

Animation & VFX • Art • Costume • Hair & Make-up
Post-production • Prosthetics • Set decoration • SFX

Drawing the line

on workshop time in
major motion pictures
and TV drama

A report by Bectu
Freelance Research



bectu.org.uk/workshop-hours

Drawing the line

on workshop time in
major motion pictures
and TV drama

A report by Bectu
Freelance Research



bectu.org.uk/workshop-hours



Bectu is the union for creative ambition. We represent over 40,000 staff, contract and freelance workers in the media and entertainment industries. Our members work in non-performance roles in live events, broadcasting, film and cinema, digital media, independent production, leisure, theatre and the arts.

Find out more at
bectu.org.uk/about

Published by Prospect
New Prospect House,
8 Leake Street, London SE1 7NN
T 0300 600 1878

© Prospect, October 2022
22-0005/Oct22/PDF

Contents

Introduction	5
Executive summary	7
Part 1	
Our research on workshop hours	10
Working hours and overtime	11
Breaks and meals	12
Travel to work	13
Safety and quality of work	14
Quality of management	17
The need for contractual change	19
Part 2	
The long-hours culture in UK film and TV	22
The need to modernise	24
What are 'workshop hours'?	26
One-size-fits-all contracts	27
Lack of support from employers	29
Travel time – the extended commute	29
Part 3	
How to fix the workshop hours problem	32

This report has been compiled with extensive help from Bectu members who have attended interviews and round-table meetings to discuss this issue, along with a wider range of workers in the industry who have responded to surveys. As most people working in the UK scripted drama sector are freelance, our interviewees have asked not to be named in this report. We are very grateful to them for their contribution.



The job involves thousands of decisions each day. It can be very intense and very stressed. We need to be able to work a structured day that allows for regular breaks, but we often can't take them. **They get wiped out by the demands of the production**, by deadlines that feel unachievable.

Bectu member, Post-production

Introduction

Across the board, the film and TV industry has come to treat very long working days as the norm.

But this document specifically addresses the working-time experiences of people working in TV drama and feature film productions who have work-patterns that are not directly affected by the logistics and constraints of the shooting day.

It refers to these workers' daily schedules as 'workshop hours'. These workers are expected to work in tandem with the shooting crew – providing services that must be completed at times broadly dictated by the shooting schedule, but not necessarily during the same hours. Those affected include workers for art departments; costume workshops; post-production; props; hair, make-up and prosthetics; animation/visual effects (VFX) and special effects (SFX) workshops.

On major motion pictures or TV drama, indirectly employed workers in animation/VFX or post-production will sometimes be employed by subcontractors with more conventional employment contracts. But where people are employed directly by the main production company, they are generally issued the same contracts as those given to the shooting crew, even though the essential working hours are very different. It is these workers that this report describes in some detail.

This report calls for two key responses from the UK film and TV drama employers:

- To negotiate with Bectu to change existing agreements, introducing specific caps to the length of the working day for workers who are not normally expected to work the same hours as shooting crew.
- To establish a dialogue with Bectu to explore modern flexible working practices to promote a sustainable work-life balance for these workers.

Our aim is to increase the level of shared working, flexible working hours and – where possible – hybrid or homeworking, allowing people to continue to work in the industry on terms that they can accept without damaging their physical and mental health.

The Bectu/Pact agreements referred to in this report are two sectoral agreements between Bectu and the Producers Alliance for Cinema and Television (Pact), the employers' trade association, covering most TV dramas shot in the UK and major motion pictures with a budget of more than £30m.

Both agreements were signed in 2017. They form the core of the employment contract on which each crew member is initially employed, and they determine the standard terms and conditions including the length of the working day and the working week, the entitlement to and timing of breaks both within days and between them, when overtime is payable, and the multiple of the daily rate that determines overtime rates, as well as a range of other factors including travel, nightwork etc.

Executive summary

Bectu surveyed workers engaged in 'workshop hours' working, and 278 replies were received. Details of the survey are on page 11. The following is a summary:

- Nearly nine out of 10 respondents who were formally contracted to work the same hours as shooting crew had some kind of formal or informal agreement to work a shorter day in line with a departmental norm (such as a 'nine-plus-one' standard working day instead of the '11-plus-one' day in the contract)
- Only one in 14 said they were never asked to work more than the departmental norm, and most felt unable to refuse requests to work longer hours than that norm. Nearly half said they believed that they had no choice but to work those longer hours.
- Only one in 10 said that they received overtime payments for working longer than the departmental norm, with a small number saying they receive payment of some other kind for this extra work.
- Most workers do not get overtime payments even when they work more than their formally contracted hours. Only one in 20 said they never worked more than the contracted hours, but only one in five expected to be paid overtime when they did.
- Respondents overwhelmingly believe that their productivity levels and the quality of the work they do are damaged by unnecessary long hours working. Similarly, there is an overwhelming belief that these working patterns damage health, wellbeing and the quality of family/personal life.
- Three-quarters of respondents said that they worked in roles where working while tired presents a safety issue. Only 6% said they never feel tired; 37% said they 'often' feel tired; and 57% said they 'sometimes' feel tired.

The key finding of the survey is that most respondents believe that better management and scheduling would reduce the problem of excessive working hours – and that the industry would be better at retaining key skills and talent if it could address it. Almost every respondent said that improvements in budgeting could make a real difference.

Other issues highlighted by the research

- By comparison with workers in other industries, people engaged in film/TV workshop hours employment have longer and more expensive commutes. The vast majority believe they have no option but to travel by car, and the average journey lasts more than one hour each way – either side of an abnormally long working day.
- Unlike on-set crew, these workers generally have to make their own provisions for meals. Only one in 20 has access to crew catering and ‘craft services’, and only one-quarter have access to a canteen. Seven in 10 expect to prepare a packed lunch, buy cold meals or microwave food.

