SOLT & UK Theatre skills shortages research: final report

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Executive summary

Background and methodology

Shift Insight conducted a 13-question survey and 30 qualitative interviews to explore which off-stage technical roles are hard-to-fill for SOLT & UK Theatre members, the reasons for this, whether this is due to skills shortages and what initiatives have been put in place to address any skills shortages.

Where are the skills shortages?

Skills shortages were found across most technical roles, especially among sound and lighting technicians (including automation technicians) where major skills shortages exist. Skills shortages were also prevalent in carpentry, and wigs, hair and make-up (WHAM) roles.

Across all jobs, mid-level technical roles were seen as the most pressing concern, particularly among sound, lighting, automation, stage hand and WHAM technicians.
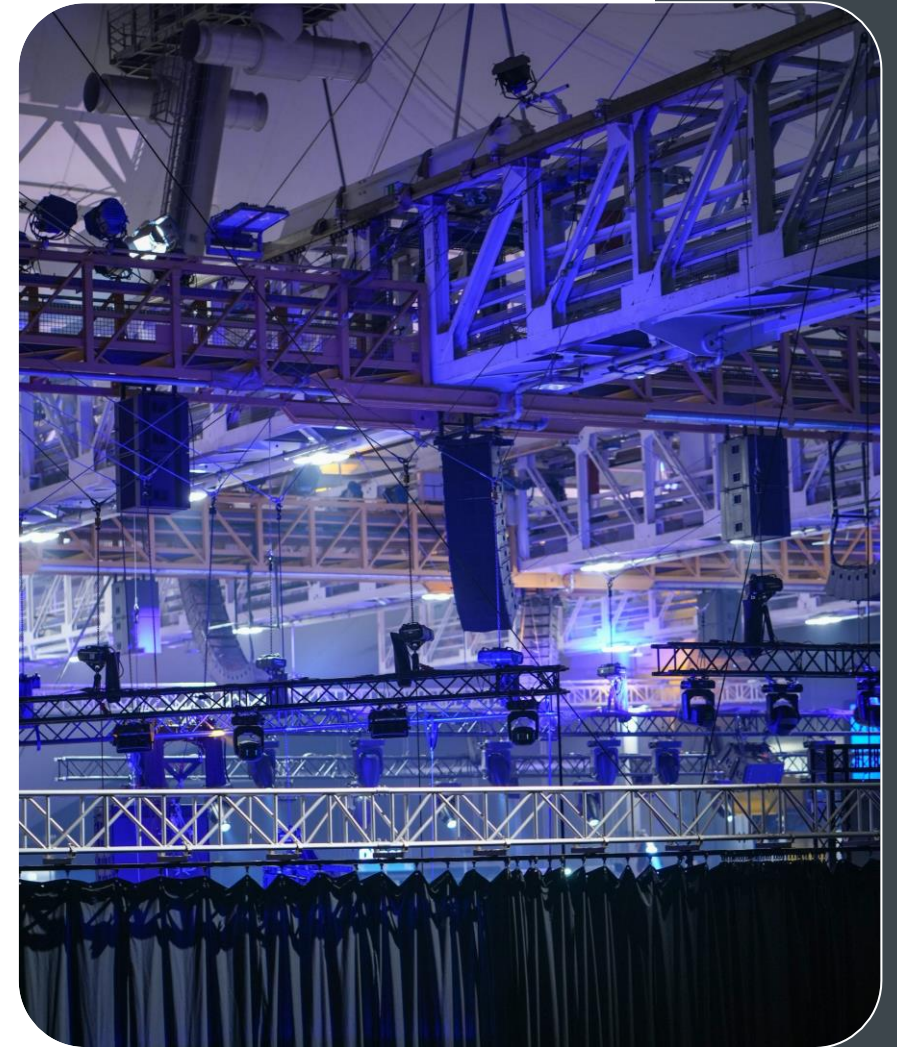
Executive summary

Respondents opinions on why there are skills shortages

Lack of sufficient technical or practical skills
1. Candidates often lacked any real experience.
2. The qualifications they had gained hadn't prepared them adequately for the role.
3. More specialist technical experience was required, which candidates did not have.

Lack of educational opportunities
1. A lack of funding and time impacts both an organisation's and individual's ability to access on-the-job training.
2. Qualifications didn't always provide students with the skills required.
3. Regional production houses and repertory theatres, which in the past have been pivotal in providing opportunities to develop skills, have reduced funding, and therefore produce less productions and have fewer roles.

The Covid effect
1. Employees reevaluated their careers, seeking a better work/life balance by switching to work in other sectors, primarily film and TV, which offer higher salaries and greater flexibility.
2. During Covid-19, many technicians were promoted quicker than expected, causing knowledge gaps and sometimes a lack of experience and confidence. This affected the training of more junior roles too, who are often reliant on learning from the senior team.

Executive summary

Perceptions about technical education

- Technical education was seen as a starting point to provide foundational knowledge for students to build on, but once in a job practical experience becomes more important.
- Where people had studied was important – participants felt some theatre schools prepared students better than others for the world of work.
- Specialist technical qualifications are increasingly significant in the industry, particularly in sound, lighting and automation roles.
- Hands-on practical learning, soft skills, information around career pathways and networking opportunities were also seen as important for technical education.

Diversity and inclusivity

- The majority of participants felt that their organisation and the industry as a whole was inclusive.
- Most felt the theatre sector was especially diverse in terms of neurodiversity and sexual orientation.
- Some thought the industry lacked diversity in terms of ethnicity and disability.
- Despite an inclusive environment, actually appealing to a diverse workforce was seen as a key challenge and one that resulted in the sector not being representative of society as a whole.
- Respondents felt theatre organisations had a responsibility to create a diverse workforce, yet they often did not have the resources or skills to be able to better support and appeal to a wider set of individuals, whether raising awareness, introducing training or making practical changes.
- Participants felt raising awareness in schools about off-stage roles as a career pathway may help create a more diverse sector.

Executive summary

Initiatives to address skills shortages

- Gaining practical experience was seen as more important than a degree or technical education.

- The most common initiative to support off-stage technical roles was unpaid work experience or internships; other initiatives included apprenticeships, workshops, internal training and mentorship programmes.

- Almost one-third of participants (30%) felt their organisation, or the industry, wasn't doing much to support off-stage technical positions. This was largely due to a combination of funding, time and resourcing challenges.

- Challenges faced when working on initiatives included the financial burden and lack of time for both the organisation and the individual taking part.

- Organisations sometimes competed for candidates rather than working collaboratively to upskill the sector.

Conclusions

From this research, it is clear that skills shortages are prevalent across all off-stage technical roles. These shortages are especially pronounced among sound, lighting and automation technicians.

Across all specialisms, mid-level and freelance roles were where skills shortages were the biggest concern. Respondents felt this was because candidates lacked appropriate technical or practical skills, the pay was low compared to other sectors, and not enough people were interested in working in off-stage technical roles. Shortages were amplified as the pathways and opportunities are not clearly established earlier in the skills and talent pipeline.

Covid-19 also had an impact, causing people to re-evaluate their careers and either leave the sector or move to film and TV, where pay and conditions were seen to be more favourable.

