Briefing: A crisis for the screen industries

Bectu briefing • June 2025

Bectu's Big Survey

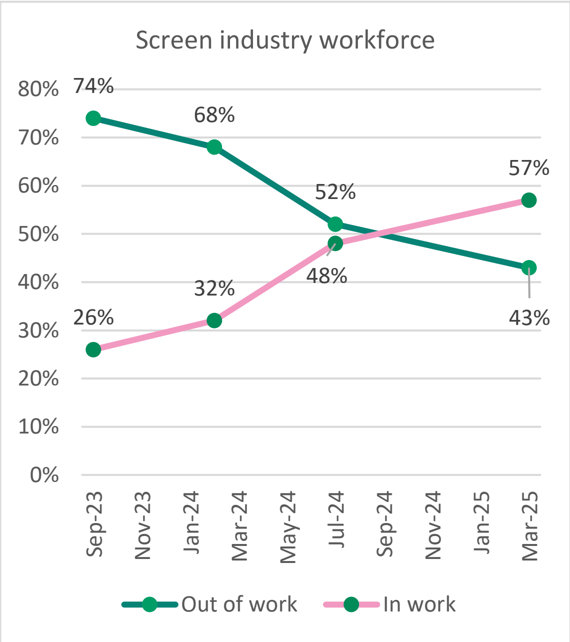
Between February and March 2025, Bectu surveyed 5,597 respondents across the creative industries in the UK's largest ever survey of behind-the scenes creative workers. This briefing draws on data from the 3,453 respondents who work in film, TV drama, unscripted or factual television, and commercials.

More than half (55%) of screen industry workers surveyed are working as freelancers, with 14% working through their own Ltd. company as self-employed.

Screen industry slowdown

There are still large numbers of screen industry workers out of work; 43% of all 3,453 screen industry workers surveyed by Bectu between February and March 2025 said they were not currently working. This includes:

- 43% of those in film, 45% of those in TV drama, 46% of those in unscripted and 45% of those working in commercials.



This is only a small reduction from July 2024, when Bectu research[1] found more than half (52%) of the UK's film and TV workforce were out of work, and February 2024 when 68% of respondents said they were not working, only a tiny decrease from September 2023 (74%).

It is now more than a year on from the end of industrial action in the US that brought much production in the UK to a standstill. This coincided with a downturn in broadcasters' commissioning, due to financial constraints caused by a further squeeze on the BBC licence fee and a slump in advertising revenues. Indeed, it is clear the drought in work across the screen industries runs deeper.

71% of those working in TV drama, 79% of those working in commercials and 78% of those working in film say that their employment was directly affected by the 2023 US industrial disputes and industry slowdown.

[1] https://bectu.org.uk/news/half-of-uk-screen-industry-workers-remain-out-of-work-bectu-research-finds

- But despite high proportions of people working in unscripted saying that they are out of work, only 43% of unscripted workers say that they were directly impacted by the 2023 US industrial disputes and industry slowdown, suggesting a bigger problem in commissioning.
- Overall, only 16% of screen industry workers (film, TV drama, unscripted and commercials) have seen a full bounce back in their employment since the end of US industrial action in November 2023. Just 11% of those working in unscripted, 10% of those in commercials, and 17% of those working in film and TV drama say that they've seen a full recovery in their employment.