Overwhelmingly, respondents to the survey recommended that departments not part of shooting crew should have contracts appropriate to them and their departmental norms. Their contracted hours should be limited to those norms and overtime penalties could then incentivise good work-scheduling for these workers.



Draughtspeople tend to work from 8am to 6pm, but there is an expectation that art department assistants, runners and co-ordinators **will be there earlier and later, without overtime.** Some in management also do lots of emailing at the weekend with onerous lists of tasks that need to be addressed before the Monday.

Bectu member, Art department

Part 1

Our research on workshop hours

Bectu surveyed the branches that are expected to do off-set working under the existing Bectu/Pact agreements. The union specifically targeted workers who are working directly for a production, hired under the Bectu/Pact film agreement.

The research expressly excluded people working for a subcontractor or other facility that supplies services to a production (such as a VFX facility or a post-house) and focused directly on people working in the following departments:

- Animation/VFX
- Art department (draughtspeople, buyers and related work)
- Costume workshop and co-ordinators
- Post-production
- Props (dressing, workshop, modellers, and co-ordinators)
- Prosthetics
- Set decoration and related props management
- SFX (physical and pyrotechnic)

Participants were asked to agree or disagree with a series of statements on a scale of one to five, where 1 = 'strongly agree' and 5 = 'strongly disagree'.

Working hours and overtime

Of those who were working under the different Bectu/Pact agreements to work either a '10-plus-one' or '11-plus-one' standard working day (SWD), fewer than one in five said that they actually work the hours set out in their agreements. Nearly half said they have a verbal or informal understanding that they work a shorter day when appropriate – but nearly one-third said it was 'up in the air' and their option to go home before the full contractual day had been worked varied depending upon who they spoke to. Only one in 14 respondents had been given anything in writing to say that they don't work more than the SWD.

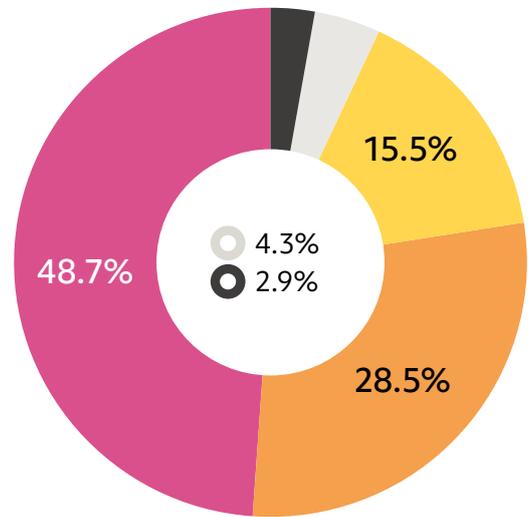
Four in 10 respondents said they are spending 11 hours or more at work each day.

Of the 245 respondents who said they had an arrangement to work fewer hours than those in their contracts, most reported pressure from employers to work extra hours. Only one in 14 said they are never asked to work more than the shorter agreed day, and only one in 10 said they feel OK about saying no if they are asked to do this work. Nearly half said they



I would like to be able to say no to requests to work longer than my normal or verbally agreed working day, but I don't feel able to.

Strongly agree ○○○● Strongly disagree



feel that they have no choice but to work these hours when asked and more than a third said they felt under pressure to comply with such a request.

Only one in 10 said they are paid any overtime payments for work done over and above what is agreed informally; for roughly the same number overtime is not a factor because they work the hours in the Bectu/Pact TV drama or major motion picture agreements.

Even the point at which the formal agreements mandate overtime payments, only one in 20 of 'workshop hours' workers said that they never did working days longer than those set out in the agreements. When working additional hours, only one-fifth reported a solid expectation of getting overtime payments when they go over the working day as set out in the Bectu/Pact agreements. One-third said they 'usually' get overtime payments, but more said they were 'not usually' offered overtime payments in cases like this. As such, employers default to a presumption that these workers don't qualify for overtime payments. There are, therefore, under very few financial pressures to limit the working day – or even to ensure that the end time is predictable. **It is often forgotten that a predictable working day is an important factor in achieving a good work-life balance – and essential for people who are juggling work and childcare.**

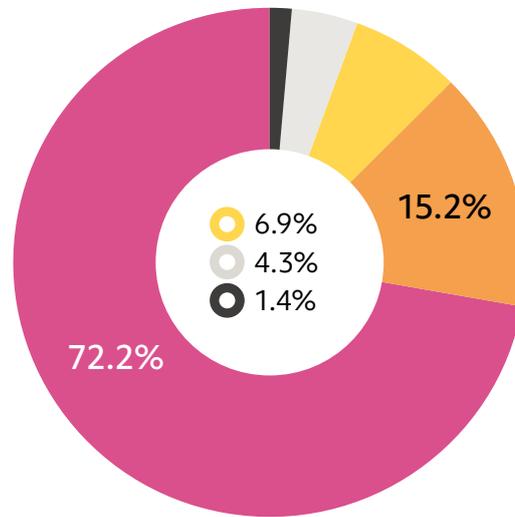
Breaks and meals

Respondents reported a wide range of 'official' lunch break arrangements. Nearly 80% said their lunch break is supposed to take an hour, but of these nearly half expect to work through some – or all – of it. Only 2% said that they were actively encouraged to take breaks when needed, and only one in five said they were allowed rest breaks they needed in the day. Four in 10 said that they had no breaks in the day apart from lunch, and a similar



I feel like my department isn't as valued by productions as other parts of the crew are. We are not given as much respect or consideration as other departments.

