilitator representing the employer. It is an opportunity for a constructive and supportive conversation at around the time the freelancer's contract is nearing its end.

This initiative is a response to a problem rooted in the industry's model of employment. Over several decades, the TV industry has made itself wholly dependent on short-term hiring arrangements which often treat freelancers as neither independent suppliers, nor as employees. Freelancers report that they feel unsupported and alone, and the period leading up to the end of a contract is often experienced as a moment of particular vulnerability.

Supportive Offboarding has four essential ingredients: the offer of feedback from the company to the freelancer; an invitation to give feedback to the company; an opportunity for a career-related conversation; and the expression of gratitude. A carefully designed process and set of resources enables its facilitation to be undertaken by a non-specialist. It sets out to be practical, resource-efficient, and flexible.

This pilot, which took place over a ten-month period in 2024-25, investigated each of the main features of the intervention and evaluated the process of implementation. The study found that participants overwhelmingly valued the intervention, saying it made them feel more supported and appreciated. Though light-touch, it has highlighted a broader need for freelancer recognition, suggesting that even small initiatives like this one, could have a big impact on the industry's working culture.

Report Design: Jim Smith Design Ltd (jim@jimsmithdesign.co.uk)

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Introduction

Supportive Offboarding is an intervention focused on a short, structured meeting between a TV freelancer and a representative of the employing production company around the time their contract is nearing its end. It aims to support the freelancer at this period of transition. It has four essential components:

- **the offer of feedback from the company to the freelancer;**
- **an invitation to give feedback to the company;**
- **an opportunity for a career-related conversation;**
- **and the expression of gratitude.**

Freelancers (whether self-employed or fixed term PAYE) commonly end their contracts without these basic courtesies, deepening feelings of isolation and lack of support. This structured intervention, therefore, has been designed to provide employing companies with an easy-to-use framework to ensure that these supportive conversations take place as a matter of course.

This initiative is a response to a wider challenge facing the film and TV sector in the UK. Despite a surplus of aspiring young entrants, many highly skilled mid-career professionals are lost to the industry. This 'brain drain' has become increasingly evident over the past decade as demand for TV content has grown more erratic. Between 2015 and 2025, the industry experienced two unprecedented booms and two sharp downturns which exposed the loss of experienced workers. This loss stems not just from job instability but from workers feeling unsupported in their day-to-day work. Indeed, lack of support was a key issue raised by respondents to our survey, *State of Play 2021*, undertaken for Bectu.[1]

It's great to have job autonomy, but too often this leaks into feeling unsupported in your role.

(Respondent to State of Play 2021)

Freelancers of this earlier study attributed lack of support to various interconnected aspects of TV production culture. These include opaque recruitment practices, unclear working hours, and the absence of standardized pay rates. Job descriptions are often vague, reporting procedures inconsistent, and formal appraisals rare. Career support, training, and Continuing Professional Development (CPD) opportunities are largely absent, leaving workers without clear pathways for growth. Management is often poor, with untrained managers generally being freelance themselves. In short, TV freelancers collectively express a need for a more supportive environment, along with the systems and structures that, in a traditional workplace, would typically be provided by an effective HR department.

I once approached three senior managers (across two weeks) to express that I was feeling overwhelmed and needed support. Each one advised that I speak to another person. Following speaking to all three, nothing changed and I was still working 14-hour days to try and please the Series Producer.

(Respondent to State of Play 2021)

Organizational learning and the improvement of work practices and culture are often deterred by the project-based nature of television production. It is all too easy for lessons to go unlearned or be quickly forgotten, and the culture of work can vary dramatically, sometimes even within the same organization at the same time, across different projects. Non-specific statements of good intention for organizational improvements in work culture are too often short-lived. In this context, adopting a simple and systematic approach to better supporting freelancers could offer a more reliable means of ensuring consistent good practice.

1 End-of-contract interviews

The precursor to what became Supportive Offboarding was a small but defining feasibility study undertaken in 2022, supported by the British Film Institute (BFI), which asked the question: 'In what way could existing management protocols and practices be adapted and applied to ensure the more effective support of a largely freelance workforce?'

This review highlighted two key practices, both commonly used in industries with more established HR processes: performance reviews and exit interviews. Whilst neither are directly applicable to a freelance employment context, both provide useful points of reference when considering how freelance support might be improved. The idea of an intervention that draws from both of these practices attracted support from those industry partners who were consulted as part of the study – at least in principle. In practice, however, many potential obstacles were envisaged. Anticipated challenges included prohibitive time constraints, limited resources, insufficient training or confidence to deliver such an intervention, a lack of trust in the process, as well as broader concerns about the likelihood of candour.

What emerged from this consultation and feasibility work was a 'white paper', *End-of-contract Interviews*.[2] Whilst not advocating an 'exit interview' (at least in the sense that this term is generally understood) this proposal made the case for the *liminal* period approaching the end of a freelancer's contract being treated as a crucial moment for the expression of support (see appendix I). It identified this support in terms of the offer of feedback; the request for feedback from the freelancer, and the opportunity to review the employee's performance in relation to their own career aspirations and continuing professional

development needs. It argued that such a conversation need not be over-demanding of time or be necessarily resource intensive. It suggested that to alleviate concerns about trust and candour the conversation must be *confidential*, *optional* and *facilitated by someone situated at a distance from the project* on which the freelancer had been working. It suggested that such a conversation might be highly effective in terms of 'perceived organizational support' (POS)[3] without needing to be of a depth that would require facilitator training. The paper proposed a pilot project to develop a framework, explore the practicalities of delivering such an intervention, and assess the viability of the concept.

To advance this proposal into a pilot phase, Bournemouth University partnered with the UK-based production conglomerate Fremantle, a leading "super-indie" producing popular shows that included (at the time of the pilot) *Britain's Got Talent*,

Britain's Got Talent, produced by Talkback Thames, was one of the shows to participate in the Supportive Offboarding study.

Rap legends DJ Target, Krept and Konan front *The Rap Game*, a show produced by the Fremantle label, Naked, during the period of our study.

The Apprentice, *Escape to the Country* and *The Rap Game*. Shortly before the start of this work, Fremantle Global Entertainment had launched FM Reach, an initiative aimed at enhancing its talent pipeline and overseeing skills development across its global production operations. Recognizing the mutual benefits of working together, Bournemouth University and Fremantle entered a partnership agreement to develop and test the proposed intervention. This pilot took place between March 2024 and February 2025, thanks to the generous support of the British Academy in the form of an Innovation Fellowship for the Principal Investigator (PI). The project was internally branded by Fremantle as 'Reach Out'.