The impact on screen industry workers

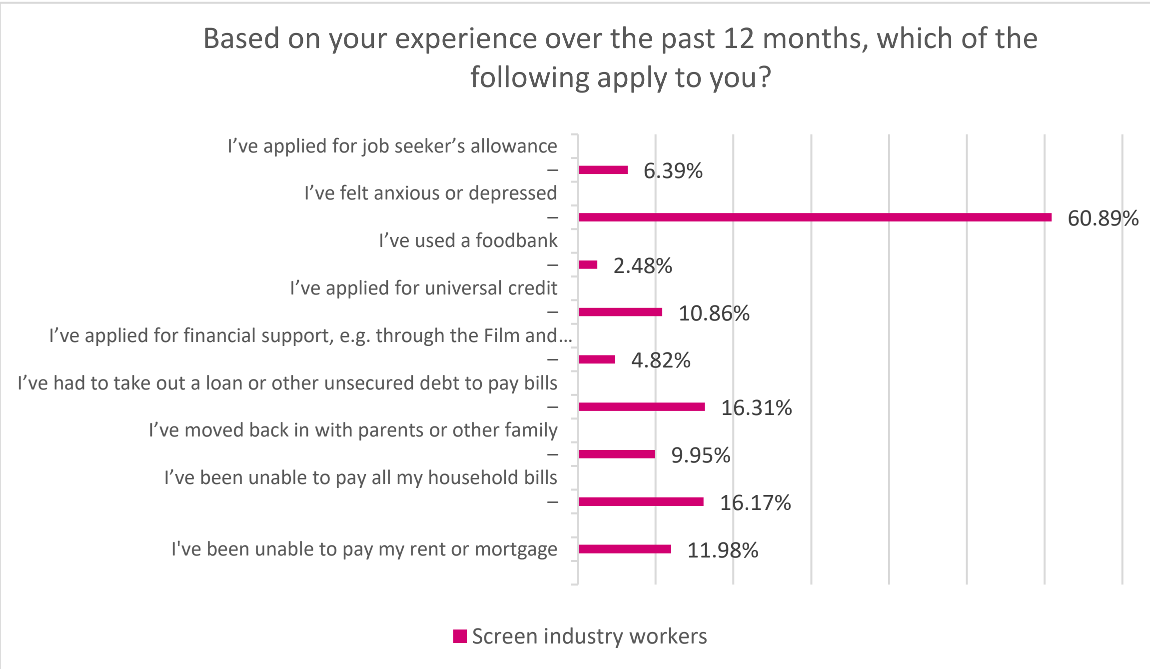
The impact this is having on workers is profound, with seven in ten (70%) screen industry workers saying that they are struggling financially (27% are finding things extremely difficult and 43% more difficult than normal).

A third of screen industry workers (30%) told us that they have no savings which they might have been able to rely on. Indeed, just a quarter of screen industry workers (25%) said they would be able to maintain their current standard of living if they had no work for three months. With that now a reality for many, workers are struggling to stay afloat.

Almost one in five (16%) screen industry workers have been unable to pay their household bills in the past year, with the same proportion having taken out a loan or unsecured debt to cover these. 12% have been unable to cover their housing costs, with one in ten (10%) moving back in with family as a result.

More than a third (35%) of screen industry workers earn under £30,000 a year, before tax, from their work in the creative industries. And 31% supplement their income with work outside of the creative industries.

11% of screen industry workers have applied for universal credit.



The slowdown is also taking a toll on workers' wellbeing, with 65% reporting poor mental wellbeing and 61% reporting anxiety or depression over the past 12 months. One in five screen industry workers are really struggling with their mental wellbeing, while 46% are somewhat struggling.

This crisis poses an existential threat to the highly skilled workforce who hold up the UK's £125 billion creative industries. A third (33%) of screen industry workers now see themselves leaving the industry altogether in the next five years. This is a marked increase from 24% in September 2023, as the long-term impact of the slowdown has taken hold.

The ebb and flow in work is clearly unstainable, with only 13% of screen industry workers saying that they feel secure in their job.

'It's feast or famine'

The impact of the screen industries' slowdown has compounded existing poor working conditions. 85% of screen industry workers told us that they feel precarious in their work and just 19% say that they feel confident about their future in the industry.

The feast or famine nature of the industry – whereby there may be an overabundance of work one minute, and none the next – is an incredibly challenging environment to work in, but our survey results show that for most screen industry workers, this is the norm.

The unhealthy and counterproductive long hours culture in the UK film and TV industries is not just a health and safety issue for workers, who frequently, for example, face long drives after working long shifts. It also takes a toll on people's work/life balance.

While 39% of screen industry workers told us that they had no work at all in the past week, 21% had worked for 50 hours or more, with 14% working for 41-50 hours.

And respondents told us that the average length of a regular working day in the screen industries was 11 hours. In that time, 42% told us they get a one-hour lunch break, while 14% said it was not usual for them to get any breaks at all.

It is no surprise, then, that screen industry workers are struggling to balance work and family life. 71% say that their work has had a negative impact on their personal relationships. 37% say that their work has impacted their reproductive choices (e.g. choosing to have children).