Strongly agree  Strongly disagree



number said that they either had inadequate breaks all the time, or that they could only get breaks when they weren't in a crunch period.

Respondents said that people working off-set were often perceived as second-class members of the crew and that the catering provision illustrated this well.

Aside from time allowed for breaks, the quality of meals available is significantly worse than for those offered to shooting crew. Only one in 20 have access to crew catering and 'craft services' (the snacks that are regularly available to shooting crew). A quarter reported having access to a canteen where hot meals can be purchased. Seven in 10 expect to prepare a packed lunch, buy cold meals or microwave food.

Travel to work

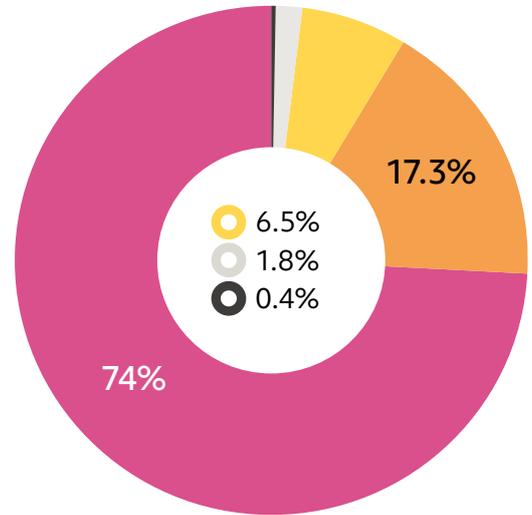
Travel to work in the film and TV drama industries is particularly hard on the crew. For London workers, there isn't an optimal place to live: working locations are all around London and the M25 – Three Mills in Bromley-by-Bow, the Elstree and Borehamwood studios, Leavesden near Watford, Pinewood near Slough, Shepperton and Twickenham in the south-western suburbs, with Longcross and the expanding Bray studios further out along the M4 and M3 respectively.

All crew doing workshop hours have multiple places of work. Over a three-year period, only a quarter had worked in fewer than five different locations, a fifth had worked at seven or more locations and more than half had worked at five or six locations. More than half spent more than an hour commuting each way – and one in six reported average commutes longer than 90 minutes each way.



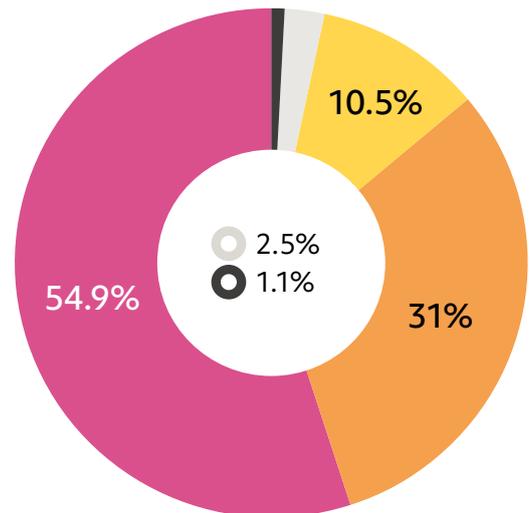
I feel that my shorter term health suffers due to long working hours (stress, exhaustion, anxiety, lowered immune system).

Strongly agree ○○○● Strongly disagree



I feel that the hours I work lead to stress and anxiety.

Strongly agree ○○○● Strongly disagree



Three-quarters of respondents said travel by car is the only practical option open to them, given the work location and their start and finish times (one in 10 of respondents needs to bring equipment each day). One fifth said that they use public transport to go to work, even though they could do it more quickly by car. Unlike most workers in London, only 6% find public transport to be the quickest travel option open to them.

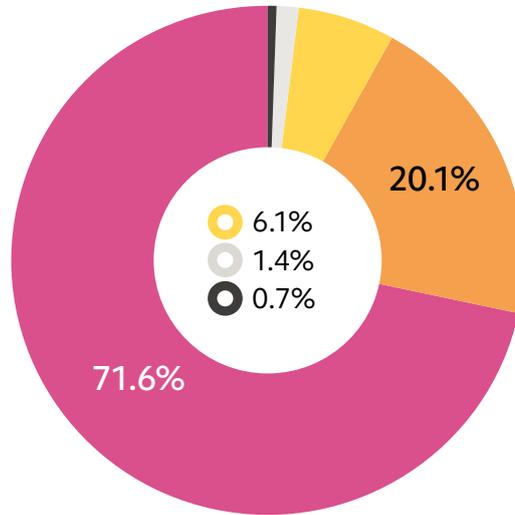
Safety and quality of work

For some years, Bectu has been campaigning on the issue of long-hours working, making the case that unnecessarily long days expose workers to health and safety hazards as well



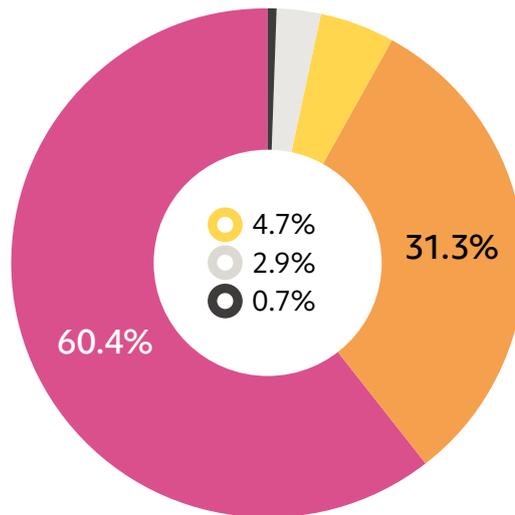
I feel that the amount of time I have to spend at work impacts my family/personal life in some ways (hurts my relationships, stops me from being the parent that I want to be, etc).