In a nutshell

As an industry, we have a problem retaining talent. There are a few reasons for this, but one issue is cited as lack of support. This intervention draws on ideas from practices used in other sectors to address this, helping freelance staff feel more supported in their roles through the offer and structured implementation of end-of-contract interviews.

2 Design, development and testing

We set out in February 2024, to design, develop and test an intervention to help freelancers feel better supported – a one-to-one conversation between a freelancer approaching the end of a contract, and a 'facilitator'.

The latter was to be someone who could speak for the employing company but at arms-length from the show that the freelancer had been working on. This important feature was to ensure confidentiality and encourage candour. Different models of facilitation were tested (these are discussed below). Our first step was to design and develop a framework and a set of resources necessary to support such an intervention. Inevitably this required also formulating a process for its implementation.

The process that emerged was as follows. With the active support of the relevant Head of Production, an explanatory email was sent to prospective participants (i.e. freelancers coming to the end of their time on a show) inviting them to take part. It was made clear that the offer was optional and they were free to decline, which a few did. Those who accepted the offer were contacted a second time to arrange a convenient date for the one-to-one meeting; to send them a self-assessment exercise (ten questions) prior to the meeting; and to inquire whether they would like the facilitator to gather feedback from their team.

Where feedback was requested, the facilitator would then contact the production team to ask for it, providing guidance on the kind of feedback likely to be most helpful.

The meeting then took place at a mutually agreed time and place, most commonly in person but sometimes online. Crucial to this meeting was the facilitator's prompt sheet – a set of 12 carefully framed prompts to guide and help structure the conversation. These meetings varied in length, generally reducing in time over the period of the pilot, as our facilitators became more practiced at delivery. (The time demands of the intervention are discussed in more detail below.) Following the one-to-one conversation, the facilitator would typically have a few actions to complete, such as sharing promised information or facilitating a career-related connection for the freelancer.

In addition to the facilitator's prompt sheet the package of resources included a facilitator's guide, a process plan, the self-evaluation exercise, email templates, an explanatory leaflet, and a 'how to' video.

In a nutshell

We developed and tested an intervention to support freelancers nearing the end of a contract, consisting of a confidential one-to-one conversation with a facilitator – someone linked to the employing company but independent of the project. Freelancers were invited to participate, undertake some self-reflection and request team feedback. Meetings followed a structure in the form of set of prompts, with facilitators offering guidance and follow-up support. A resource package was created, including guides, templates, and a process plan.

3 Positivity and gratitude

The expression of gratitude was included as an important aspect of our commitment to strength-base management.[4] Every conversation commenced with the facilitator conveying the company's gratitude to the participant for their contribution. In turn, the participant was then invited, through the facilitator, to express their own appreciation to colleagues if they wished.

A focus on strengths, rather than the more traditional problem-solving approach to management became an important design feature of this intervention. This approach focuses on identifying and nurturing people's skills and abilities by emphasising what they do best. Rather than concentrating on weaknesses or areas for improvement, it aims to foster a positive work environment recognising and leveraging each person's unique contributions. When gratitude is expressed and encouraged, we know it builds trust and a culture of respect and collaboration.

The expression of gratitude on behalf of the company was not expected and was universally appreciated. Crucially, by saying 'thank you' to the participant at the start, it set a positive tone for the conversation that followed.

I thought it might be about kind of negative things. But actually, I was really pleasantly surprised that the nature of it was very positive and I thought that was a really good thing.

(SO-A04)

Similarly – when later in the conversation, participants were asked if they wanted the facilitator to convey thanks to people they had worked with, the response was widely taken-up. Commenting on one such conversation, the facilitator recalled being given 'a long list like the Oscars!' (SO-AX3).[5]

> **[It] felt nice to share what was positive about specific people in the team, because – well, I just think not enough people get told that they're doing something really good, that's made such a difference to someone's experience. And that's always worthwhile sharing.**
>
> **(SO-A07)**

Facilitators also commented positively on it being 'a really nice way to put them at ease, knowing that there's no secret agenda to this.' Indeed, the effect of this simple expression of gratitude seemed disproportionate: 'They all look surprised and then smile! [laughs]'. Another commented: 'It's gone down very well, because they've probably never been thanked before, so that is a really nice thing – it's really nice part of it!' (SO-BB4). Yet another reflected: 'The appreciation – it goes a long way. I realise that … since I'm having more of these conversations, they're shocked. That's the first reaction I get is that they're shocked' (SO-CC4).

I was really pleasantly surprised at the line … of questioning. It was a positive line of questioning. 'How do you think you have contributed to the role?' 'What do you think you could do in the future to…? So, I think it felt, as a freelancer, very thought-provoking. But also positively thought-provoking. So I was very impressed with that.

(SO-A05)

The expression of gratitude, then, made space for meaningful acknowledgments in both directions. And like oil in the machine, it helped the conversational flow in a positive direction.

In a nutshell

The expression of gratitude is a key design feature of this intervention, drawing on the principles of strengths-based management. Participants were surprised and appreciated being thanked since, in the experience of many, it had rarely happened. This set a positive tone for the whole meeting. Most participants also responded positively themselves to the opportunity to express gratitude to others.

4 Feedback from the company

Before the meeting, participants had been asked whether they wanted feedback from the company. Those who chose to do so were then invited to identify individuals best placed to provide relevant input. The facilitator then reached out to these individuals, most of whom were happy to contribute. During the end-of-contract conversation, the facilitator shared this feedback with the participant.

The option to receive feedback from the company as part of the Supportive Offboarding conversation was widely taken-up and had been a new experience for most people that we spoke to, typically remarking that 'to finish a job and actually get some feedback' (SO-A04) was a novelty.

Once you've finished that filming, you're gone! And you sometimes don't return to the next series and you wonder why. Like whether they've just gone for someone else or there was something you did on the previous job.

(SO-B05)

It doesn't really come up. You do a project and then you're off, and your only feedback really is if you get booked by the same company again and you're like, 'oh, I must have done something well' [laughs].

(SO-B09)

Feedback clearly matters a great deal to people. Participants expressed profound relief simply in having their competence affirmed. By contrast, absence of feedback creates insecurity. This was evident not only among the young and inexperienced but extended to seasoned operators. Despite being highly skilled and well-regarded, one participant described what he referred to as his own 'imposter syndrome' and his relief and reassurance at being told his contribution was appreciated.

Feedback provided to facilitators varied in quality and substance. It was appreciated most when it was specific and personalized:

I got feedback on how I handled a particular guest mentor who's been a bit difficult, and I think that specific kind of feedback is always helpful because it's kind of like, 'OK, I did handle that situation good, even though it was a difficult one' (SO-B14).