Poor working conditions only getting worse

In the context of the slowdown crisis, with more facing famine than feast, respondents told us that poor employment and engagement practices were becoming more widespread, while workers are feeling less able to speak up and challenge poor practice:

> *"It's a bad time to be a freelance film/TV creative... it looks like an industry in crisis is now in a death spiral. Companies are in a race to the bottom as budgets are continuously squeezed and it's those on the coal face - the freelancers - who deal with the result of that, yet are often exploited by employers."*

> *"It's feast or famine. At the moment rates are sliding because of the lack of commissions."*

> *"I'm losing sleep a lot of the time as I wake up panicking about my future especially since companies wait until the last second to either confirm or reject if you'll be working with them. I'm incredibly stressed all of the time and there is often the vague threat that if I don't just accept poor pay I won't be able to work with them."*

> *"It's been dire and companies and employers have exploited that in the last year, often letting you go when is convenient to them without a head's up and paying you when is convenient to them. If you don't come from a rich background, it's extremely hard to survive in this industry."*

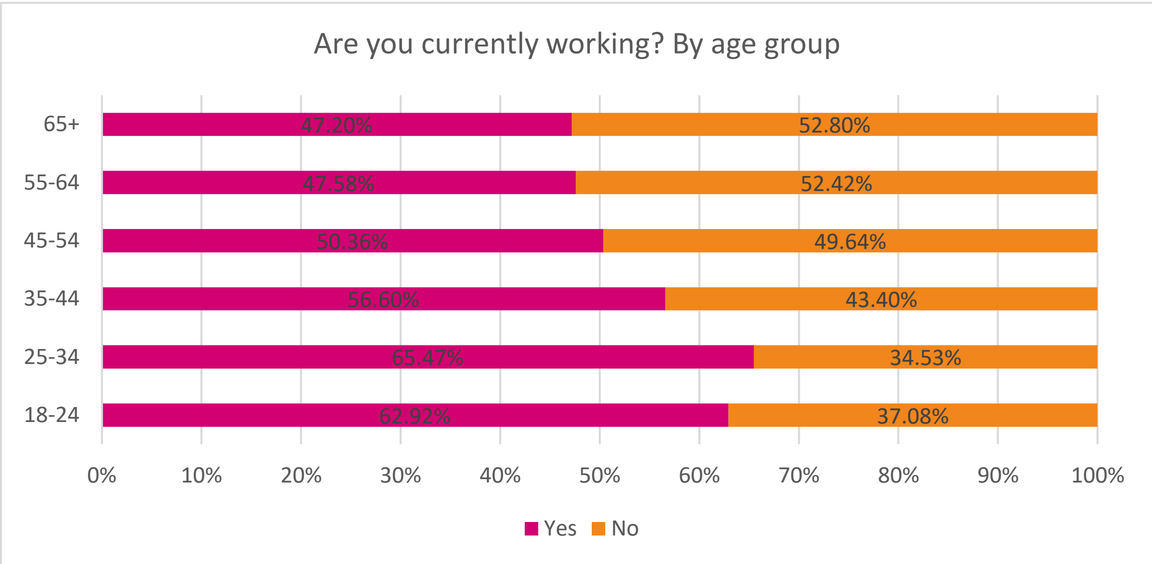
And this in turn is having an impact on industry diversity, with global majority respondents, those with disabilities, older workers and working class respondents all faring worse than their white, middle aged, able-bodied, male counterparts.

> *"As a seasoned professional of 20 years I'm now considering retraining in another sector due to the bleak picture of creative industries here. I will add that as a woman and a mother my ability to take on the hours and inflexible work that the industry demands is much more limited. I notice many women in this industry are basically forced out once they have children. It's a huge loss of skills and experience and it's not getting better."*

> *"Especially in the film industry, it's connections you have with people who are in positions to employ you… I still see discrimination."*

This is reflected in the number of screen industry workers currently out of work:

- 45% of working-class respondents are currently out of work compared to 41% who do not consider themselves from a working class background.
- 49% of disabled workers are currently out of work in the screen industries, compared to 42% of able-bodied workers.
- There is a significant gap between younger and older workers, with 65% of 25-34-year-olds currently in work compared with 48% of 55-64-year-olds.
- Global majority respondents are also less likely to be in work than their white counterparts; 58% of Asian/Asian British respondents said they were not working, compared with 44% of white British respondents.



