

Executive summary – easy read

It is three years since the start of COVID and three years since our first Big Freelancer Survey. This year's survey shows that freelancers are struggling with the effects of the cost-of-living crisis, Covid and Brexit. The report also reveals deep inequality in the theatre industry.

1156 theatre freelancers took part in this year's survey. The data highlights a pay-gap between men and women of 37.4%. That gap widens to 47.7% for freelancers with 21-30 years' experience.

This report presents the results of a survey of freelance workers conducted in early 2023. It is the third of five Big Freelancer Surveys. These surveys look into the combined effects of the pandemic and other issues for theatre freelancers. Average earnings for freelancers in the industry are 17.5% below the UK average pay.

This year's survey shows that freelance theatre workers feel 'undervalued, underpaid and under-appreciated'. Significant funding cuts in the last year have made this worse. People enjoy the work, but low pay is causing problems such as a shortage of workers and increased workload.

The general sense is that the situation for freelancers has worsened since the pandemic. Many described their careers as 'unpredictable, unsettling and unsustainable'.

Key points from the 2023 Big Freelancer Survey:

1. There is a pay gap of 37.4% between men and women working in theatre.
2. The biggest problem is low pay. Freelancers are struggling because of the expectation to work for free or for below minimum wage.
3. 64.4% of survey participants said they had felt pressure to do more work for the same fees.
4. There is a shortage of workers in some areas of the industry. This is leading to people being over-worked.
5. Survey participants feel things are not better since the pandemic.
6. The industry continues to have problems with inclusion and access. The data reveals a pay-gap of 17.19% between white and global majority freelancers. People with medical conditions, parents and careers, and from low-income homes also earn less than average.
7. 77.9% of participants said Brexit was causing uncertainty for their work.
8. Our report highlights problems for directors, stage management, costume workers and designers in more detail.

The report recommends:

1. Changing how theatre is funded and making it easier to apply for funding.
2. Better pay guidelines and reimbursement for travel and accommodation.
3. To make things easier for people who don't live in London.
4. Giving freelancers roles on boards of organisations.
5. Creating a EU/UK work permit.
6. More support for people from diverse backgrounds.