The feedback was often brief and sometimes superficial. It rarely contained any great surprises for the recipient, and in the majority of cases it had simply 'confirmed a few things …' (SO-A01) or 'just cemented that what I've been doing, I've been doing well' (SO-B13).

I had some comments on improving my confidence to talk to senior people on the team and the execs. So, I think going forward, I'll have that in the back of my mind. … It's good to know it because I'd rather know so that I can work on it.

(SO-B09)

Yet, despite such variation and its sometimes-limited nature, all feedback was welcomed by participants, and any feedback was preferable to none. Typically:

It didn't go into immense detail. It was just sort of headlines about, you know, being professional, working well as a team. And that's all you can ask for really, as a freelancer. To know that you did your job to the best of your abilities and that there were no complaints at the end. (SO-A04)

Although the offer of feedback was made to all participants, it was not always taken up. This was sometimes because of an oversight or lack of engagement in the process on the part of the participant, and sometimes for other reasons. Those in more senior roles were notably less inclined to ask for feedback knowing it would have come from peers, or people whose opinions they felt they already knew, or who (they thought) might be too busy to give it the necessary time. A number of those who had declined the offer, however, were clearly conflicted about having done so: 'I'm desperate for feedback! I say it all the time … I would love to have some kind of structured feedback …' (SO-A08). Another said: 'I guess at the time it didn't necessarily feel like something that I needed, but on reflection, I feel like in the future I would' (SO-B06).

Whether or not people asked for feedback, the proactive offer of feedback had been noted and appreciated. This was particularly so by those who said they would have been reluctant to ask for it themselves.

I think if I did have this conversation with someone on the team, that would have also been useful. It just would have been a very different conversation.

(SO-A01)

We asked participants to tell us their thoughts about their feedback being delivered to them by someone who had not been closely involved in the show. Many were ambivalent on the point, but generally thought it to be of equal merit to the alternative. In at least one case, it was the conversation with the facilitator that had directly prompted a subsequent conversation with the line manager:

…after the chat, I went and spoke to my boss and we had a little catch-up about it, so I did kind of get both versions, if that makes sense. […] Because I wouldn't, naturally, maybe have the confidence to go and ask 'hey, please give me feedback on what I've done'. Whereas this kind of sparked that conversation. (SO-B09)

As another participant commented, a third-party conversation like this ought to complement, rather than be an alternative to, a team debrief. The third-party aspect of the feedback, however, did seem to add to the important symbolic value of the conversation:

I love feedback, even when it's critical, if I know that it comes from a good place – it's constructive – because I want to be doing the job right, and if you can tell me early what isn't satisfactory about it, then I can fix it.

(SO-C03)

'It was good to just hear it and also hear it from someone else' (SO-C06). Another commented: 'It was really lovely having them read what she had said *about* me, *to* me' (SO-B10).

Sometimes, you know, [when] you're working loads and loads and you feel like they're not even noticing or appreciating what I'm doing. …And then for them to, like, write it and say 'look, I've noticed it – we see you, and we see that'. That was quite validating.

(SO-B12)

Contrary to early fears, feedback didn't appear to be too difficult to get. In a couple of cases, it hadn't arrived in time, in which case it had been forwarded after the event.

Overall, then, although not everyone requested feedback, there was an overwhelming consensus that the offer of feedback was welcomed, and when given, it was seen as meaningful, irrespective of its quality. Any and all feedback was better than none. Or as one participant put it, 'it was just nice to get it, full stop!' (SO-B14).

In a nutshell

Feedback was welcomed as a positive and validating experience in an industry where it is typically scarce, and leaves freelancers uncertain about their performance at the point at which their contract ends. Receiving feedback was especially valued by those newer to the industry or those who felt their contributions were often overlooked. Although it was often brief and sometimes lacked substance, freelancers appreciated any recognition, even when it was simply confirmation of what they already knew. The more specific the feedback, the better. Although not all freelancers requested it, and despite its varying quality, there was a consensus that it should be a standard practice for freelancers to be offered it.

5 The career focus

Reviewing a project as a freelancer's contract draws to a close, offers an opportunity to reflect and apply any insights from the experience to the individual's future career aspirations. It provides a space for freelancers briefly to discuss their longer-term goals.

It was clear that freelancers seldom get the opportunity to talk about their own career aspirations. Attention is focused on the current project and the next contract. This constant need to be the best fit for an immediate job opportunity was a continual disincentive to focus on what one wanted for oneself: 'I think, so often, I'm not really thinking long term. I'm thinking "ohh God, my contract finishes in a week and I just need to find work!"' (SO-B09).

I think, day-to-day, we're often in this industry so busy thinking about the production and focusing on the needs of production, that we don't necessarily take much time to consider our own circumstance and our own career development. I think it's quite difficult to build that into our day-to-day. And so, I think I found the pause – having a moment to pause and think and reflect on it, really, really useful.

(SO-A04)

First and foremost, at the top of my head, is 'at the moment, where's my next contract coming [from]?' Where's the money coming for the mortgage? Rather than – realistically – where do I want to be in five years-time?

(SO-B05)

The opportunity to discuss career and development needs was widely welcomed, this was relatively brief and did not explore issues in enough depth to be considered formal career counselling. One or two of those who had spent time preparing for the conversation expressed mild disappointment that there had not been more time for this part of the conversation. Nevertheless, the listening ear, the occasional insight or 'tip' based on the facilitator's own industry experience, or the offer to make an introduction, had meant a great deal:

There is no talk of development when you're a freelancer. It's just you are what you are…

(SO-C06)

I think it was really useful. And to hear from someone who has also a quite different experience to me, I think was very valuable as well. And you know, there was a couple of people who he pointed me in the right direction to in Fremantle, who I might not have known about. (SO-A08)

This aspect of the intervention, then, was generally thought to have been 'very helpful and positive' (SO-B03) and clearly effective in terms of perceived organizational support.

As a freelancer, sometimes you feel like it can be quite a competitive industry. But to have somebody to sort of say 'no, no, I think you're doing the right thing' and from a personal perspective, 'I know people that have done this' or maybe signpost courses and other sort of areas that I could look at in the future – I thought that was really helpful.

(SO-A04)

For the more junior participants, the practical aspect of this career-related part of the conversation was especially appreciated:

[It was] really good, to get tangible feedback of what can I actually do, rather than just go, 'oh, you should see if they're hiring!' because I've tried that and no one replies to my e-mail so I don't know what to do! So, getting actual 'I will cc you with this person' or 'send you a link to this course' is really helpful as practical steps. (SO-A07)

Cast and crew of *Neighbours* at work. The show based at Fremantle's Nunawading Studios in Melbourne that provided an international comparator for this study.