Harassment and bullying

Precarious work status with a long hours culture, often reliant on tight networks to find work, in a sector with acute power dynamics – the screen industries are a space where all too often, toxic workplace cultures emerge and are allowed to flourish.

Around three quarters of screen industry workers (74%) say that behaviours that would be considered toxic and inappropriate in public life are often tolerated in the creative industries – this increases to 8 in 10 workers in unscripted (79%) and 76% of global majority respondents. We also found that:

- A minority of screen industry workers say they think the creative industries are an inclusive place to work (32%).

- Just 23% say that their employer(s) or engager(s) promote a healthy work culture.
- More than six in ten screen industry workers (62%) have personally witnessed or experienced bullying or harassment in the workplace.

But despite such high levels of bad behaviour, only around half (49%) of those who had experienced bullying or harassment had reported the incident to their employer or engager. Just 12% reported the incident and were satisfied with the response – 42% said the response when they reported it was insufficient.

Freelancers are particularly reluctant to report incidents of bullying and harassment; just 11% of screen industry freelancers who experienced bullying or harassment said that they had reported it to their employer or engager and were satisfied with the response. 51% did not report.

This is largely because of a lack of formal reporting mechanisms or employee support structures like HR on many productions, as well as the short-term, project-based nature of work. But most of all, we heard that freelancers especially wouldn't report as they were fearful it might give them a name as a 'problem' and impede their chances at finding future work:

> *"It's toxic because it's a freelance industry."*
>
> *"People are too scared to call out superiors for misconduct, especially bullying, as they will not be supported by the production and it will likely result in their own dismissal."*
>
> *"Sexual harassment is rife, however I know that if I speak up, it would severely impact my career and therefore it's not worth it."*
>
> *"Bad behaviour is often brushed under the carpet. Employers find it easier to let people go (especially freelancers) rather than confront the root cause of bad behaviour. People then go on to repeat the behaviour at a different employer. There is a lot of looking the other way by employees on the issue."*

There is clearly a long way for the industry to go in terms of being fully inclusive and challenging poor practices. Just 36% of screen industry workers say that they are confident that as a sector or industry we are taking effective action to be actively inclusive for all. Nonetheless, there have been some positive moves such as the establishment of the Creative Industries Independent Standards Authority (CIISA), which our survey suggests 84% of screen industry workers support.

A clear call for change

The Government estimates that the UK's screen industries are worth £1.36 billion and employ more than 195,000 people, while the BFI's Research and Statistics Unit[2] shows that film and high-end TV production spend in the UK was £5.6 billion in 2024, generating billions for the UK economy.

The screen industries are also a major tool for the country's 'soft power'. These cultural exports not only bolster the UK's diplomatic and economic relationships but also reinforce its global identity in a time of shifting political and trade dynamics.

To maintain and grow the UK's world leading screen industries, workers, including freelancers, must be better protected.

1. Protecting workers against bullying and harassment and cleansing toxic work cultures

[2] https://www.bfi.org.uk/news/official-bfi-statistics-2024

Bectu has long advocated for an independent body to address the prevalence of bullying and harassment in the creative industries, and we welcome CIISA's establishment as a positive step towards improving standards of behaviour and providing a safe space for reporting inappropriate conduct.

Freelancers need access to independent reporting channels, legal protection, and support services to ensure they are not excluded from basic workplace rights.

Bectu has urged the industry to fully support CIISA, including financial backing, and has called for government commitment to ensure it's fully operational. We also need to see the government champion CIISA's work and encourage industry buy-in.

More broadly, we need to see production companies, broadcasters and commissioners step up to end toxic working practices. Addressing toxic workplace culture in production companies requires a coordinated and sustained zero-tolerance drive across the industry. Clear, enforceable policies against bullying, harassment, and discrimination must be implemented, while commissioning decisions should be directly tied to demonstrable commitments to safe working practices.

2. Improving conditions for freelancers

Freelancers hold up the screen industries, but are often left behind in Government policy, and get a raw deal. Freelancers are more exposed to the ebbs and flows of the business cycle, and self-employed workers lack many of the protections enjoyed by employees.