Strongly agree ○○○● Strongly disagree



When I am not at work – evenings and weekends – I feel too exhausted to have a normal family or personal life.

Strongly agree ○○○● Strongly disagree



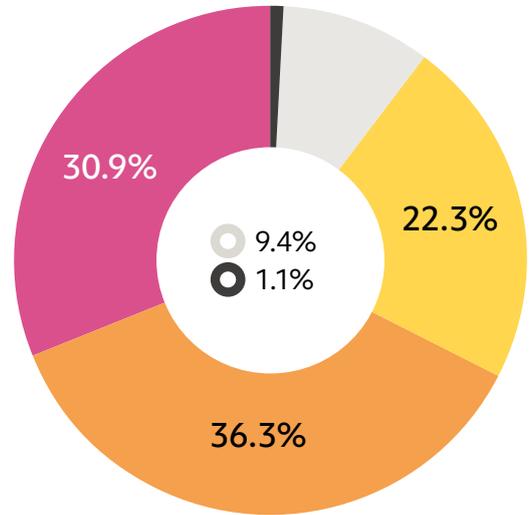
as hitting productivity levels and compromising the quality of work done by comparison with workers doing more conventional hours.

Of the 277 people who replied to our survey question of safety, a quarter replied that they don't work in roles where they expect to work while tired in potentially dangerous circumstances (this is common for post-production editors, for example). Of those who do work in such conditions, only 6% said that they never feel tired while doing so; 37% said that they often feel tired, and 57% said that they sometimes feel tired. We also asked respondents about how long-hours working affects their own health and quality of life, and how it affects their productivity and the quality of their work.



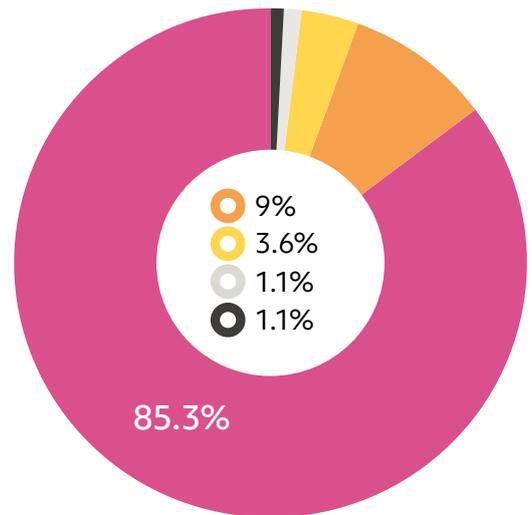
I am sometimes too tired to give my work the attention that I should do.

Strongly agree ○○○● Strongly disagree



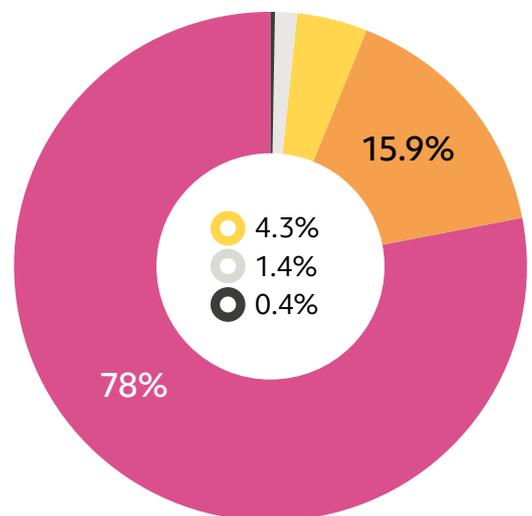
If my working day was kept closer to eight hours, I'd be more productive.

Strongly agree ○○○● Strongly disagree



The longer my working day is over eight hours, the less productive I become.

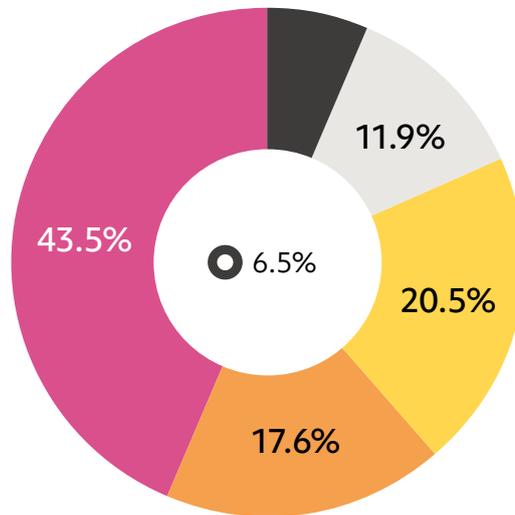
Strongly agree ○○○● Strongly disagree





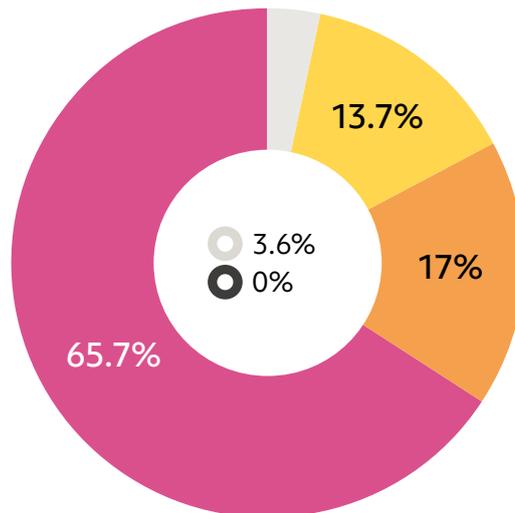
My department's managers and supervisors could be better at scheduling and this could allow us to work hours that are more acceptable to me.