From an inclusivity perspective, respondents thought that the theatre industry was welcoming and inclusive, but often failed to appeal to a diverse population, which in turn meant that the industry was not representative of society.

Background and research objectives

Background

SOLT & UK Theatre work with and on behalf of their members to champion theatre and the performing arts and to create conditions for theatre to thrive. Together, they represent 500 of the UK's leading theatre producers, venue owners and managers, and performing arts centres, as well as 1,350 professional theatre makers across the UK.

A 2020 report by the Policy Evidence Centre found that 42% of creative industries employers faced skill shortages, with Covid-19 exacerbating the problem.

The workforce in music, performing and visual arts fell by 6% between 2019 and 2021, including a 7.7% drop in self-employed roles.

SOLT & UK Theatre, funded by Gatsby Charitable Foundation, commissioned Shift Insight to conduct research to understand where and why skills gaps exist within off-stage technical roles in the theatre industry and how these can be addressed.

Research objectives

The research was framed around four research objectives to address technical skills shortages in the theatre industry.

1. Skills shortages

In the theatre industry, which off-stage technical roles are hard-to-fill for SOLT & UK Theatre members?

2. Reasons for shortages

Where hard-to-fill vacancies exist, which are due to skills shortages?

3. Initiatives

What are SOLT & UK Theatre members doing to address skills shortages in their organisations?

4. Technical education

Why are theatre organisations not making greater use of technical qualifications to address their technical, craft and production skills needs?

Method

Quantitative online survey

13-question survey disseminated to key audiences to determine which off-stage roles are hard to fill and why, whether this is due to skills shortages, and what is being done to address it.

Analysis and reporting

An in-depth report addressing research objectives by detailing findings from all research stages and delivering key recommendations.

Project kick-off

Kick-off meeting used to confirm research questions, identify audiences and scope, and to define approach and timelines.

Qualitative online interviews

30 interviews with theatre and production company senior management, and technical and production managers. A deep dive to explore reasons behind any skills shortages, what is being done, and how technical qualifications factor into this.

Profile of participants

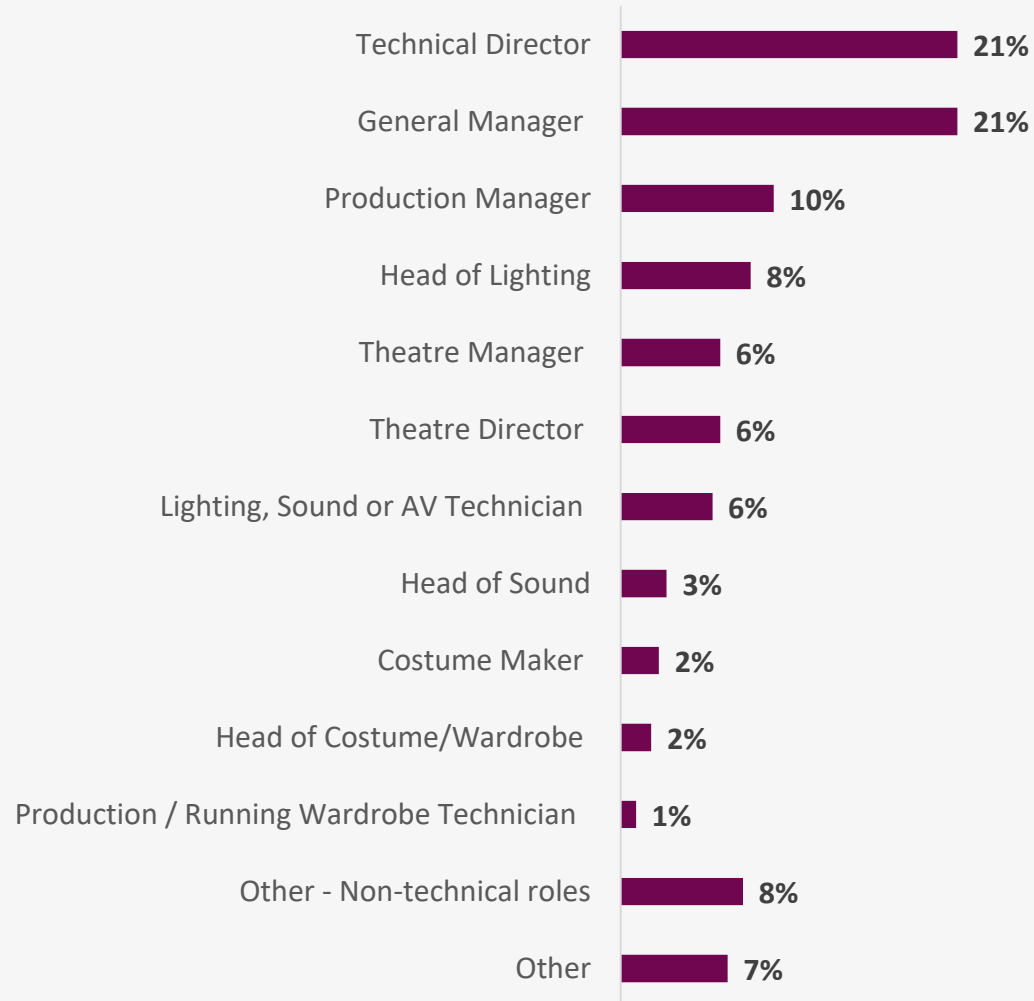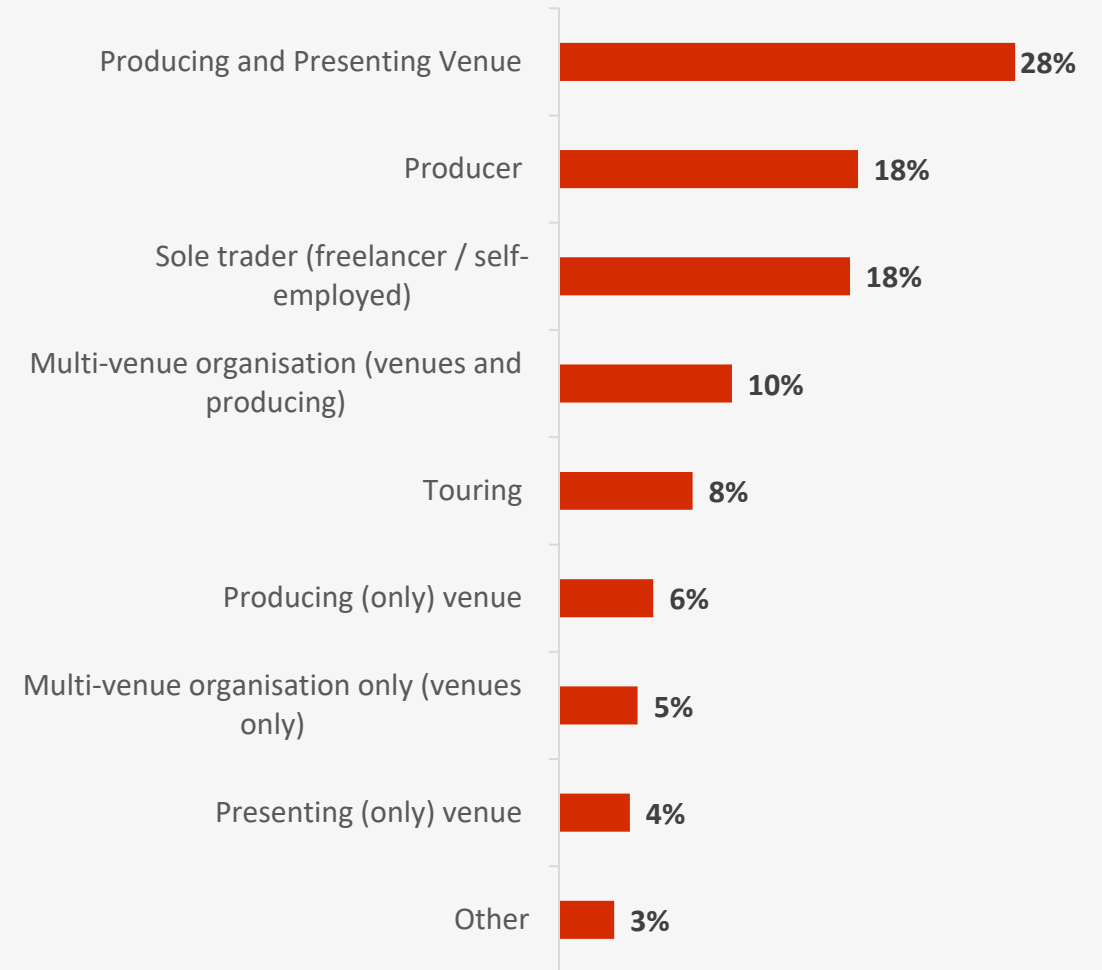# Profile of respondents | eSurvey