Not all conversations included this kind of advice. In many cases, this aspect of the intervention had consisted of little more than a few minutes of attention, recognition and affirmation. However, despite the limited time it was given, it had provided a reminder to think about their career more broadly.

In a nutshell

Freelancers appreciated the opportunity to talk briefly about their career aspirations during these conversations, something rarely afforded in this fast-paced, project-driven industry. The intervention prompted a valuable moment of reflection. While this was generally brief and not in-depth, it provided a chance for affirmation and sometimes practical guidance. This mix of personal encouragement and practical steps was appreciated, even when only affirmatory. Younger or more junior freelancers reported having found this especially helpful.

6 Feedback for the company

The Supportive Offboarding process provides an opportunity for departing freelancers to share in confidence any thoughts based on their recent experience that might be of benefit to the company.

I think at first, a lot of people just thought it was all talk, like 'oh, you know, the company just wants to look good, so they're saying all these things and nothing's ever actually going to happen'. But I think, because more senior people are taking the time out to have these sorts of conversations … a proper sit-down meeting, I think that makes it feel more real, and it just fosters a kinder environment.

(SO-A01)

As with other aspects of this intervention, there had been initial surprise at being invited to provide the company with feedback, with comments like 'I hadn't been asked that question [before]' (SO-B08) and 'it doesn't happen often, if at all …' (SO-B09). This had led to some initial scepticism, albeit sometimes attributed to others:

I think initially, and especially when they sent the questions through, I was like 'oh this is just some more corporate reputation washing or something'. […] That's my initial reaction. But I think I did – partly because I heard that there was a more junior member of the team who did it and said they got something out of it […] that did make me think that maybe I should at least engage with this a bit better … (SO-B02)

Despite such initial misgivings, however, feedback in most cases had been positively constructed, often involving comparisons of process or practice with those of other companies: 'I just said some stuff that had happened at previous companies which hadn't happened at this company, and thought maybe that's a way to approach things' (SO-B05).

…it wasn't necessarily that I had anything kind of massive to contribute, but there were a few things that I thought, from experiences with other companies, that might be quite useful. You know, certain working practices when I've worked with other companies, and I was like 'actually that would be quite handy if that happened at Fremantle'. So hopefully it felt like I could contribute those ideas and they might have an impact on other employees further down the line.

(SO-A04)

Several facilitators commented that this part of the conversation had yielded some particularly useful insights and suggestions. Reporting on feedback given by one participant, the facilitator commented:

[The colleague] was very honest in a very constructive way about some of the challenges she faced, as well as the things that she obviously enjoyed about working on the project […]. [She] talked about some of the ways that systems could be made easier and just improvements [to] our workflow basically, based on her own experience over at ITV previously. So that was very helpful for me personally, because it's something that we can actually address and incorporate into future series. (SO-BB1)

Nevertheless, there was evidence of caution in this part of the conversation, and sometimes self-censorship. There were comments like 'I didn't want to be saying the wrong things.' (SO-B05)

…you don't want to be seen as being – you know, wrongly – you don't wanna be seen to be ungrateful or causing a stir as a freelancer, because I think you are – and especially in the current climate – you're acutely aware that these are the people that are hiring you. [And someone who is] moaning a lot, you don't wanna hire them.

(SO-B07)

People were worried that they might be misunderstood, thought to be 'making a fuss over nothing' or creating problems. There was a concern about seeming negative to people one might still be working with, or would need to work with in the future, or whose feelings one didn't want to hurt:

. . . you know how hard everyone else works and you don't want to come across as critical. Especially when you're so junior to someone senior, and you know that they're dealing with challenges from the execs and the channel and legal and all those sorts of things. You don't want to come across like a junior just whining about the things that were hard. (SO-A01)

I just thought, I don't really wanna be that guy. I don't wanna be negative. I've got a good relationship with [the Talent Manager]. She's great! . . . I don't know how I would have addressed that without feeling super-awkward.

(SO-B13)

Despite some self-censorship of this kind, most participants reported having taken the opportunity to provide some form of feedback to the company, and this was generally reported as having been a positive experience.

It felt really good to share what I found good about the company with the hopes that that was something that they'd know benefited people and potentially would continue with or, you know, try to continue funding etc etc.

(SO-A07)

Early concerns about the possibility that this aspect of the intervention might raise serious personnel issues, proved to be unfounded. On a couple of occasions where this could have happened, the matter was already being dealt with by HR. Generally, any problems raised had – as one facilitator put it – been 'really easy stuff to fix' (SO-AX4).

I've been able to let go of a few things I've been thinking about in that I've told someone now, so I don't have to mull over – I don't have to ruminate over that anymore. Even if nothing really comes from it.

(SO-B02)

The 'third party' role of the facilitator being 'outside of the bubble of production' (SO-A05) was considered essential in this aspect of the conversation: 'I was grateful that it was [a third party]. There's not a lot of complaints but I did mention two things. One of the things I wouldn't be comfortable saying if it wasn't [confidential]' (SO-A06).

When you [give feedback directly to] a producer who is kinda like your employer, you know, it's a huge risk on yourself. We talk about all these horrible things that have happened in this industry […] but if you have a third-party person, you know, it feels a lot safer…

(SO-C03)

The value, then, was in highlighting areas for improvement, in simply getting things 'off one's chest', and to feel that one's opinion counted: 'I felt like my voice was really valued and they were really taking on everything that I was saying.' (SO-B03). Facilitators had conveyed a sense of genuine interest in the participants' feedback – be it positive or negative – and this had been appreciated: '… they do want to listen to us, and they do want to know what kind of feedback we have so they can, you know, try and make things better …' (SO-B08). In this way, the act of listening had, itself, been perceived as supportive.

In a nutshell

Despite some initial scepticism, most participants engaged positively, offering constructive feedback based on their experiences, often comparing practices with other companies. Some expressed caution about highlighting negative aspects of their experience, fearing it might harm their reputation or future opportunities. Nevertheless, many appreciated the chance to share their views, particularly as the process was facilitated by someone at arms-length from the show. The value was seen in being able to highlight areas for change and improvement, in getting things 'off one's chest' and, perhaps most of all, in feeling that one had a voice.

7 Other aspects of the intervention

Having examined the four essential ingredients of the intervention, the study also focused on the way in which these conversations were facilitated, and the usefulness of some of the resources developed as part of this pilot. Aspects of its potential transferability were also explored.