Strongly agree ●●●●● Strongly disagree



It would be easier to find – and keep – good workers in my department if working hours weren't as long as they are.

Strongly agree ●●●●● Strongly disagree



Quality of management

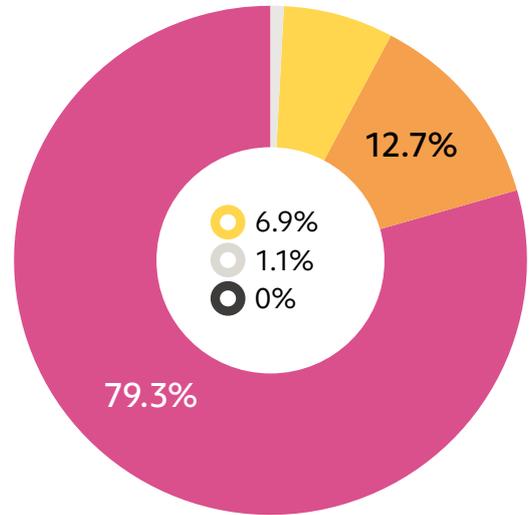
A recurring theme in Bectu’s engagement with members and other workers in film and TV is a conviction that management could do a great deal more to reduce unnecessary working hours and alleviate the problems that they cause when a long day is the only possible option.

In addition to concerns about poor scheduling, respondents also called for more investment in new practices for job-sharing and flexible working.



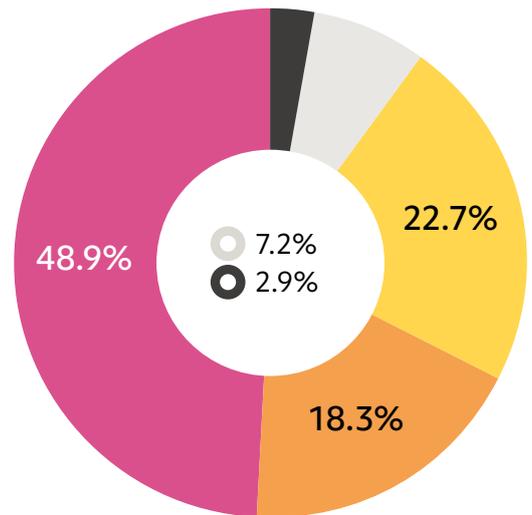
Production could manage budgets better so that we could reduce the need for long hours working.

Strongly agree ○○○● Strongly disagree



My department could do more to facilitate job-shares and flexible working that would allow us to work hours that are more acceptable to me.

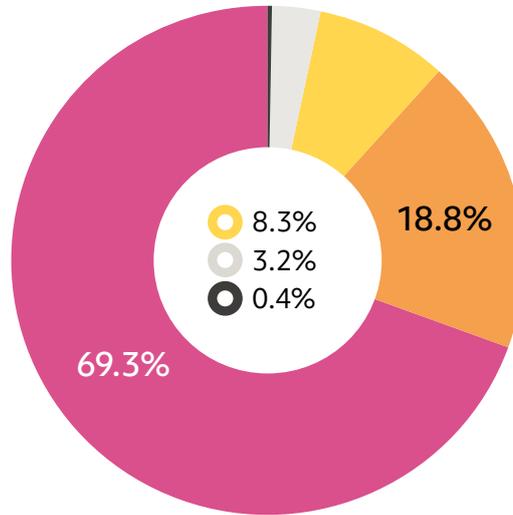
Strongly agree ○○○● Strongly disagree





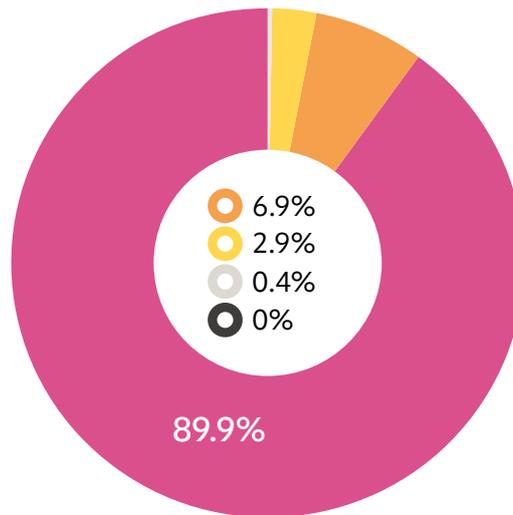
If overtime payments were due on days that we work more than our normal hours, productions would get better at scheduling and budgeting for my department and we'd work more sensible hours.

Strongly agree ●●●●● Strongly disagree



I believe that departments that aren't part of the shooting crew should have contracts that are appropriate to them and overtime payments should be made once we have worked an agreed, and appropriate number of hours in a day.

Strongly agree ●●●●● Strongly disagree



The need for contractual change

Overwhelmingly, respondents to this survey said their lives would be improved if people who do 'workshop hours' had firm contracts that define their working time – ending the practice of patchily-managed 'gentlemen's agreements' and 'industry norms'. Bectu members report that all of the flexibility has to come from the workers and not their engagers, and that this creates an uncertainty that makes it difficult to plan work.

