



Research to inform policy from the University of York
School of Arts & Creative Technologies

CREATIVITY UNLOCKED?

Lessons from the pandemic for the games and TV industries

Summary

- The pandemic has put immense stress on creative workers in games and TV. It has disrupted work patterns and caused financial insecurity and mental health issues.
- The challenges of hybrid working are causing higher numbers of staff to leave, meaning that key talent is lost in the creative and cultural industries (CCIs).
- The CCIs should embrace flexible working arrangements to boost productivity, creativity and diversity. Options could include:
 - remote working
 - hybrid working
 - part-time contracts
 - job-sharing
 - four-day weeks
- If the government wants to devolve and grow creative production across the UK, it needs to take urgent action to improve working conditions in the CCIs.

Context

Note: This section references severe mental health impacts.

The creative industries, especially games and television, are often seen as exciting and rewarding fields to work in. However, they also involve many challenges and pressures, and these can affect the mental health and well-being of their workers.

Some of these challenges:

- precarious work conditions that create uncertainty and limit access to benefits and support
- bullying, harassment and discrimination, which can:
 - create a hostile and unsafe work environment
 - damage self-esteem and confidence
- strict deadlines and long working hours, creating stress, anxiety, exhaustion and burnout
- imposter syndrome, which can lead workers to doubt their abilities and achievements and fear criticism or failure
- vicarious trauma, which can result from exposure to distressing or violent content or stories (e.g. when working in journalism or moderating online content)

The COVID-19 pandemic has exacerbated existing issues by:

- disrupting work patterns
- increasing financial pressures
- reducing social interactions
- creating additional stressors

The Film and TV Charity's Looking Glass reports (2019, 2021, [2022](#)) have shown there is a growing mental health crisis in the creative industries. Recent [research](#) conducted by the University of Leeds and funded by the Screen Industries Growth Network (SIGN) has also highlighted issues in the creative industries, such as:

- burnout
- trauma
- substance abuse
- depression

This echoes other emerging research in this area. Other negative impacts on creative workers' mental health include:

- anxiety
- low motivation
- isolation
- suicidal thoughts

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New Insights and Evidence

Drawn from the University of Leeds / SIGN study.

Isolation and loss of social capital

As a sociable person in a sociable industry, I really struggled with lockdown ... I found myself getting quite depressed, I guess.
– James, 32-year-old assistant producer in factual television production, Leeds

Work in the games and TV industries is naturally social, relying on teamwork and informal communication. However, the pandemic disrupted social contact in these industries.

The study describes how, during lockdown, workers in these industries faced isolation and lack of social contact, leading to mental health issues such as depression and anxiety.

It also highlights generational differences in how workers experienced remote work: younger workers were more willing to return to the office after the pandemic.

Challenges and benefits of remote working

It really impacted on the whole creative process ... I couldn't wait to get back in, to be honest.
– James, 32-year-old assistant producer in factual television production, Leeds

Remote and hybrid work have affected creative workers in different ways.

Some workers appreciated the flexibility of working from home, especially older ones, while others missed the office environment and the creative process, especially younger ones.

There was also a conflict between what management expected and what workers preferred based on their realities. Some industries, like TV, pushed for a return to the office, while others, like games, embraced a hybrid model. Some companies maintained an office culture, while in others there was less going on to attract workers to return.

Burnout and turnover

It's been really tough. I've been experiencing burnout, depression, anxiety and cynicism as a result of the pandemic.

– Amy, 32-year-old senior games producer in Sheffield

The pandemic has negatively affected the mental health and well-being of creative workers, and for some this has caused burnout and a loss of self-identity.

Many workers have considered quitting their jobs due to ongoing stress in the industry. The study argues that burnout is not inevitable but is shaped by several factors:

- social
- environmental
- individual

It also suggests that post-pandemic burnout, cynicism and melancholy could provide staff with the motivation to change the exploitative context of creative work.

Policy Recommendations

Creative workers need more psychologically informed interventions and support to cope with the pressures and challenges in their work and life.

1. Create a duty of care for workers in the CCI

The CCIs should develop a duty of care for their workers that includes:

- mental health support
- trauma-informed practices
- a safe and respectful work culture
- data collection on well-being
- flexible work options

2. Recognise and support the mental health challenges of creative work

The games and TV industries should adopt a psychologically aware approach to address the mental health concerns and challenges that affect creative workers, who have been hit hard by the pandemic. This approach should involve:

- providing more support for mental health issues
- working with industry and healthcare partners
- following trauma-informed principles (recognising and responding to the sources and impacts of trauma in creative work)

- creating a safe and empowering work culture that gives workers a voice and choice
- collecting more data on well-being to identify gaps in support

3. Encourage flexible working in the CCIs

The CCIs should adopt a more flexible work environment to improve productivity, creativity and diversity. Options could include:

- remote working
- hybrid working
- part-time contracts
- job-sharing
- four-day weeks

To achieve this flexibility, there is a need in the industry for more:

- training and guidance
- skills development
- diversity initiatives
- regulation of working hours
- recognition and support for alternative work arrangements

These approaches will ensure that flexibility does not create or worsen challenges and inequalities in the CCIs.

Further information

To find out more about the University of York's work on digital creativity, check out XR Stories and the School of Arts and Creative technologies.

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xrstories.co.uk | york.ac.uk/arts-creative-technologies

This research was undertaken for SIGN by Dr David Lee at the University of Leeds. Read the full report:

<https://screen-network.org.uk/our-work/publications/>

DOI number: [10.5281/zenodo.10880235](https://doi.org/10.5281/zenodo.10880235)