Facilitation

A key design feature of the intervention had always been that it was to be facilitated by someone independent of the show. This proved to be important as it emerged that there was a consensus about the disbenefits of the conversation being facilitated by someone directly involved in the show. These concerns principally related to their giving of feedback to the company, and not so much the receiving of feedback or the career-related theme of the conversation. As discussed above, it was clear that even though the facilitator was arms-length from the show and confidentiality had been assured, there was still an element of self-censorship at work.

> **I think a lot of younger people on the team I work with, I think they would maybe be cautious of having an open chat with me, because I'm the big boss on the show…'**
>
> **(SO-B07)**

Three different approaches to facilitation were tested: first, with someone from a different part of the organization; second, with the Talent Management team; and third, a member of the HR team. Each approach seemed to work, though factors like personality, career background, and experience make it difficult to draw reliable conclusions about the correlation between role and facilitation effectiveness.

Giving feedback about the show to the execs, they will take that personally – and I know they will take it personally! And also, there's our own strange quasi-social/work relationship that muddies that. So it's much easier [...when] there's no personal or emotional or – anything.

(SO-B02)

Participants clearly wanted facilitators to be 'a step away from the project' (SO-B10) but with a level of knowledge about the show (or at least its production processes more broadly). A facilitator needed to be someone that represented 'a different perspective' and to whom it would be 'easier to be honest', thereby providing a listening ear for 'stuff I wouldn't say to my immediate team' (SO-B05), but at the same time, not so far removed that it would 'feel like I was explaining something alien to them.' (SO-B10). In this respect, the Talent team appeared to occupy the sweet spot – possessing an in-depth understanding of the show and its requirements while remaining entirely uninvolved in its production. They had the added advantage of being people who most freelancers were keen to talk to.

By the same token, the Talent team found the process to be valuable to themselves, providing first-hand information that was not always easily accessible:

… a lot of the time we're advertising jobs, we're getting CV's in, sometimes we filter, sometimes we meet them, sometimes we don't […] and they'll go to the team that's hiring. And then it's really difficult sometimes for us to gather that information from the team. Because as soon as they book someone, they're onto making [the show] and we're the last people they're thinking about telling. So this is actually really valuable. (SO-BB3)

… as a freelancer you wanna be speaking to those people … because those are the people who are potentially going to give you jobs, and keep you in mind, and are aware of the different roles and stuff coming up across a massive company like Fremantle. You don't want there to be stuff lost in translation.

(SO-B07)

Self-assessment exercise

Prior to the one-to-one meeting, participants received a self-assessment exercise comprising ten thoughtfully crafted questions designed to foster introspection and self-inquiry (e.g., 'What do you think others might identify as your most valuable contribution to the team, and why?'). They did not directly correspond to the facilitator's prompt sheet, but rather were intended to help the participant prepare for a productive and insightful conversation.

I looked at [the questions] initially when I got the emails and scanned them. And then I looked at them again about an hour before the chat on the train on the way in .... And it did actually make me think about stuff that maybe I wouldn't normally. [...] I don't normally think about a show looking back, you're just constantly looking forward for your own survival [laughs].

(SO-B07)

There was a wide range of responses when participants were asked about the value of this feature of the intervention. For many participants it had helped them to 'think about things that I probably wouldn't have thought about' (SO-B12) prior to the meeting, as well as given them a sense of the possible themes and direction of the conversation ('... it definitely gave me a better understanding of what I was going into'. SO-B10) Another said: 'It was good. It kind of prepared me, you know, for the kind of line the conversation is going to go into and I could just, sort of, prep my mind' (SO-C01).

Whilst some participants confessed to having given this little more than a cursory glance ('…to have a quick idea of what kind of stuff would be chatting about', SO-B06), some had clearly found it helpful – 'It did make me think a lot' (SO-B08) and 'made me think about stuff'(SO-C02).

> **I wrote my own list of what I would like to say about … how I would do the role differently, things that I thought worked well and didn't work well, and how I think things could be improved in terms of the actual job role in itself and moving forwards.**
>
> **(SO-B12)**

One of the facilitators reflected that sending questions in advance had also been in the interest of inclusion: '…we have a lot of crew members who have varying forms of dyslexia, and also can be neurodivergent – and they may not have declared this to us necessarily – so again sending some questions to think about ahead of a debrief, I think, makes it a very open process and also inclusive for people like that' (SO-BB1).

One or two participants thought it had been unnecessary to pose such specific questions, when it could have sufficed simply to provide a list of themes. Notwithstanding these reservations, the self-assessment exercise was largely welcomed, even by those who had clearly not given it much time.

Facilitator's prompt sheet

The facilitator's 12-step prompt sheet provided the structure for the conversation in the form of a checklist function without inhibiting the natural flow of conversation. Despite the intention to amend and adapt the prompts in response to the experience of facilitators throughout the pilot process, only minor changes were made after its first few uses. Overall, facilitators were happy with its design and found it to be a valuable way of keeping the conversation focused.

Although initially, some misgivings were expressed in relation to development and training (prompt 7) by facilitators who feared they were insufficiently knowledgeable about available training or concerned about having to 'keep up with all the courses that are out there to be able to suggest them' (SO-BB4), this did not become a problem. Often, conversations did not extend beyond simply raising the question of training as something to consider, with reference to organisations known to provide it. Overall, the facilitator's prompt sheet was thought to be useful because it ensured that 'you cover your bases' (SO-BB1).
In one or two instances, a too-casual approach to the prompt sheet led to unintended omissions – such as neglecting to invite participants to express colleague appreciation (prompt 10) – underscoring the value of adhering to the prescribed protocol.

Time required

One of the concerns expressed during the earlier feasibility study had been that the intervention would involve a prohibitive amount of additional time and resources. It was important, therefore, to gauge a sense of how much extra work was being created. In the early stage of the project, the facilitator had deliberately experimented with the length of the one-to-one meetings, tending to run them slightly longer than (he believed in retrospect) they needed to be. These ranged between about 25 minutes and 45 minutes. However, by the time facilitation was being undertaken by the Talent team (the project's second phase), 20 minutes had become the norm.

Some additional administration such as setting up the meeting, asking for team feedback and any follow-up work (emails to pass on thanks, connecting or providing further information) was thought to have accounted for an additional 30 to 40 minutes. Once a pattern was established, the approach adopted during the remainder of the project was to allow 20 minutes for the conversation, with an additional 40 minutes for administrative tasks on either side. The allowance of one hour of the facilitator's time per participant seemed to be sufficient.

Transferability – the Australian comparison

During its final stage, we examined the intervention's transferability by extending our study to Fremantle Australia's Melbourne base. Nunawading Studios has long been the home of the soap, *Neighbours* (cancelled by Amazon/Freeview shortly after this project ended). Whereas in the UK we had focused on unscripted and factual entertainment shows, the participants at Nunawading also gave us insight into the intervention's relevance to scripted production.