This represents an overwhelming level of support from respondents for specific and appropriate contract terms for workshop departments that are different from those of the shooting crew.



Working my 13th day in a row, I was exhausted, and I made a bad decision that I realised, in a split-second, was going to result in me losing fingers. My hasty evasive action avoided this, only to cause me to drive the scalpel into my leg instead. **I've no doubt that I made this mistake because I was tired.**

Bectu member, Props and SFX



Part 2

The long-hours culture in UK film and TV

Bectu members have told the union they believe employers could do a great deal more to reduce hours, and the evidence from other countries show this it is possible. In Sweden, there is a statutory 10-hour cap on the working day with a 40-hour cap on the working week. Employers fund a union rep on every production who can monitor and challenge poor scheduling decisions, and as a result, their industries invest more in training, scheduling, and management.

The standard production crew terms assume a shooting day of 10 or 11 'shooting' hours (usually with an additional unpaid hour for lunch but this is sometimes reduced by agreement). Some departments are also expected to work additional 'prep-and-wrap', which can make the working day for large parts of the crew stretch beyond 13 hours. There are also examples in production departments of co-ordinators being expected to work even longer hours, and to do so without invoking the protections of the Bectu/Pact agreements. In the context of where the work happens – because of the different working locations, the industry relies upon a workforce that can often be expected to spend a further two or three hours a day commuting by car – it all adds up to a brutal working schedule that can often go on for months on end without a break.

Employers generally justify these working patterns for shooting crew because of the logistics of the shooting day – artist availability, restrictions on when particular locations can be used, available light etc. These are not the only factors though. It's also the case that equipment and facilities are hired by the day, and long days are a way of sweating those costs. Expenditure on equipment hire, prop and wardrobe rentals, catering, and permits can be reduced if the shooting period is shorter. This is a particularly sharp incentive in lower-budget features where many of the crew are on a buy-out – hired by the day with no time-limits or paid overtime.

In the UK, the 'workshop hours' issue that this report addresses is rooted in the fact that most of the workers that are directly employed by a production will be engaged on the same contracts, regardless of the types of work that they do. These terms default to the terms worked by the shooting crew.¹

¹ For full details of these terms, see this document, Appendix One:
General working-time norms in film / TV drama

During the negotiations that led to the Bectu/Pact 2017 major motion picture agreement, Bectu called for separate terms for workshop hours. The employers were unwilling to concede this point. As one Bectu member told the union:

'This is an industry that is not asking people to sign inappropriate contracts because it needs to do so (indeed, by most standards, it runs contrary to the interests of the industry). They are only doing so because they can, and because they don't feel forced to ask themselves why they are doing so.'

The need to modernise

The emerging skills crisis in film and TV drama is highlighting the need for this industry to move into the 21st century. The beneficiaries of one-sided employment relationships that have allowed the industry to develop to where it has done must now accept the blame for the industry's inability to attract and retain the right skills.

For many production crew, it is now not unusual to spend months on end where the working day will last 12 or 13 hours. In some cases, days are even longer. It is worth noting that when the agreements were drafted in the years leading up to 2017, they were based upon the experiences of an industry not working to full capacity as it currently is.

As recently as 2016, crews would expect to not be working as many weeks in the average year as they do today. In 2022, the same shooting crews will often be working most weeks in a year, with some workshop departments employed on even longer contracts as they will be heavily engaged in pre-prep work before shooting starts.

As budgets have risen, and streaming video on demand (SVoD) work has come to dominate UK production, the average engagement lasts a great deal longer than it did a decade

ago. It is an industry that is using legacy working practices from an age in which passionate well-off people were prepared to subsidise the industry with their time and accept sub-optimal wages.

As this report shows, this is bad for quality, productivity and professionalism. It also does nothing to create a diverse workforce. Being able to afford to live in London with access to a car is almost an entry requirement for some parts of the industry. Workers from low-income backgrounds and from ethnic minorities are substantially under-represented.

In a wake-up call for the creative sector, the Nesta Creative Industries Policy and Evidence Centre published a damning report on class-based exclusion in September 2021.² In broadcasting, Ofcom's 2021 report is critical of progress towards promoting diversity reflecting minority ethnic groups as well as real problems retaining women and older workers.³ The Film and TV Charity's September 2021 report, Racial Diversity Initiatives in UK Film and TV, reported a widely held view within the industry that 'a lot of diversity and inclusion work is performative, designed to minimize PR risk and 'respond' to complaints, with institutions doing what they think they need to rather than what's effective'.⁴

The problems for an industry that doesn't recruit on merit don't end there. It means that it is unable to attract and retain the kind of management that will focus on skills-progression, skills-retention, productivity and crew welfare.

This last factor runs through this whole report. The UK film and TV industries often do not operate to the standards of professionalism that other comparable industries would expect. When the working relationship is toxic, when it excludes some of the people that it needs and is unable to retain many of the skills that it has developed, and when it is damaged in the short-term by stress-based absence from work, it is not an industry that is serving its investors any better than it is serving the people who work in it.

2 Social mobility in the creative economy: Rebuilding and levelling up?
<https://www.pec.ac.uk/research-reports/social-mobility-in-the-creative-economy-rebuilding-and-levelling-up>

3 Five Year Review: Diversity and equal opportunities in UK broadcasting.
https://www.ofcom.org.uk/___data/assets/pdf_file/0029/225992/dib-five-years-2021.pdf

4 Racial Diversity Initiatives in UK Film & TV
<https://filmtvcharity.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2021/09/Racial-Diversity-Initiatives-in-UK-Film-and-TV-FilmandTVCharity.pdf>

What are 'workshop hours'?