Which of the following best describes your role?

Role	Percentage
Technical Director	21%
General Manager	21%
Production Manager	10%
Head of Lighting	8%
Theatre Manager	6%
Theatre Director	6%
Lighting, Sound or AV Technician	6%
Head of Sound	3%
Costume Maker	2%
Head of Costume/Wardrobe	2%
Production / Running Wardrobe Technician	1%
Other - Non-technical roles	8%
Other	7%

Which of the following best describes your type of business?

Type of business	Percentage
Producing and Presenting Venue	28%
Producer	18%
Sole trader (freelancer / self-employed)	18%
Multi-venue organisation (venues and producing)	10%
Touring	8%
Producing (only) venue	6%
Multi-venue organisation only (venues only)	5%
Presenting (only) venue	4%
Other	3%

Base n = 210

Profile of respondents | eSurvey

Where do you currently work? (Multi-choice)

Scotland: **8%**

Northern Ireland: **2%**

North East: **8%**

Yorkshire and the Humber: **7%**

East Midlands: **8%**

North West: **10%**

West Midlands: **11%**

East of England: **5%**

Wales: **6%**

London: **44%**

South West: **12%**

South East: **14%**
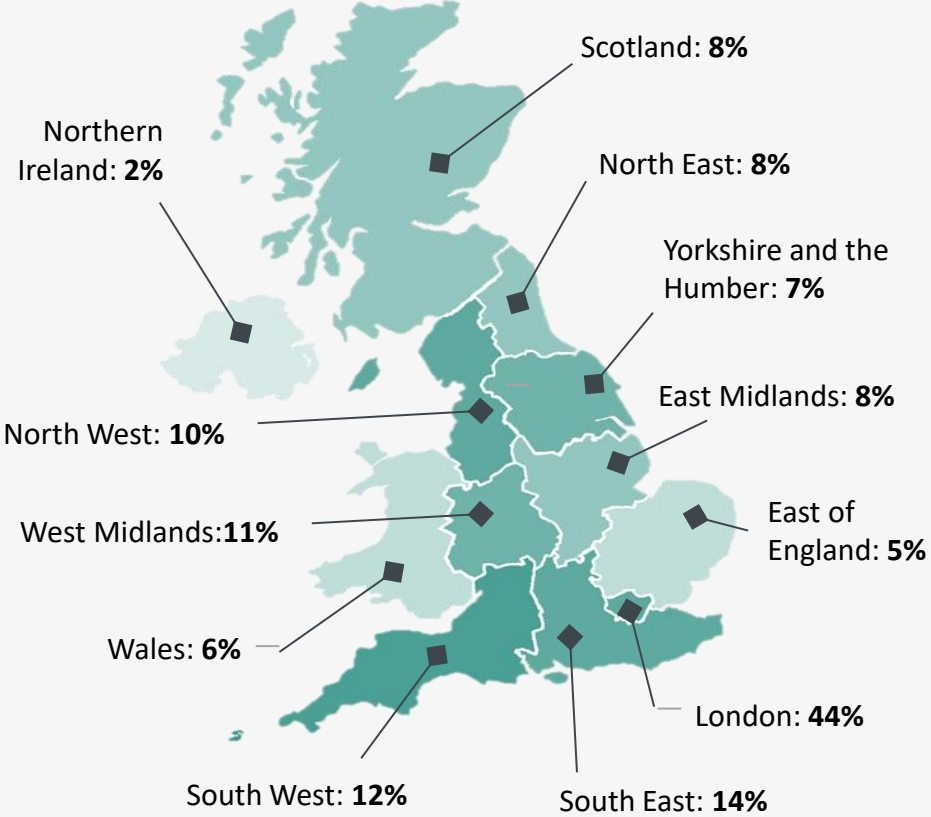
All of the above: **14%**
Prefer not to say: **1%**

Where do you currently work? (Multi-choice)

Sector

Sector	
Commercial	39%
Subsidised	30%
Not-for-profit	23%
I work across multiple organisations	20%
Don't know	1%

Profile of respondents | Interviews

Which of the following best describes your role?

Role	Count
Theatre Director	4
Theatre Manager	4
General Manager	4
Technical Director	4
Head of Lighting	3
Production Manager	3
Head of Sound	1
Head of Wigs, Hair and Make-Up (WHAM)	1
Head of costume/wardrobe	1
Costume Maker	1
Lighting, Sound or AV Technician	1
Other	3

Which of the following best describes your type of business?

Type of business	Count
Producing and Presenting Venue	6
Multi-venue organisation (venues and producing)	6
Sole-trader (freelancer / self-employed)	5
Producer	4
Presenting (only) venue	4
Producing (only) venue	2
Touring	2
Multi-venue organisation only (venues only)	1

Profile of respondents | Interviews

Where do you currently work? (Multi-choice)

Scotland: **1**

Northern Ireland: **1**

North East: **1**

Yorkshire and the Humber: **2**

East Midlands: **1**

North West: **4**

West Midlands: **3**

East of England: **3**

Wales: **2**

London: **13**

South West: **3**

South East: **4**

All of the above: **4**

Where do you currently work? (Multi-choice)

Sector

Commercial	11
I work across multiple organisations	8
Not-for-profit	7
Subsidised	6

Skills shortages

Sound and lighting technicians were the most difficult off-stage technical roles to fill

Survey respondents were asked if they had difficulty filling vacancies for various technical off-stage roles. Shortages were found across a variety of different technical roles, implying that demand exceeds the available talent pool. However, the most common shortages were seen among sound and lighting technicians – over half of respondents selected these roles. While there were few regional variations, only 1 respondent based in London found it hard to fill lighting designer vacancies compared to 15% who were not based in London.