The cast of *Neighbours* celebrate the show's 40th birthday and more than 9,000 episodes at the point of our study.

It quickly became clear that there were few discernible differences between the experience of working in the TV industry in Australia and working in the UK (other than in relation to the sector's smaller size). The heavily freelance-dependent employment model exists in both countries, and precisely the same kind of issues were referenced by interviewees about industry-wide working conditions and work culture. However, there was a marked difference between this broader industry experience and the experience of working on *Neighbours* at Nunawading Studios. *Neighbours* it seems, provided a distinctive and atypical case study of a TV working environment, much more in line with the standards of good employment practice more commonly found outside of the TV industry. For example, the show had its own HR manager and adopted recognizable HR processes. It provided clearly defined roles, within which there was the possibility of career progression. There was a pattern and predictability to the flow of work. Weekends were protected, and the production accounted for school breaks and public holidays. Participants consistently remarked on a healthier work environment more consistent with the balance of work and life, usually contrasting this with their experiences elsewhere in the industry. Nevertheless, feedback on the intervention echoed that of other participants, with freelancers acknowledging that their experience at Nunawading was an exception within the industry rather than the norm.

This final aspect of our pilot, then, led us to conclude: that the intervention was as relevant to scripted as to unscripted; that the intervention has relevance beyond the UK; that the differences in organizational environment were significant only in relation to the kind of show being made; that the regionality/geographical isolation of the studio did not seem to have any particular bearing on the reception of the intervention; that the relevance of the intervention did not seem significantly different for those working on long-running drama at the point at which their contract was ending; and that the intervention will be experienced differently depending on who the facilitator is and the nature of their role (as discussed above). The Australian comparison, then, suggests that the intervention has real potential value in other geographical, organisational and genre contexts, and that this is something that could be developed going forward.

In a nutshell

Facilitation was thought to work best when undertaken by someone with knowledge of the show but distant from its production. The self-assessment exercise intended to help the participant to prepare for a productive and insightful conversation, was largely welcomed, even by those who had clearly not given it much time. The facilitator's prompt sheet provided a useful 12-step structure for the conversation covering all the important elements. The time required for an effective conversation, but acknowledging its scant supply, was thought to be around 20 minutes for the conversation, with an additional 40 minutes for administrative tasks on either side – an hour per person. Transferability – the Australian comparison suggested that the intervention has relevance beyond the UK and was as relevant to scripted as to unscripted.

Conclusion

Participants were asked to summarise their thoughts on the overall experience of the intervention and whether they would take the opportunity again, if it were offered. The response was unanimously positive to both questions. The experience had left them feeling 'more openly supported by senior members of the team and the company' (SO-A01). Although some admitted to having been initially sceptical or concerned about their limited time to participate, they consistently expressed the view that they were glad that they had. Having this kind of 'human interaction' helped them to feel 'valued as an individual' rather than being simply 'a cog in a machine' (SO-A01) or 'just going through revolving doors' (SO-B09). It was important to know that 'what you've done on [the show] has been useful and appreciated, and that your feedback counts for something' (SO-B13).

I thought it was great! I thought I would leave and feel like it was irrelevant. And I left and I felt excited! I think I thought it was just like a box they had to tick. But then I was like, 'oh, this *is* about me – it's actually you checking-in with me'. I felt respected and seen.

(SO-C05)

The experience was taken as a recognition of the fact that they worked hard, and sometimes in challenging conditions: '… this series that I've worked on – this show in particular – it was quite a roller coaster of a series, so I think [the intervention] couldn't have come at a better time in all honesty! [Laughs]' (SO-B12). Another participant (working on a different show) commented similarly: '[Name of the show] is quite a hard show – there's downsides to it. But after this [conversation] I feel like I'm going away with a very nice experience, so it's a nice send off!' (SO-A06).

A recurring theme to these summative remarks was the overall novelty of the experience: 'I've been working in TV for 10 years and I've never had that done before' (SO-B12). This was echoed by many.

It's not something I've ever had the opportunity to do before, and I think it's something that the industry needs.

(SO-B13)

Most expressed the view that it was something that ought to happen at the end of every contract. One participant summed it up thus:

. . . it's a two-way street, isn't it? The companies need freelancers to work for them to make these programmes, and as freelancers, we want to work for companies but we want to also feel valued. So I thought that that was a really positive experience and something that I would definitely look to do again. (SO-A04)

The upbeat response from both the freelancers and facilitators who took part, seems disproportionate to the modesty of the offer: a meeting that generally lasted about 20 minutes with some associated administration. As interventions go, this is light touch. Such an overwhelmingly positive response is suggestive of water on parched land and clearly indicates the broader need for the kind of cultural change that this intervention represents.

The optional nature of the intervention may, in part, explain this level of enthusiasm in that those choosing to participate might be expected to be more favourably predisposed. Neither do we suggest that the intervention as described here is any more than a work in progress and may well benefit from further refinements. Furthermore, it is important to recognise that not every TV company will be able to accommodate the approach set out here unaided. Indeed, one of the questions the project

sought to address – who is best placed to facilitate Supportive Offboarding – remains inconclusive, largely due to the marked resource disparity between 'super-indies' and SMEs. This issue merits further exploration. Nevertheless, our findings make it clear that the intervention significantly enhanced a sense of organizational support for freelancers at the point at which their contract was coming to an end. In an industry suffering the loss of mid-career talent, such efforts are urgently needed to foster a healthier work culture. While this alone is not enough, it is a meaningful step in the right direction. And in a landscape where the smallest gestures matter, it could significantly impact individual workers' experience.

In a nutshell

Participants overwhelmingly valued the intervention, saying it made them feel more supported and appreciated. Some were initially unsure or worried about time constraints but were glad they took part. Many noted that this kind of conversation is rare in the industry and felt it should happen at the end of every contract. Though light-touch, this intervention clearly addressed a broader need for freelancer recognition. More work is needed to adapt it for different contexts, but what is clear is that even small steps can have big impact on the industry's working culture.

APPENDIX I:
Guiding concepts

Supportive Offboarding is based on important guiding concepts that have informed our approach to the design, development, and testing of this intervention.

Contract endings as liminal phases

The notion of *liminality*[6] frames our recognition that the period leading up to the end of a freelancer's contract is a crucial transition, where meaningful support could significantly enhance their experience and shape future career decisions. Such liminal phases are often marked by psychological and emotional strain. In the case of freelancers, this period is often marked by uncertainty, anxiety, and vulnerability. While financial insecurity is certainly a primary stressor, other factors such as disrupted routines, loss of professional identity, and increased isolation can further intensify this experience. Research on career transitions has examined the psychological processes of sensemaking, identity work, and stress management. While much of this scholarship focuses on traditional employment, these dynamics are equally relevant to TV freelancers, who must navigate such transitions frequently and without the structural support of an organization.