The optimal day for working is widely accepted, across many industries, to be something approaching an eight-hour day (or less). Anything longer than that has been shown to damage productivity and hurt the quality of the work that is done – a particularly serious problem for an industry that places a premium on high-quality work. The impact of these working hours is also very damaging to the workers concerned.⁵

However, people working in many of the 'workshop' roles are expected to sign the same contract that shooting crew do. This can be for the '10-plus-one' or '11-plus-one' standard working day that is laid out in the Bectu/Pact agreements.

Productions generally regard these departments as 'self-managing', and the senior management of the productions concerned leave the application of the agreements to local supervisors. This has some upsides for the crew concerned. Verbal assurances are often offered, or unspoken norms are applied, telling crew that the shooting-hours terms won't be enforced, and that they will only be expected to work a shorter day – eight hours, nine, or nine-and-a-half depending upon the department and supervisors in question.

There are downsides too. These alternative arrangements are not subject to any real penalty clauses, and there is little pressure on local managers to honour the verbal agreements or norms. When they are broken, Bectu's research shows that overtime payments are few and far between. None of the consistencies the industry agreements are supposed to provide offer any protection to the workers concerned.

Those verbal assurances have a varying value anyway. In some cases, a team working with one manager can be doing two hours more than with others. Having self-managing teams with no overtime due (or even any additional payments at single time) for the 10th and 11th hour has widely been described as a 'bullies' charter' by Bectu members working in workshops.

⁵ Fatigue in the broadcast industry – IOSH Magazine
<https://www.ioshmagazine.com/2022/03/02/fatigue-tv-and-film-industry>

Employers know that they don't have to pay for any extra hours, let alone start paying overtime until 8pm on a standard working day that starts at 8am. There are few incentives placed upon productions to work to a budget.

With no real overtime penalty for a longer-than-planned working day, it is not unusual for supervisors to characterise this as an obligation to work two extra hours for free (not only 'without overtime', but without payment of any kind – 11 hours work for the price of nine).

As such, it also removes the incentive for employers to schedule work responsibly and is used as a contingency to cover for poor planning and budgeting. Members report a high instance of work that lasts longer than the verbally agreed time, and an almost universal expectation that the working day should last longer than the optimal eight hours that workers in almost any other comparable sector would work.

There are already sectors of the industry where employers have conceded this point without doing any damage to their own industry. The Bectu/Pact Construction Agreement signed in 2007 has now developed into one that works a 7.5-hour working day. In other cases, Bectu members have found ways to create pressure for more humane hours. The union's current SFX Branch rate card asserts that shorter 'workshop' days should be paid at the same rate as longer 'shooting' days on the grounds that workshop working is often more intensive, and most employers already honour this norm for this department.

Wherever possible, contracts should have a sensible set of standard working hours and have viable Overtime penalties to encourage good scheduling. The failure to do this removes all the incentives that would press the industry to save itself from its own worst instincts.

One-size-fits-all contracts

Off-set 'workshop hours' workers are engaged on the same contracts, and by the same employers as those who engage the shooting crew. They are generally unwilling to differentiate between the different types of workers. The convention that everyone should work to the same contracts has gone largely unchallenged as the industry has developed.

However, workshop departments are now larger than they were, in comparison to shooting crews, and this problem is increasingly unsustainable.

Being freelancers, they have struggled to assert a collective voice, and their hours are damaging to their health and wellbeing. They also run counter to the interests of an industry that claims to value productivity and a high-quality product. Historically, because of an over-supply of labour, and a culture formed from 'passion-projects', employers have become accustomed to a bargaining position that allows them to treat productivity and work-life balance as an afterthought – a responsibility that they can outsource on to a freelance workforce.

One example of this toxic culture is the prevalence of presenteeism – people feeling pressured into being at work for appearance's sake during time that they are not actually doing productive work. This report encourages employers to meet a challenge that it is in their own interests to meet. Unnecessary long working days reduce quality and productivity and hurt the industry's ability to retain and attract the talent that it needs.

Bectu's 2017 'Eyes Half Shut' report drew the following conclusion.

"Bectu is now calling on the Advertising Producers Association, the British Film Council, the BBC, Channel 4, Directors UK, ITV, the major motion picture studios, PACT and Sky to join the union in establishing a new commission to address the industry's management practices.

"Bectu believes that it is possible to improve working practices at the same time as improving the prospects and the competitiveness of the industry. There is no contradiction between making this sector more humane and making it more efficient and productive."

This report repeats this call, with a particular emphasis on the practical steps that could be taken by the industry in its own interests – to engage in a dialogue with the industry's workers to professionalise its approach to quality and productivity.

The issue of workshop hours provides a litmus test that shows where the film and TV employers are failing. When employers insist that they need long working days for the purposes of the daily shoot, there is no pretence that workshop hours exist for any other reason than the fact that employers can demand them from freelancers. This litmus test illustrates that the long hours culture exists because employers can demand it without needing it.

Contracted working hours are not the only problem though. To fully understand the impact of unnecessarily long working days, we also need to know about the context in which they take place – one where there is an abnormally long commute to work, and there is little provision for the welfare of the workers concerned.

Lack of support from employers

Workshop crew generally aren't offered meals by the production, nor do they have access to craft services that are often mentioned in their working contracts. Bectu's survey showed that fewer than one-third of them have any expectation of having a hot meal during this long working day (and only one in 20 can access the crew catering that is provided at no cost).

In most cases, people doing workshop hours are expected to provide their own food which means shopping and preparing an evening meal, and a packed lunch for the following day at the end of very long working days. Because of the long travel-times to work, it is often preferable to eat breakfast at work. If this is the case, they will need to arrive earlier – usually bringing their own breakfast as well as their other meals.