Bectu has consistently argued for the Government to appoint a freelance commissioner to ensure that government policy takes into account the needs of the self-employed and freelance workforce. Such a post should work across government to:

- act as a champion for freelancers within government
- develop a strategy to coordinate government activity on self-employed rights and entitlements across departments
- work with the Office for National Statistics to collect data on freelancers in the economy – with a particular focus on the creative industries and other growth sectors
- ensure that data on freelancers is distributed to relevant government departments, agencies and devolved governments
- improve government understanding of employment issues affecting freelancers and ensure this is accounted for in future employment reforms
- establish a one-stop-shop for freelancers to obtain information on government policies that affect them, including their employment rights

We also need to see the modernisation of protections and entitlements for the self-employed, granting them access to rights currently afforded to employees. Freelancers remain excluded from many of the basic rights afforded to employees, including sick pay, holiday entitlement, parental leave, and protection from unfair dismissal. Without targeted policy reform that extends this support to all workers, we could see a two-tier system that leaves workers who hold up some of the UK’s most prosperous industries with precarious incomes and little recourse when facing exploitation or poor treatment.

Any serious effort to raise standards across the labour market must include freelance and self-employed workers, or risk reinforcing the very insecurity the government claims to want to address.

3. Improving equality and diversity across the screen industries

While generally, on-screen diversity has improved over time, increasing the diversity of those in non-performing roles is vital if the industry is serious about any commitment to diversity and inclusion.

On screen and off-screen diversity are closely interlinked, and not just for those in decision-making roles, including in commissioning, producing, directing and writing. For example, in hair and makeup, trainings have frequently omitted textured hair and makeup for darker skin tones, which meant that it was either an optional extra or not provided at all. This has led to many people qualifying as professional hair and makeup artists but able to provide services only for white people. Bectu has campaigned to change this, providing guidance for hair, makeup and prosthetics so that ethnic minority actors receive the same quality of service with their hair and makeup as that provided for their white colleagues.

Improving equality and diversity in the screen industries requires moving beyond surface-level commitments and embedding meaningful, long-term change at every stage of the production pipeline. This includes widening access to opportunities through paid internships, fair recruitment practices, and targeted outreach to underrepresented communities, particularly working-class, disabled, and racially minoritised talent.

And it is not just access to starting in the creative industries that needs to improve, but workers from Black or ethnically marginalised backgrounds need to be supported to advance and continuously develop. 2024 research from Creative Access[3] found that whilst a large proportion of employers have encouragingly upped their DE&I spend in the last year (68%), almost half (45%) of employers across the creative economy are currently focusing that spend on entry-level talent. However, 70% felt that DE&I spend focus needs to be applied across all career levels.

Moreover, Global Majority creative workers are disproportionately impacted by poor working conditions across the creative industry than their white counterparts, pushing out diverse talent already in the industry. Improving the working conditions for all creative industry workers would have a positive impact on industry diversity.

4. Safeguarding public sector broadcasting

We have one of the most highly skilled and versatile workforces in the industry, who create some of the world's most popular programmes, shows and events, often commissioned and streamed by our world-leading public service broadcasters, who act as large skills incubators within the ecosystem.

The UK's public service broadcasters currently produce around 32,000 hours of new British content a year – 160 times the 200 hours of UK-produced content produced by streaming giants such as Netflix and Amazon. Over 28 million people in the UK utilise this plethora of services for evening entertainment on an average day.

The funding model and remit of the UK's public service broadcasters allows them to take a risk and commission quintessentially British content, often resulting in big successes domestically and abroad. Eg: Killing Eve, Fleabag, I May Destroy You, Alan Partridge, Peaky Blinders and Line of Duty. Channel 4 has produced TV favourites such as It's A Sin, Peep Show, Fresh Meat, This is England, The IT Crowd and Grand Designs, all of which capture what it truly means to be British – and some of which might not make it past a pitch to a commercial broadcaster more focused on driving up subscriptions or selling ads.

This reputation in film and TV production plays an important role not only in attracting inward investment, but promoting Global Britain abroad, demonstrating a thriving and confident creative industries sector in the UK, and contributing to a geographic distribution of wealth and feeding the levelling up agenda.

The Government must also ensure a prosperous future for public sector broadcasting and recognise the role it plays in the wider screen industries' success.

[3] research from Creative Access