Perceived organizational support (POS)

The concept of *perceived organizational support* (POS)[7] is drawn from organizational support theory and refers to a worker's belief about how much their organization values their contributions and cares about their well-being. High POS is linked to greater job satisfaction and sense of well-being, reflected in performance and motivation. POS is typically shaped by intentional practices that affirm the value of employees' contributions, acknowledge their achievements, recognize

their personal values and goals, encourage the expression of opinions and concerns, demonstrate care for their well-being, and cultivate a sense of belonging in the workplace. Such an approach closely aligns with the principles of strengths-based management rooted in positive psychology, particularly in its focus on enhancing well-being and fostering a positive work environment. By providing a structure to do some of this work through the expression of gratitude, reciprocal feedback and a career conversation, POS provides the business case, the informing design principle, and the critical evaluating metric for this intervention. Freelancers should feel that they are valued, affirmed and heard.

Ethics of care

Ethics of care is a moral approach to behaviour that emphasizes empathy, relationships, and the responsibility to care for others. Unlike traditional ethical theories focused on rules or consequences, it highlights the importance of context and personal connections in making moral decisions. It argues that people's well-being is shaped by their relationships and that moral choices should prioritize compassion and responsibility toward others. Over the past four decades, scholars such as Carol Gilligan, Nel Noddings, and Joan Tronto have significantly expanded this perspective and it is now widely applied in areas like healthcare, education, and social work.[8] It is also evident in shifting social attitudes such as in recent interpretations of what constitutes an employer's 'duty of care'. Supportive Offboarding, then, is premised on the *moral* imperative of organisations to support their workforce, and not simply because it may be good for business to do so.

Pragmatism

Ideas that seem impressive on paper may prove impractical in reality. Pragmatism[9] prioritises what is possible in practice, rather than what might be ideal in theory. It values action, adapting what is known to be effective to real-world situations. It recognizes that solutions must be flexible, responsive to different situations, and able to evolve as new challenges arise. We are not aiming to provide the TV industry with a complete framework for feedback-giving, conducting career conversations with freelancers, or fostering a positive culture of gratitude, but rather to address these areas in a limited and focused way. It is certainly no cure-all for the sector's complex and systemic employment challenges. The Supportive Offboarding approach is intended to be a modest, specific, and practical intervention that can be implemented swiftly, within a context where budgets are tight, people are busy, and time is limited.

The Apprentice, produced by Naked, was another of the shows to participate in the Supportive Offboarding study.

APPENDIX II:

Approach and methodology

As indicated in Appendix I, pragmatism has served as a central guiding idea for this approach. From the outset, the project was framed around practical problem-solving and real-world application. We therefore set out to appropriate methodological tools that would allow us to be highly responsive and have drawn heavily on action research, which is qualitative, inductive and interpretive. Action research formalises the process of systematic reflection and development.[10] Notably the work is cyclical (the same essential process being repeated) and iterative (with each pass intended to develop and improve it) incrementally adjusting or diversifying. In this case, each cycle consisted of five progressive steps: the design (or adjustment) of the intervention framework under development; creation (or amendment) of the associated briefing material/resources to support facilitators; implementation of the intervention (focused on the central conversation between facilitator and participant); research interviews (researcher and participants, and researcher and facilitator respectively); and analysis of both the emerging interview data and observation/reflection on the implementation process. This analysis then informed the subsequent cycle, enabling a design-develop-test protocol to shape the evolving intervention framework and to refine the process of its implementation – a total of three cycles.

The first action cycle (April-July 2024: project weeks 6-23) facilitated from within Fremantle Global's team, focused on the initial design and implementation of the intervention framework followed by some initial testing across a number of factual entertainment shows within Fremantle's UK labels. The second action cycle (September – November 2024: project weeks 28-39) delivered by the Talent team within Fremantle UK,[11] focused on the further testing of the intervention, again across shows within

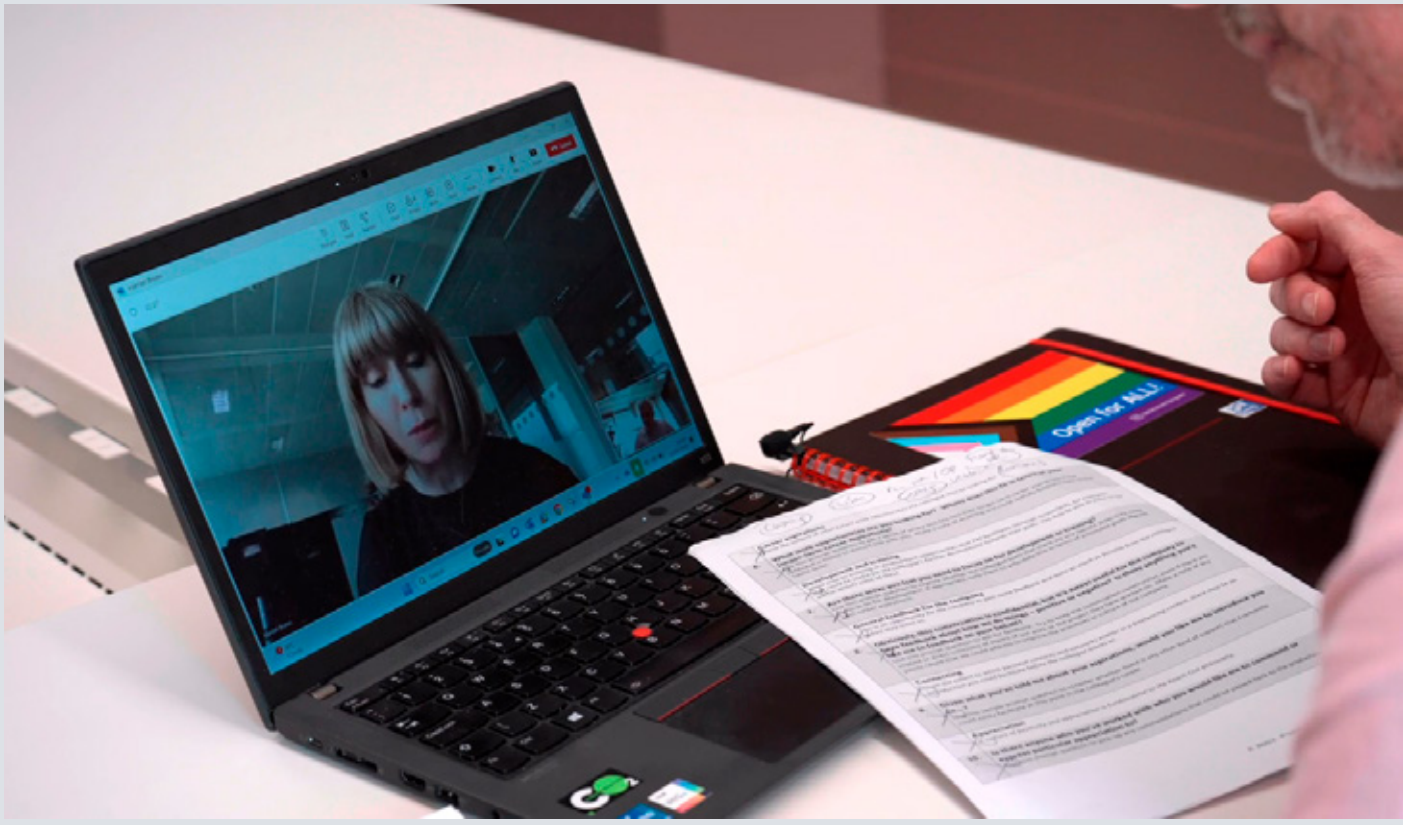
Fremantle's UK labels. The third action cycle (December 2024) continued in a similar vein but introduced a further level of experimentation by incorporating six key variables: a non-UK cultural and regulatory context (Australia); a different organizational environment (Fremantle Australia); a regional production away from the capital (Melbourne); a contrasting genre (scripted); a milieu where longer-term contracts are the norm (long-running drama); and delivery of the intervention by HR (as distinct from the Global or Talent/recruitment team).