Travel time – the extended commute

In an interview with a group of members, Bectu discussed the daily travel time that is added to these working hours. Because the 'London' studios (Pinewood, Shepperton, Leavesden, Longcross, Elstree, Three Mills etc) the workers concerned (who lived all around the south-east or in London) would be expected to work at any of them. These interviews were followed up by an online survey.

More than half of the workers concerned expect their average daily commute to last longer than one hour each way. The vast majority believe that they have no option to travel by car as the public transport options for getting to most studios are very limited.

To get to Pinewood at 7am is almost impossible on public transport. New studios and expanded studios are being planned in Bray, Broxbourne and Shinfield (Reading) – all of which are even further out of London, so travel time can be expected to be even longer in those cases. As one member put it...

***“There’s a convention that our travel to work is the same as anyone else’s commute – that we shouldn’t be paid for it, and it shouldn’t be tax-deductible as a business expense. But as freelancers, we can’t optimise where we live and get a routine in the way that most workers do. We can get hired for short or medium-term contracts in a range of different places – and none of them have good public-transport links. Sometimes you accept a job a few weeks in advance and find that the workplace has changed a few days before you are ready to start.*”**

***“So, unlike an ordinary commuter, we are travelling up to four hours a day, starting very early, and finishing very late. Even a shorter 10-hour day can last 14 hours if we’re not lucky with the commute. In the end, many of us conclude that travel by car is the only option.*”**

***“Our travel also costs us a lot more than an ordinary commute does – but we can’t claim any tax back on it – it’s a large direct cost to us.”*”**

The result can be that a day can last more than 16 hours door-to-door – with an additional need to prepare an evening meal, a packed lunch and a breakfast for the following day.



We don't forecast our capacity to meet demand very well. The rates for the whole department are set before the set dec is appointed, so it's not something the set decs can even manage. **Bad estimates can cause huge problems.** I can't imagine any other high-value industry being managed in this amateurish way.

Bectu member, Set decoration

Part 3

How to fix the workshop hours problem

The primary conclusion of this report is a call for specific contractual arrangements for people doing workshop hours. This would dramatically realign the incentives in the industry and serve everyone's interests.

There is another opportunity here though. Because film production is a highly creative craft, it is not always easy to design the work in a way that allows for shared working – the job-sharing, shift-working and worker-substitution that facilitates shorter working days and weeks. A day that lasts 12 or 13 hours could be staffed by workers working an early or late shift with a handover or in four-day-week patterns.

To achieve this, departments would need to update working practices so that handovers could happen without damaging the consistency and continuity of the work. If this investment were made, people working on long projects would feel more able to take holidays when they chose, or to mould their working day around their family lives – making it easy (or even possible) to hire childcare.

Other industries have worked out how they can strike the right balance between the need for continuity and getting workers to produce the optimal quantities and quality of work. Industry standards are developed. More co-ordinators and support staff are hired. In the IT industries, for example, project managers would be expected to make contingencies to cover for the absence or illness of programmers scheduled to work on a project. Their success is based on an ability to help minimise absence and illnesses in the first place.

Specifying creative work to meet complex expectations is a craft in itself. Where creative workers are realising the vision of an important stakeholder (in this case, a director or head of department) ways and means could be developed to help everyone better understand what is needed. Senior film editors talk about the importance of the relationship that they have with a director – one that depends upon the ability of both sides to communicate well. The same is true for other departments where a creative vision needs to be realised by large teams of craft workers.

To some extent, this is a problem that has already been solved where work is outsourced to external suppliers. In animation and VFX, facility companies bid for the work and the end-engagers (the production) generally are given teams, and not named individuals to work

with. As such, those teams hire people on a PAYE basis and can manage them in the way that ordinary employers do with eight-hour days, contingencies in place to cope with staff absences and normal holiday arrangements etc.

Even then, because of the ‘passion project’ instincts of industry management, these deals are often secured by fixed-price bids which allow engagers to expect almost unlimited ‘changes’ if they aren’t happy with their work, and this has meant that Bectu’s campaigns in animation and VFX are largely focussed upon unpaid overtime. Gradually, with the emerging skills shortage, the union’s campaigns have worked and some of the key players in the industry have recently announced that they will not expect their teams to work unpaid overtime with more expected to follow suit soon.⁶

Collective bargaining between employers and workers creates a fairer and more inclusive industry – one that rewards skills and not endurance – and one that can be healthy and sustainable. Reduced working hours need to be established in industry agreements and contracts. If short-termist employers perceive themselves as having an option to call for longer hours at no extra cost, it removes the incentives needed to solve this problem. It is time to reassess working practices and relationships and draw the line on excessive workshop hours.

⁶ “DNEG to pay 1.5x rate overtime to VFX artists” – Broadcast, 13/09/21
<https://www.broadcastnow.co.uk/tech/dneg-to-pay-15x-rate-overtime-to-vfx-artists/5163260.article>



In the first few weeks, I was proud of the work I was doing, but as time went on, I was deliberately dragging my feet to get a bit of a breath. After a few weeks of 12-hour days, I stopped caring about whether the work was to the standard I would normally expect of myself.

You can't problem-solve when you're exhausted.

Bectu member, Costume department

Animation & VFX • Art • Costume • Hair & Make-up
Post-production • Prosthetics • Set decoration • SFX

Drawing the line

on workshop time in
major motion pictures
and TV drama

A report by Bectu
Freelance Research



bectu.org.uk/workshop-hours