Have you found vacancies in any of these technical off-stage roles hard to fill? (Multi-choice)

Role	%
Sound technician	55%
Lighting technician	53%
Stage management	39%
Stage hand/technician	34%
Costume/wardrobe (performance based)	33%
Lighting/AV programmer	32%
Wigs, hair and make-up (WHAM)	28%
Carpentry (including set building)	25%
Automation technician	23%
Video production	20%
Specialist costume-making	13%
Lighting designer	10%
Sound designer	10%
Wig-making	9%

> "Technicians are by their very nature very practical people. They're people who have invested an awful lot of time and energy into learning how to create, how to work and make theatre happen… When they were made redundant and the job security was pulled out from underneath them, every single one of those experienced technicians retrained. It is not hard to take somebody who knows lighting for theatre and start doing lighting for film or to start doing architectural installations and lighting for buildings."
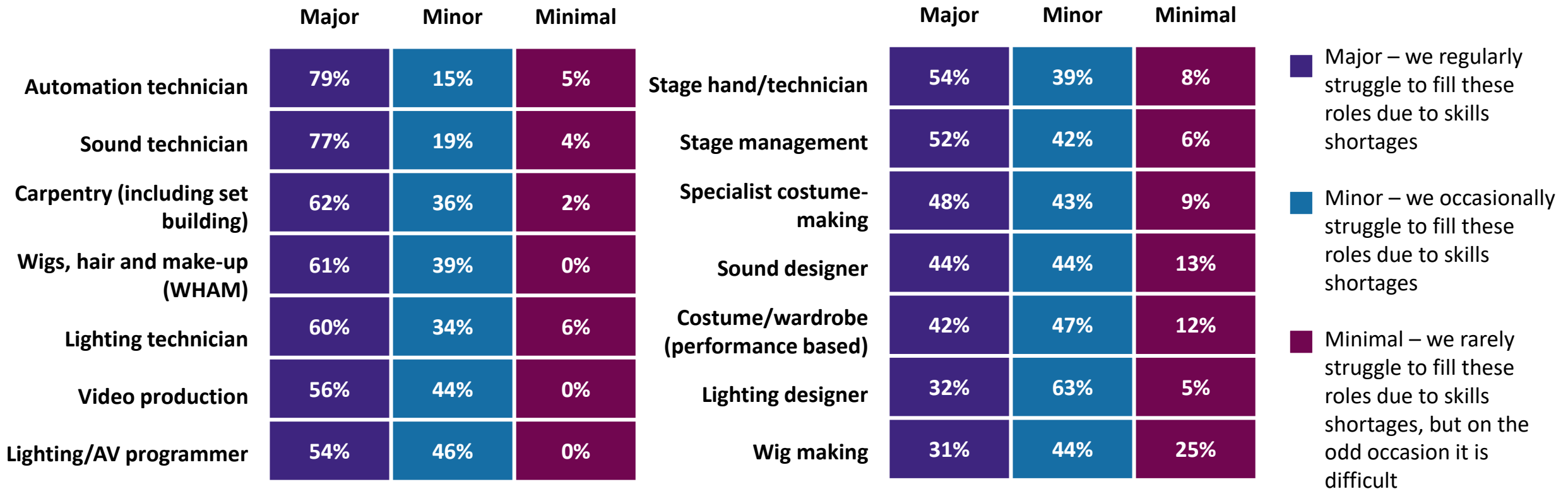>
> **Technical Director, Presenting (only) venue, West Midlands**

Unsure / not applicable to my role – 8%
We have not found any of these roles difficult to fill – 2%
Other – 8%, Base n = 210

The severity of skills shortages was highest for automation technicians and sound technicians

Survey respondents were asked to rate the severity of skill shortages they had experienced in specific roles. Across all roles, respondents more frequently characterised shortages as either major or minor than minimal. This highlights the widespread nature of skill gaps in these areas, emphasising the critical need for targeted strategies to improve skill development to effectively address these shortages.
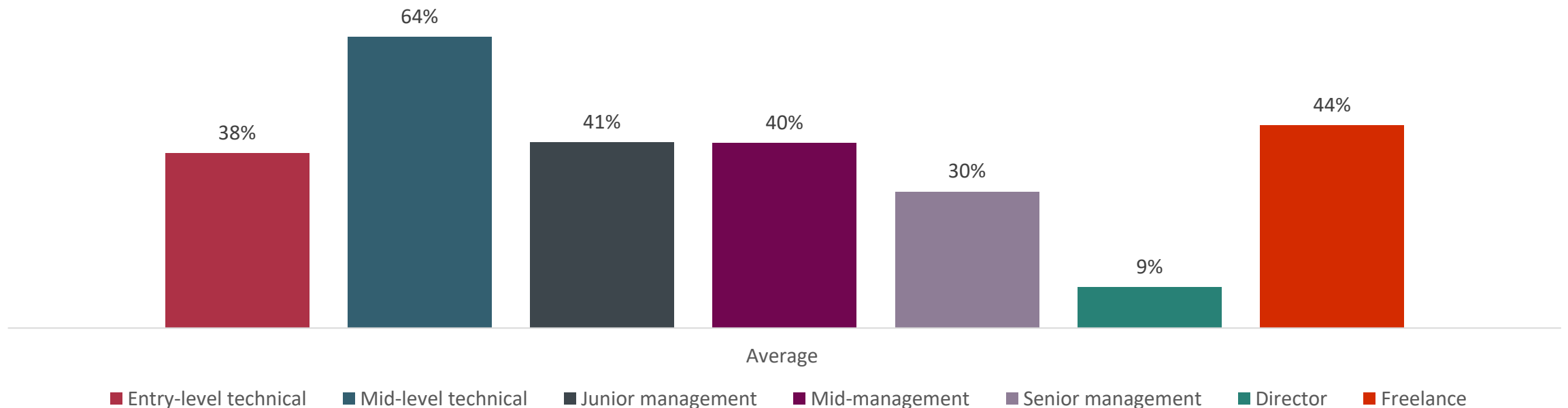
How would you describe the skills shortages in these areas?

	Major	Minor	Minimal
Automation technician	79%	15%	5%
Sound technician	77%	19%	4%
Carpentry (including set building)	62%	36%	2%
Wigs, hair and make-up (WHAM)	61%	39%	0%
Lighting technician	60%	34%	6%
Video production	56%	44%	0%
Lighting/AV programmer	54%	46%	0%

	Major	Minor	Minimal
Stage hand/technician	54%	39%	8%
Stage management	52%	42%	6%
Specialist costume-making	48%	43%	9%
Sound designer	44%	44%	13%
Costume/wardrobe (performance based)	42%	47%	12%
Lighting designer	32%	63%	5%
Wig making	31%	44%	25%

- **Major** – we regularly struggle to fill these roles due to skills shortages
- **Minor** – we occasionally struggle to fill these roles due to skills shortages
- **Minimal** – we rarely struggle to fill these roles due to skills shortages, but on the odd occasion it is difficult

**Participants were only shown roles that they had previously selected as difficult to fill.
Base n = 16 (wig making) to 100 (sound technician)**

Across all specialisms, mid-level and freelance roles were where skills shortages were the biggest concern

This was consistent across organisation types and locations. While most specialisms followed a similar pattern, the largest shortage of mid-level technicians was reported for automation technicians, where 77% of those saw a skills shortage at this level, sound technicians (76%) and stage-hand/technicians (76%). Shortages at mid-level look likely in part to have been influenced by the impact of Covid-19 on the sector. Freelance roles were most likely to be seen as a level of concern in specialist costume making (74%).

