



SKILLS SHORTAGES IN THEATRE

The results from a survey of workers' perceptions.

These are the results of a perception survey of people working in all parts of the UK's theatre sector. The aim was to form a view of how workers in this sector personally perceive reported shortages - how it affects them, their working lives, their personal circumstances and what it means for the wider industry. It was conducted between the 31st of August and the 26th of September 2022. It was circulated to Bectu members with a request that the link to the survey be forwarded to non-members who also work in theatres in the UK. It received 823 responses (nearly 30% of whom were not Bectu members).

THE NATURE OF THE SKILLS SHORTAGE

The responses confirmed that the problem is a serious one. The number of respondents to this survey alone significantly exceeded expectations. 60% of respondents said that the issue of skills shortages had got 'much worse' since 2019. Only 4% of respondents didn't know of anyone who hadn't left the industry because of unsatisfactory conditions and rates of pay. 19% said that they knew of ten or more people who had left because of these factors.

ALL OF THE INCENTIVES WORK IN THE WRONG DIRECTION

When asked for the reasons people had cited when leaving the industry, the biggest factors were the combination of a poor work-life balance (84.8%) and unsocial hours (74.5%), alongside the low pay that the sector offers in comparison to other industries (77.2%).

Well over half of the respondents said that the work-life balance issue had actually got worse since the pandemic, and nearly half said that the question of anti-social hours had also deteriorated (over 20% said that it had got 'much worse' in both cases).

On the issue of pay, the industry has always offered uncompetitive pay in relation to other sectors and the survey said that 80% believed that this factor had got worse (with 45% saying 'much worse') since the pandemic. In relation to the cost of living, 94% said that the situation had deteriorated in this respect (65% said it had got 'much worse'). The other key factor was the levels of stress at work. 67.6% said they were aware that it was given as a reason to leave the industry by people that they knew, and over 77% said that this factor had deteriorated since the pandemic (34% said it was 'much worse').

The survey results were not a vote of confidence in the quality of the sector's management. Over half of the respondents said that, in their experience, managers don't listen to their concerns about safety and the quality of their work, or act upon those concerns when they are raised. Bectu understands that it would be unreasonable to expect management to have a quick fix to either of the problems relating to a shortage of skills or the finances needed to offer the large pay-rises that the industry needs, so it is all the more surprising that the employers are not using the only short-term lever at their disposal to stem the flow of workers leaving the industry – an expression of appreciation for the hard work and craft-skills that their workers bring to the industry.

Roughly half of the respondents also said that they didn't "*feel appreciated or valued by their employers*" with only 37% saying that they did feel valued in any way.

A DESIRE TO WORK IN A MORE PROFESSIONALISED INDUSTRY

A frustration with the industry's lack of professionalism ran like a thread through the survey responses. 94.4% of respondents said that the industry relies upon a "*the show must go on*" attitude for its resilience, and 89% of

respondents agreed that this appeal to their goodwill is used by employers to unfairly pressure workers into doing work that they shouldn't be asked to do. Those respondents said that they wanted the industry to professionalise itself instead.

A PROFESSIONAL APPROACH TO SKILLS DEVELOPMENT

Linked to the concerns about professionalism was a level of unhappiness about the attitude of managers in the theatre sector towards the professional skills of its workers. There was a widely-shared belief in the importance of skills development as a pre-condition to doing high-quality work – over 90% of respondents agreed on this.

When asked to agree or disagree with the statement that *"...managers respect our skills and don't expect us to multi-task and do jobs that need to be done by properly trained people"*, only 22.4% did so (66.9% disagreed).

34.8% said that they were aware that a lack of career structure had been cited as a reason to leave the industry altogether (and almost half of respondents said this factor was getting worse). 52.9% said that they didn't believe that their employer was good at 'upskilling' people so that there were good candidates when jobs became vacant (only 22.7% believed that their employers were good at this). 69.9% said that they believed that *"people are promoted before they are ready for it and their lack of skills/experience creates problems for others"* and only 13% disagreed that this was the case. 62.8% also disagreed with the statement that their industry *"has a professional attitude to recruitment and it attracts people based on their skills and not "who they know"."*

THE VICIOUS CYCLE THAT BUILDS THE SKILLS SHORTAGE

There was a widespread belief that all these issues fed into each other to create a vicious cycle – that *"...short-staffing = more stress at work = people leave the industry = short staffing."* Over 93% of respondents recognised this as a factor.

Of the 146 respondents who commented on the work of 'Front of House' staff, only 5 disagreed with the statement that *"...short staffing results in a poorer quality of service to customers – which results in more pressure from customers on staff."*

All of this should be seen in the face of sharp uptick in poor behaviours among audiences since the return to work following the pandemic (which the vast majority of respondents who had a view on this have noticed). Respondents agreed that the skills shortage made it harder for upskilling to happen. Most respondents agreed that the skills shortage meant that there weren't enough skilled people available to learn new skills from – and that the over-work caused by the skills shortage meant that those who do have the skills are too busy to pass them on anyway.

CONCLUSIONS

The survey shows a clear desire from the workers in the theatre sector to see their industry become more professional in its approach to recruitment, skills development, and retention. The circular problem of short staffing / stress / losing staff can only get worse, and the retention problems caused by low pay are similarly ones that will need a radical solution.

All these issues have been raised repeatedly over the years in negotiations between the union and the theatrical employers. Bectu has called for better, more professional methods of recruitment and the union has initiated work to improve the diversity of applicants for work – particularly in London's West End.

The union has called for wages that keep pace with inflation. Members have pressed employers for better scheduling to reduce stress and improve work-life balance. It would be fair to say that – had the employers listened to Bectu more attentively over the past decade, the industry wouldn't be facing an existential threat now.