

TV FREELANCERS: SIX MONTHS OF NO WORK AND NO SUPPORT

In early April 2020, Viva La PD, a community of television Producer/Directors conducted a survey of almost 1000 freelancers from across the TV industry. We have since re-pollled our member base and the wider TV community, and have discovered worrying trends. The following findings are based on a new poll of nearly double¹ the number of freelancers who took part in our last survey.

KEY FINDINGS

- Over half of freelancers have not worked at all throughout lockdown.
- Just 1 in 10 have worked consistently during the same period.
- 57% of freelancers have no work on the horizon for at least the next 3 months. Together with a lack of work for the previous 3 months, this leaves most freelancers facing the prospect of no work for half a year.
- 55% of our respondents are not eligible to receive assistance from either of the Government's coronavirus support schemes for workers.
- Nearly 100 respondents are already selling their specialist TV production equipment to pay basic bills. Others said they are selling personal belongings, selling their house, or living off money they will owe in tax.
- Almost 60% of freelancers are either considering leaving the industry, or have started working in a different sector already.
- 94% of respondents want to see a change to the way they are hired. Half of them would like a comprehensive review of freelance terms and conditions.

RETURN TO WORK NEW FINDINGS

Upon the industry return to work, freelancers have several concerns. The most pressing being:

- 82% worried about job availability as inevitably there will be low demand and high supply.
- 76% are concerned they will bear the brunt of for the double impact of reduced budgets and excess labour supply through drastic cuts to their professional freelance rate.
- 58% have serious concerns about their own health & safety in relation to Covid-19 safe working practices

¹ 1896 respondents took part in the survey.

- 51% also concerned about the impact on their mental health and wellbeing. The same number expressed worries about the pressure and workload expected on them upon their return

FREELANCER FORUM

As in our previous report, we understand how important it is to give a voice to the freelancers who have responded to the survey. The below extracts are typical of those affected by the current situation, and the impact it could have on the future of the freelance workforce.

Common Themes:

- Lots of people have put themselves in to debt to help survive the last few months
- A large portion of people have thought about leaving the industry or are actively seeking a career in another industry
- People still feel abandoned and feel there has been no support from the government or production companies, which has exposed the precariousness of being a freelancer
- There is a huge concern for the future and what TV will be like when we return to work in terms of lower rates and an over saturation of freelancers looking for work
- Concerns about the strides made for women, BAME and people of lower social economic backgrounds, who will have to find other work to survive.
- Worry about how the industry will go forward: smaller rates, smaller teams, risks to health and safety to maximise profits.

Some responses have been lightly edited for clarity, spelling and grammar reasons. The number above each is allocated by the survey software to identify each responder separately.

#84

Both myself and my partner work in the TV industry and we have literally lost all future work. It's extremely worrying as we have two small children so we can't just up and leave to a new location for work. I'm concerned that when jobs do become available, there will be so many unemployed freelancers fighting for the position, that it will be hard for either of us to get work. And when will there actually be any work Available? It seems unlikely that any dramas (in which we work) will go ahead in the next few months. It's such an anxious time and I've fallen through the cracks for government help so when our money runs out my family will have to support us.

#525

Coming from a working class background, I simply do not have any financial support from my family, I'm on my own. Sadly, I'm not alone, no one in TV has tens of thousands of cash in their back pocket, and unless we get back to work ASAP or the government extends its help to us, vast amounts of working class people in TV simply won't be able to afford to stick around. We'll all get pushed out because we can't fall back on the bank of mum and dad. The only ones left when TV starts again, will be the middle class white people.

#116

I have a 2 year old son and am expecting my second child. I had spent 4 months out of work before Covid hit due to the very quiet winter period we were just coming out of. Never before in 12 years in the industry have I ever had more than a week between contracts. When Covid struck, I suddenly found myself looking after my son full time so would have struggled to work even if there was anything about due to no childcare. I am soon to go on my second unpaid (!) maternity leave, after which I've decided I can't return to being freelance. I need a staff job for security and to offer me flexibility as a mum, and it's unlikely I'll find this in the TV industry.

#123

The government policy towards limited companies is grossly unfair. Currently I receive circa £500 a month from the furloughing myself. I have a wife and 5yr old daughter. This is NOT enough to live on. I am extremely worried about the future and it is affecting my mental health.

#18

During a recent Skillset session, [A SENIOR FIGURE FROM A BIG PRODUCTION COMPANY] implied that freelancers would have to take a cut in rates and that it would be a 'buyer's market' in terms of jobs. With this kind of attitude at the top of the broadcasting production companies, it is clear that the message isn't sinking in that freelancers have had a raw deal or that they prop up the industry. With so many having not received any government support, surely the industry should be instrumental in protecting our right to fair pay and a fair contract. I fear that as soon as the broadcasters and production companies stop panicking, the situation for freelancers will soon be forgotten.

#28

As a mature experienced BAME worker I already face many challenges maintaining a career. I am concerned that the "new" pressures will make diversity even more of an expensive idea and it will be sacrificed.

#66

I seem to fall through the cracks. I'm very, very scared about the future, I love TV and know nothing else as I've done it for 25 years since I was 18. I will be in competition with other Executive Producers as it's obviously a pyramid of roles. It breaks my heart and scares me to think I will have to try to find another role.

#51

I'm giving serious thought to leaving the industry and had even set a deadline of April this year to do so. It's not just the insecurity of being freelance and never knowing if and when you'll be working. It's the lack of opportunities, mentorship and training. Companies have no reason to invest in people and it's incredibly difficult to find ways to move up the career ladder especially in today's climate when budgets and schedules have been cut.

#229

I'm pregnant and my earnings last tax year exceeded the 50k. However I was sick before lockdown with pregnancy sickness and couldn't work and then I've been unable to work during lockdown. I'm living off the money I saved for my maternity allowance. Government maternity's allowance is £152 a week. It's a disgrace. Pregnant women should be able to claim extra support from the government especially as we are classed as clinically vulnerable.

#395

My partner and I are both paye freelancers, we both now have zero income. No help from the government and no help from our industry. We feel utterly alone. We've had to leave our home and move in with my partners family. Our landlord did attempt to help us with a rental holiday but we are living off our limited savings and would have spent all of them on rent, we don't know when our industry will re open and therefore would have amounted a great debt that we wouldn't be able to repay. I am now desperately looking at other careers as I feel so let down by an Industry that I have worked incredibly hard for.

#270

The lack of government support for people earning just over 50k means my family are now in a dire financial situation. We're are in debt to family and banks and will not make mid year tax payments. It will take years to recover.

#263

Unless there are major changes within the next month or so, I'll be leaving the industry. I see nothing actively being done by any production company that will actually protect their freelancers- I guarantee we will be thrown into the wolves with no proper protection in place for Covid- because all of us will be desperate for work so we will take anything.

#294

I have a dependent, my partner has left TV for more reliable work. That's now a real prospect for me and many I know. I am concerned about the diversity of TV. Giving more of us a more stable future even if it's not full time would work. Giving ltd companies help would also stop TV haemorrhaging experienced talent.

#355

I think this has shown how precarious our work is and the impact that has on the mental health of people in this industry is terrifying. It feels like there is no support and we are living in uncertainty. I have felt very disposable and alone and have decided to rethink my career as a result.