At which level(s) is the skills shortage a concern?

Average

■ Entry-level technical ■ Mid-level technical ■ Junior management ■ Mid-management ■ Senior management ■ Director ■ Freelance

Base n = 18 to 100

Respondents felt vacancies were caused by a lack of people with technical or practical skills, low pay and low interest levels

Why do you think these vacancies are hard to fill?
(Multi-choice)

	%
Lack of people with technical or practical skills	78%
The pay is low	61%
Not enough people interested in doing this type of job	58%
Lack of the work experience you demand	49%
Too much competition from other employers	39%
Lack of people with basic ability to build upon	31%
Poor attitude, motivation, or personality	18%
Inflexibility and unwillingness to accept change	16%
Lack of the qualifications you demand	9%
Other – Poor work/life balance	4%
Other: Loss of senior staff / premature promotion of juniors	2%
Other	4%

Base n = 188

This question was asked to align with the National Skills Survey and to identify where vacancies were due to skills shortages, rather than other reasons.

In interviews, participants explained how difficult it was to find people with the necessary practical skills, attributing this to qualifications not equipping candidates with the appropriate skills and knowledge, as well as a lack of practical experience, and a need for more specialist technical skills.

Low pay was also seen as problematic, with only 24% agreeing that '*Our compensation and benefits packages attract and retain top talent*'.

"

I always want to get younger people in but then I find that actually they haven't always got the skills or it's not acceptable... If somebody had done a degree in costume production, I am expecting them to be able to use a machine and to not have to undo their work and start again because it's not usable.

Head of Costume and Wardrobe, Multiple organisations across the UK

"

A lack of educational opportunities contributes to skills shortages

"

Often in colleges, and this will be a financial restriction, people learn with £10 wigs they buy off Temu or the college has a stock of synthetic wigs. What they don't have, and what's really needed is the skills of putting on wigs, preparing hair for wigs, specific to theatre and working with fine lace wigs. It'll be a budgetary restriction because each wig costs between, £1,500 to £2,500, so if you need a stock of wigs for a group of 30 students, that's expensive. Students are not always particularly careful with them because they haven't got the skill yet. There are some courses that are working on that a lot more, but being comfortable with picking up a wig, treating it in the right way and being able to maintain it as well is important.

Head of Wigs, Hair and Make-up, Multi venue organisation, London

"

Time and funding

Respondents reported having a lack of time and funding to be able to train people on the job, covering basic to more specialist training needs.

Inconsistent qualifications

The quality of graduates was seen as variable and some felt that despite hiring individuals with relevant qualifications, their understanding and skills were not where they should be, or what they would have expected.

The decline in funding for regional productions

Participants felt these used to play a pivotal role in skills development and providing individuals with opportunities to develop specific skills. A lack of funding for productions in these areas was seen to have negatively impacted upskilling technical roles.
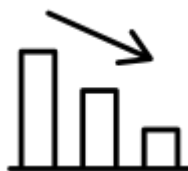
Lack of resources to enable skills development

This was seen specifically for those in WHAM roles, such as working with specialist wigs – primarily due to the cost of each wig to practice on, as well as the ability to work on a diverse range of skin tones and hair types. Participants reported that students are often required to supply their own models to practice on which can mean they don't get to work with a diverse range of individuals.

Covid-19 and other factors have caused people and to re-evaluate their careers

"

We lost a lot of people during Covid, a lot of people have gone to TV and film. A lot of people discovered that you can earn a similar amount of money and have a much better work/life balance. The large companies with bigger salaries hoover up any available talent there is… pre-Covid, people would leave college and they would start off in a regional show and gain some experience before then moving into a West End show. There is such a shortage now, people are leaving college and going straight into West End shows with little or no actual real experience."

Production Manager, Freelance, Multiple organisations

"

Covid-19

Participants stated that many left the sector during the pandemic and moved to other industries. Although an initial bounce back occurred shortly after the pandemic, when people were craving normality, participants felt many reevaluated what they wanted in life and chose careers with a better work/life balance and salaries.

Striving for a better work/life balance

Although this was mainly due to the impact of the pandemic, participants felt it has also been impacted by shifting societal views – more workers seek jobs that offer a better work/life balance, rather than the long hours associated with theatre, particularly those touring or with children.

Not meeting expectations

People were seen to have varying expectations of what the role might entail and feel it didn't prove to be the 'glamourous' profession they anticipated.
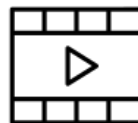
Competition from other industries

Participants stated many have moved to industries like TV, film, events and broadcasting, which can offer more money and either more flexible hours or long periods off. There is a belief that these industries have adapted much better post-pandemic than theatre.

Competition from other theatre companies

Due to skills shortages, many are going straight to the West End, as there is more budget, according to participants. They stated that often, people will leave a job half-way through production if a better offer comes along, especially during pantomime season. Others felt individuals had to often leave organisation to be able to take the next step in their career, rather than continuing to learn and progress with the same organisation.

Participants highlighted some additional factors that have impacted skills shortages, including restructuring after Covid-19

> *I feel like that some of the more junior positions have been removed. Theatre has always been one of working your way up through it and I feel like that we've either altered job roles or got rid of job roles, so that the people who have a very small skill set don't have things to learn on. It's not really an industry that's been big on training people up independently.*
>
> **Sound Technician, Touring, Multiple organisations across the UK**

> *I don't think that schools are aware of the career opportunities backstage in theatre. And as soon as the pupil mentions theatre, they're usually assumed that they want to act. I think it starts off at schools and then I think that the drama schools where all these subjects are taught again with most drama schools, the emphasis is on acting.*
>
> **Theatre Director, Producing and presenting venue, London**

Restructuring of companies: Participants stated that, largely due to Covid-19, many organisations have restructured, resulting in some job roles, particularly mid-level roles, being removed. Compounding this, a lack of skilled workers means some have been seen to be promoted when they wouldn't normally have been. These individuals often lack the experience for those more senior roles, in turn impacting their ability to train those more junior to them, according to participants.

Lack of awareness: Participants noted that when thinking about careers in theatre, people tend to think about performance roles, rather than technical off-stage opportunities.

Specialist roles: As technology becomes more advanced, there is a greater demand for specialist roles. Participants explained that previously, theatres would have multiskilled technicians, which are now incredibly hard to find, impacting on cost and the quality of production.

