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# The big freelancer report

Executive Summary

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The COVID-19 pandemic has decimated the workforce of freelance artists, technicians, and craftspeople on whose health and resilience the recovery of the performing arts sector depends.

*However, the scale of the crisis for freelancers is rooted in a wider story of inequity which predates the pandemic.*

The relationship between producers, venues, organisations, and the workforce is one of mutual dependence. But over the past 50 years, permanent employment for artists has largely disappeared. 94% of the work created for the nation's stages is entirely reliant on the freelance workforce.

COVID-19 has exposed critical vulnerabilities in this existing business model. For freelancers, these include forced dependency on the sector's existing infrastructure and organisations, unstable margins of income, significant overheads, and a lack of basic employment protections.

Of significant concern is that the 'reputational' aspect of the freelance business model has a coercive effect in the workplace, discouraging individuals to push back against poor pay and conditions, abuses of power, and unsafe working practices. This response was most common in women, and particularly women of colour.

**This summary identifies some of the problems facing the workforce and makes practical recommendations for change; however, it is strongly recommended that one reads The Big Freelancer Report in its entirety.**

## **The Challenge for Freelancers**

The COVID-19 pandemic created a situation in which the vast majority the performing arts sector workforce was left with no representation, no access to channels of influence or communication, no direct benefit from the government's cultural recovery plan, and, in some cases, no income support.

Existing problems of employment status, fair pay, talent development and training, working conditions, and inclusion already place certain burdens on freelance theatre workers. COVID-19 magnified those systemic challenges and added three more: an income emergency, a retention crisis, and a vulnerability regarding safety when returning to the workplace.

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## Recommendations: The Short Term

In the short term, there are several specific actions that the sector can take.

Firstly, protect the 'excluded' by actively lobbying for Arts Council and Culture Recovery Fund monies to directly benefit freelancers through training, skill retention, innovation, and public works.

Engage meaningfully with the scale of the retention crisis which most affects early career workers, D/deaf, workers with disabilities, and those from a diverse ethnic background by creating, for example, a series of three-month paid programmes of skill retention and upskilling and determine paths of progression for participating freelancers.

Finally, create a sector-wide strategy for the return of live performance to ensure consistency and a high-degree of safety in all workplaces, and consult with experts from existing specialist organisations along with stakeholders to build an inclusive recovery.

## Recommendations: The Long Term

While the pandemic has decimated both the finances and the morale of performing arts freelancers, it has not affected the talent, craft, or creativity of this world-beating workforce.

The sector cannot – and must not – return to 'business as usual', which to freelancers represents economic exploitation, poor working conditions, a lack of inclusivity, and an inability to shape or determine sector strategy.

Systemic change is required to build a more resilient future and the change most freelancers crave is practical in nature.

However, significant issues must be addressed, including greater employment protections, fair pay, talent development and training, working conditions, inclusion, and the underlying power imbalance and lack of access to sector assets.

The consequence will be an industry better able to reach new audiences, discover new voices, and retake its place at the heart of the nation's culture.