Facilitator/participant conversations took place mainly, although not entirely, in person. The approach taken by the Talent team in cycle 2 was managed in a slightly different way from the others in that two people were often involved, one as the main facilitator and the other as notetaker. A typical Supportive Offboarding conversation in cycle 2, consisted of the participant and facilitator meeting face-to-face at the company's head office, with the note-taker online. Research interviews were a mixture of in-person and online, a decision made on purely pragmatic grounds.

For ethical reasons the specific content of the conversation between the participant and facilitator remained confidential, was not recorded and is not cited within this report. Rather, the project's focus was the participant's reflection on their interaction after the event, and similarly, those of the facilitator. In both cases, research interviews were semi-structured, guided by a flexible schedule. The first cycle featured eight participants; the second featured 16; and the third, a further ten. In total 34 freelancers participated in the study. Facilitators were interviewed after every conversation during the first cycle, as well as at strategic points in the process; four facilitator interviews took place for the second cycle; and for the third cycle. In total, 17 research interviews were conducted with facilitators and a further five interviews were undertaken with other individuals to shed light on wider contextual issues and aspects of the intervention's practical application (eg. with senior managers).

As the details of the intervention took shape, a deliberate decision was made to adopt the principles of strength-based management, rooted in the paradigm of positive psychology (as discussed above). In essence, the intervention was designed to emphasize positive feedback (in both directions) and expressions of gratitude, prioritizing affirmation over criticism and celebrating success to foster confidence and morale.

This process produced a set of tested resources built around the facilitator's schedule – referred to as a 'prompt sheet' – designed to support a focused and constructive conversation. This became organized as 12 carefully curated prompts anchored in four key themes: feedback to, career development, feedback from, and the expression of gratitude. Over the course of the project, additional resources produced included an explanatory leaflet, a self-assessment exercise for participants (sent in advance of the conversation as preparation); some supplementary guidance for facilitator/administrators on setting-up the process (email templates etc); and a 'how to' video.



A Supportive Offboarding conversation conducted online from Fremantle's London headquarters.

Notes

1 Van Raalte, C., R. Wallis, and D. Pekalski. 2021. *State of Play 2021: Management practices in UK Unscripted TV*. Poole: Bournemouth University. https://eprints.bournemouth.ac.uk/35897/

2 Wallis, R. (2022) 'End-of-contract interviews: The purpose and principles of an intervention to improve the support of television careers.' Bournemouth University eprints. Online: https://eprints.bournemouth.ac.uk/37395/.

3 See Appendix I for a fuller discussion of POS as a guiding concept to this approach.

4 Strength-base management reflects a broader disciplinary shift within psychology over recent years with a significant change of emphasis away from pathology toward 'positive subjective experience, positive individual traits, and positive institutions'. See Seligman, M. E. P., & Csikszentmihalyi, M. 2000. Positive psychology: An introduction. *American Psychologist*, 55(1), 5-14. doi:10.1037/0003-066X.55.1.5 p.5.

5 The alphanumeric referencing of quotes used in the text corresponds to a system developed within the study to distinguish between participants while preserving their anonymity.

6 Liminality, as defined in literature and anthropology, refers to a transitional stage or a period of ambiguity and disorientation that occurs during a rite of passage or a period of change. The origin of this idea can be found in Turner, V. (1967). 'Betwixt and Between: The liminal period in rites of passage.' In Turner, V. *The Forest of Symbols*. Ithaca: Cornell University Press. 93-111.

7 Baran, B. E., Shanock, L. R., & Miller, L. R. (2012). Advancing organizational support theory into the twenty-first century world of work. *Journal of Business and Psychology*, 27(2), 123–147. https://doi.org/10.1007/s10869-011-9236-3

8 Engster, D and Hamington, M. (eds.) 2015. *Care ethics and political theory*, Oxford: Oxford University Press.

9 Ormerod, R. 2006. The history and ideas of pragmatism. *Journal of the Operational Research Society*, 57(8), 892-909.

10 McNiff, J. 2000. *Action research in organizations*. London: Routledge.

11 In the context of television, Talent Managers (or Talent teams) work as part of a production company's recruitment process. Their primary responsibility is identifying (usually off-screen) talent as soon as a show has been commissioned (or 'green lit'). With short lead times being common in the commissioning process, they must often work swiftly, relying on established contacts, past experience, and trusted recommendations.

Picture credits

The period leading up to the end of a TV freelancer's contract is a crucial moment when better support could positively impact their experience and future career decision-making. Many freelancers have reported feeling a profound sense of lacking support – a problem we know to be directly correlated to high numbers of people leaving the industry by mid-career.

Supportive Offboarding addresses the lack of meaningful feedback, welfare support, and professional development opportunities for the industry's largely freelance workforce. It introduces an intervention centred on a short, structured meeting between the freelancer and a representative of the employing production company, timed to take place as the freelancer's contract approaches its end.

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Bournemouth University