Lack of arts funding: A lack of funding was seen to affect arts education and reduce the number of shows, impacting attendance, which may contribute to reduced awareness of theatre and attitudes about it being a stable career.
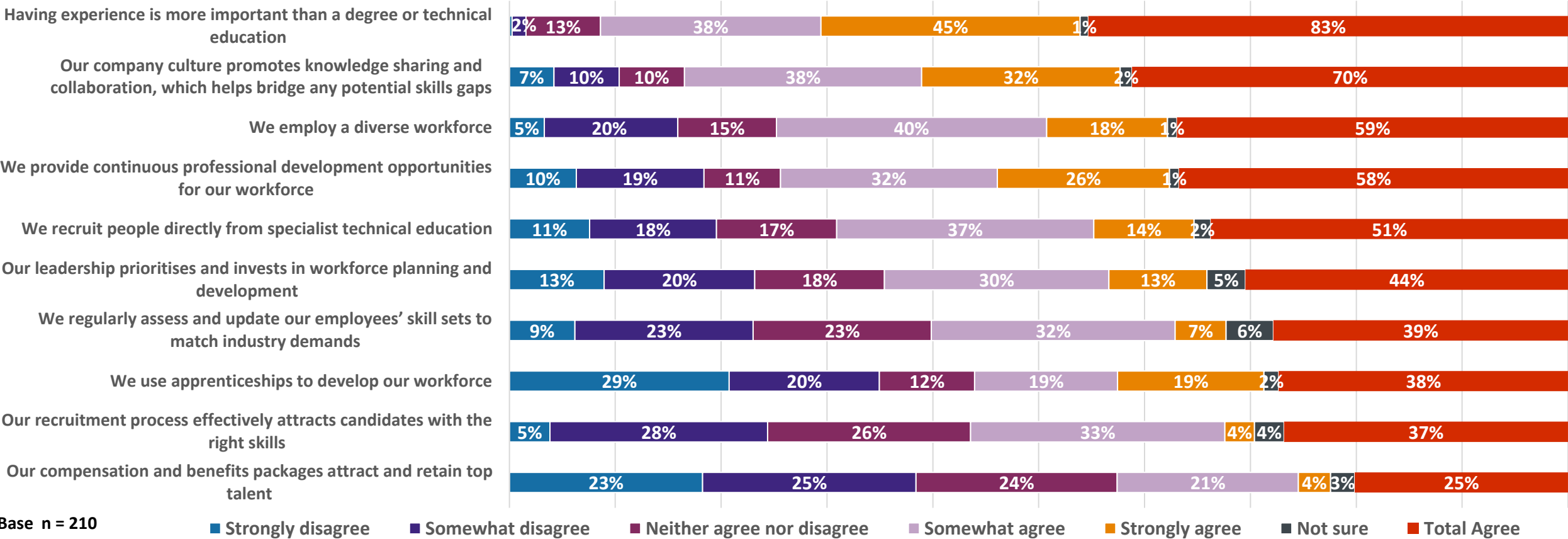
Initiatives

Experience was valued over prior education or training

Survey respondents were asked to rate their level of agreement with the statements below. The most commonly agreed-upon statement was that practical experience is more important than technical education, yet nearly half disagreed that their organisation was using apprenticeships to develop their workforce. This implies that although apprenticeships, which bridge hands-on and technical training, are valued, they seem to be underused in terms of developing the workforce.
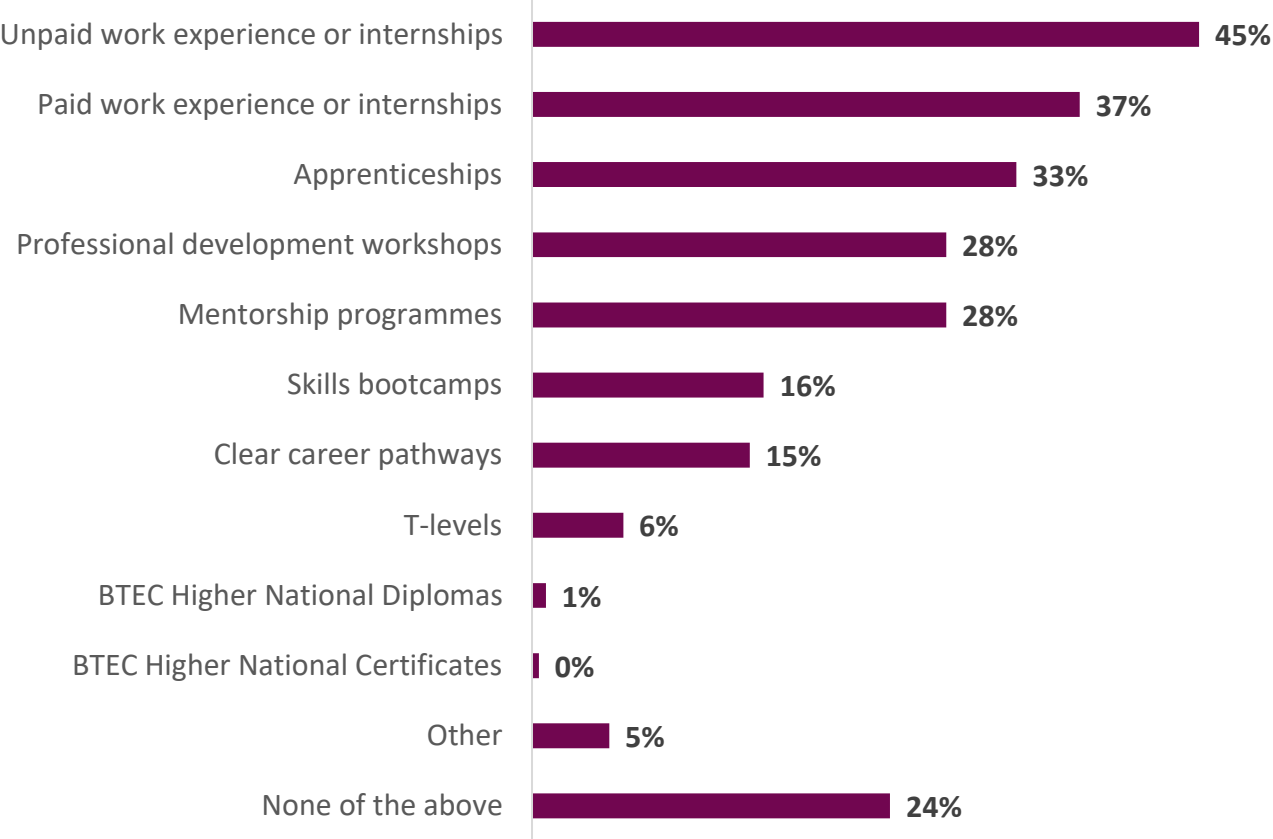
To what extent do you agree with these statements

Statement	Strongly disagree	Somewhat disagree	Neither agree nor disagree	Somewhat agree	Strongly agree	Not sure	Total Agree
Having experience is more important than a degree or technical education	2%	13%		38%	45%	1%	83%
Our company culture promotes knowledge sharing and collaboration, which helps bridge any potential skills gaps	7%	10%	10%	38%	32%	2%	70%
We employ a diverse workforce	5%	20%	15%	40%	18%	1%	59%
We provide continuous professional development opportunities for our workforce	10%	19%	11%	32%	26%	1%	58%
We recruit people directly from specialist technical education	11%	18%	17%	37%	14%	2%	51%
Our leadership prioritises and invests in workforce planning and development	13%	20%	18%	30%	13%	5%	44%
We regularly assess and update our employees' skill sets to match industry demands	9%	23%	23%	32%	7%	6%	39%
We use apprenticeships to develop our workforce	29%	20%	12%	19%	19%	2%	38%
Our recruitment process effectively attracts candidates with the right skills	5%	28%	26%	33%	4%	4%	37%
Our compensation and benefits packages attract and retain top talent	23%	25%	24%	21%	4%	3%	25%

Base n = 210

■ Strongly disagree   ■ Somewhat disagree   ■ Neither agree nor disagree   ■ Somewhat agree   ■ Strongly agree   ■ Not sure   ■ Total Agree

Unpaid work experience and internships are common

Survey respondents explained which initiatives their organisation offered to support off-stage technical positions.

Does your organisation offer any of the following for off-stage technical roles?

Initiative	%
Unpaid work experience or internships	45%
Paid work experience or internships	37%
Apprenticeships	33%
Professional development workshops	28%
Mentorship programmes	28%
Skills bootcamps	16%
Clear career pathways	15%
T-levels	6%
BTEC Higher National Diplomas	1%
BTEC Higher National Certificates	0%
Other	5%
None of the above	24%

Base n = 210

Unpaid work experience or internships were the most common initiative for off-stage technical roles, with 45% offering these. The impact of such unpaid opportunities has frequently been debated, both in terms of their impact on individuals (Hunt & Scott, 2023) and on diversity in the creative industries (Siebert & Wilson, 2013). It is worth noting also that 37% of respondents were offering paid opportunities of this kind.

Compared to other business types, multi-venue organisations (venues and producing) were significantly more likely to offer apprenticeships (73% vs. 33% overall).

During the interviews, participants working in small organisations outlined numerous financial, time and resourcing challenges that prevented them from offering apprenticeships regularly.

Meanwhile, subsidised theatres were significantly more likely to provide skills bootcamps (32% vs. 16% overall).

Apprenticeships were seen as the most common way to address skills shortages

Survey respondents were asked in an open question to describe how their organisation or industry was addressing skill shortages in the off-stage technical workforce.

How is your organisation / the industry addressing any skills shortages in the offstage technical workforce? (Open text)

Category	%
Limited action	30%
Apprenticeships	27%
Internal training	19%
Open events and community engagement	17%
Work experience/placements	17%
Recruitment strategies	16%
Networking and collaborating	14%
Nurturing talent / Career pathways / Mentoring	12%
Supporting early career	5%
Salaries	4%
Using freelancers	3%
Connecting through forums	1%
Other	5%

Base n = 155

Apprenticeships were the most prominent initiative to address skills shortages, underscoring the increasing value placed on practical, hands-on experience.

However, in this question, almost one-third of respondents felt their organisation, or the theatre industry, wasn't doing much to support off-stage technical positions.

This links to interview participants views that there were not always the funds or the opportunities available to do so. Whilst others discussed a need for suitable apprenticeships that focus on specific skills gaps as well as an increase in the availability of training needs.

These individuals felt that their organisation either wasn't doing anything to address skills gaps, or that their company was too small to have great effect.

Initiatives that increase awareness and core learnings are valued

Participants described current initiatives being used to address skills shortages in the industry.

Increasing awareness of off-stage careers
- Work experience with school students
- Residential summer schools
- Free off-stage career's days focusing on different aspects of the theatre
- Open days with the National Saturday Club
- Careers stands at music festivals

Qualifications
- Technical course and stage management courses
- Apprenticeships and T-Levels
- Internship scheme, '10,000 Black interns'

Training
- Trainee programmes and graduate schemes
- In-house training for less experienced staff

Freelancers we spoke to either didn't know about initiatives or found it hard to introduce new initiatives within an organisation of which they were not a permanent member.

Benefits
- Most people come to have fun, but it does lead people to join the industry.
- Increases awareness of other roles in theatre.

Benefits
- Each training serves different purposes whether entry level or more specialist.
- Opportunities for staff to move around departments, get a feel for different disciplines, and receive a broader education.
- Appeals to people from more diverse backgrounds.
- Welcomes those without formal education/qualifications.

Benefits
- Upskills staff, particularly those who were promoted quickly during Covid-19.
- Ensures everyone has necessary knowledge like health and safety, working at heights.
- Shows investment in employees, improving retention rates.

A lack of collaboration can prevent initiatives from succeeding

Interview participants described challenges they faced when introducing and maintaining initiatives to support skills shortages in the industry.

Ensuring it is valuable: Participants felt it can be difficult to ensure people get something valuable from their work experience.

Cost: They thought that those who can afford to do work experience and apprenticeships tend to be people who can fund themselves. In addition, not all organisations can afford to take on work experience or apprentices. This can negatively impact equality, diversity and inclusivity as only those who can afford it can apply and move into the industry.

Diversifying experience: Some participants explained that Big West End shows run for a year, but it is important for staff to gain experience opening and closing a show – as a result they felt it is often better for them to work across shorter runs to gain experience. However, they explained that fewer organisations are able to provide this experience, with the decline of repertory and regional, non-touring, theatre.

Industry of freelancers: Many felt that it can be hard to introduce and maintain initiatives as there are so many freelancers in the industry.

Frequent poaching of talent: Others explained that often an apprentice gets poached before they even finish the training. Due to skills shortages, other companies are happy to hire someone with basic training and finish their training while on the job.

Lack of unity: Some thought that organisations are competing against each other, rather than collaborating to help each other combat these skills shortages.

Lack of vision: Some felt that employers are usually not thinking of staff career development, as it is seen as time-consuming and costly. However, they thought that staff value organisations that invest in them, and this kind of support and development may stop people moving around, as they may feel appreciated and invested in.

Retention: Participants discussed issues with retention as some move to different organisations, while others leave the industry all together due to low pay, work/life balance and not seeing a pathway for future career progression.

Reduction in existing initiatives: Many explained that rising costs mean that some organisations have had to scale down training programmes.

Lack of time: In a busy industry, both employers and employees felt they did not have the time available to invest in training programmes.

A more unified training system encourages continuous learning

During the interviews, participants suggested that technical skills shortages in the industry could be better addressed.

Training and education

Work experience and apprenticeships: Many wanted a more unified system to support work experience and apprenticeships, to increase their exposure to the industry. They felt individuals should be encouraged to move around to get experience of different types of shows.

Provide cheap basic qualifications: Others wanted qualifications that will help train people quickly and effectively, including basic entry-level training to help people enter the profession without having to invest a lot of time and money, as well as providing necessary qualifications such as first aid training to make it easier for people to continuously learn.

Investing in talent: Participants explained that companies growing their own talent is key to improving retention rates, upskilling staff and saving costs in the long term. Nurturing talent by providing guidance and career paths would be beneficial.

Train the trainers: As a great deal of training is done on the job, they felt it would be helpful to train individuals on how best to train others.

> *I think a more formalised system for training people quickly and simply. So, there's a course run by the Association of British Technicians, which is a one-week course which is designed to teach people the basics but the problem with that course is it's about £1,000… if you are straight from school and have no experience and don't know what that's going to lead to, they don't want to risk that £1,000. There needs to be a way in which UK theatre organisations can find people who have potential and somehow send them on a course simply and cheaply to get the basic qualifications, which means that I can then put them in an entry level position.*
>
> **Production Manager, Freelance, Multiple organisations**

Providing information and networking opportunities could create a more sustainable industry

Clarity and exposure

Awareness: They saw value in increasing awareness of technical roles and changing the narrative around theatre jobs being unsustainable career paths.

Define skills: Some suggested creating a clear definition of skills and indicators to be able to judge someone's skillset quickly and effectively.

Career progression opportunities: Others wanted to ensure there are opportunities for progression in all departments.

Growth and sustainability

Adapt: Many felt theatre needs to adapt to societal change, like other creative industries have done, for example, by providing a better work/life balance to maintain talent.

Funding: Others believed that an increase in funding would have a huge impact on awareness, training and career stability.

> *Need to show that it's not just a job, you can build a career in this sector. We have to convince young people, but we also have to convince their parents that it is a viable career. We have to build up the profile of those people who work backstage, whether you work in finance, admin, marketing, creative learning or in technical theatre.*
>
> **General Manager, Producing and presenting venue, East of England**

Communication and collaboration

Networks: Introduce networks to share resources and support one another. Participants felt organisations can be inward looking, but there should be initiatives to support the industry as a whole, which will then benefit individual organisations.

Knowledge sharing: Some suggested usings employees' experience to upskill more junior staff.

> *I think there should be a central place where people will go independently of where they work, what their background is, a hub that is by nature unbiased, where people can go and network. They can connect and present themselves and work together professionally.*
>
> **Head of Wigs, Hair and Make-up, Multi venue organisation, London**

Role of technical education

Technical education provides foundational knowledge for students to build upon and get their foot in the door

Participants shared their views and experiences of technical education.

A starting point

The majority viewed technical education as a strong starting point, especially if it is from a reputable institution, but recognised that most relevant knowledge comes from working on the job, whether they hold a technical qualification or not – and felt that, once they get their foot in the door, practical and relevant experience becomes more important. The reality of the job is that everyone is continuously learning through experience and from others.

Specialist qualifications

Participants were divided in their opinions on specialist qualifications. Some believed that as technology advances, it can be harder to learn on the job, particularly in sound, lighting and automation roles and as a result specialist technical qualifications are more useful in these areas. However, others felt that students should get more generalist qualifications and practical experience before specialising.

Practical experience

The inclusion of practical experience within technical education was seen as particularly useful to help students 'hit the ground running' when entering the profession.

Expectations

Experience used to be the main way to enter off-stage careers. As technical qualifications were introduced, we were told that employers would look for these from candidates, but attitudes are now turning, and technical qualifications are no longer being seen as essential.

Practical learning and attitude can help support skills shortages

Participants made some suggestions on how technical education could play a greater role in addressing skills shortages.

Course focus: Participants felt courses should focus more on entry level/junior elements of the industry to help manage expectations of the reality of working in theatre. They thought practical placements should always be included to better prepare students for the industry and help make them more employable.

Media: Participants suggested having a greater online presence – using Facebook groups to network, TikTok videos to educate young people on what the industry entails and YouTube videos to spark an interest.

Information: Participants suggested providing information on a range of opportunities, educational routes, career pathways and what that job actually entails, as well as career stands at music festivals to attract new audiences.

Networking: Participants felt that a supportive network within technical education would help people learn from one another and discover valuable opportunities.

Link to industry: Participants felt technical education needed to be much more closely tied in with the industry and employers, to help both develop skills and build important connections.

Regional: Participants wanted more technical education opportunities in regions outside of London – as they felt regional theatres play an important role in training individuals and providing them with opportunities.

Diversity and inclusivity

Despite an inclusive environment, a lack of appeal to a diverse audience means the sector is not representative of society

Only 18% of respondents in the survey strongly agreed with the statement 'We employ a diverse workforce', though 40% agreed with it somewhat.

However, the majority of interviewees felt that their organisation and the industry as a whole was inclusive, as it tends to be a liberal and accepting environment, and one that recruits with an open mindset. Many also recognised improvements over time, with complaints being addressed and management taking more responsibility.

Although most felt the theatre sector was particularly diverse in terms of neurodiversity and sexual orientation, they felt it lacked diversity in terms of ethnicity and disability. Others felt that diversity varied by location and job role – for example, some suggested that technical teams felt predominantly white and male, while costume and make-up tend to be mainly female.

Despite an inclusive environment when at work, many felt that appealing to a diverse population was the industry's main challenge and one that resulted in the sector not being representative of society as a whole. They felt that initiatives to create a diverse sector must start when individuals are at school, so they are more exposed to the industry and see working in technical theatre roles as a sustainable and attractive career.

> *I think naturally in our industry we have a more eclectic workforce from a neurodiversity point of view, and from a sexual orientation point of view. I think ethnicity is still a problem in our industry.*
>
> **Head of HR, Multi venue organisation, London, South East and South West of England**

Awareness and exposure would help make theatre more diverse

Participants highlighted some barriers they face when appealing to and maintaining a diverse workforce.

Expensive performances: Acknowledging significant amount of access work, audiences may find tickets unaffordable particularly in challenging fiscal circumstances. This impacts exposure to the industry and many felt that this was part of a wider problem of being able to appeal to those from different ethnicities and socio-economic backgrounds.

Negative perceptions: They explained there is a common narrative that the creative industry provides limited security when actually there are a wide range of opportunities.

Practicalities: Participants noted that other demands can prevent organisations adapting to create a more inclusive environment, particularly when supporting those with physical disabilities.

Stretched resources: Some noted the pressure for organisations to stay afloat, meaning that inclusive decisions can get sidelined, such as the types of training and support offered.

Support: Participants stated the sector isn't always set up to support parents and those with physical or mental disability.

Performance focused: Some also felt that efforts to improve diversity were more focused on performance roles and less so for technical roles within both education and the workforce.

> *The pressure to stay afloat makes it harder to make inclusive decisions. In terms of the kind of support you can give to different types of people in your workforce in terms of the kind of training and support you can offer and in terms of the decisions you make for the audiences that you want to welcome.*

Theatre Director, Producing and presenting venue, London

In their own words…

"There is lots of lip service. There is not enough actual action. And the diversity we have got in our sector is around performance and there is little consideration around other areas of work that we do and other areas of the workforce. I also think drama schools and technical education is not inclusive and we need to make sure the intake for those courses is diverse."

General Manager, Producing and presenting venue, East of England

"I think first of all, it's raising the profile that these kinds of roles exist. I think so many people still don't understand how theatre is made and how many different roles there are out there, and what's being done. TV and film have done a reasonably good job of that by highlighting actually what goes into making it."

Theatre Director, Producing and presenting venue, London

"It's really hard if you're a parent and if you have a physical disability or an intellectual disability… I'm physically disabled and I trained to work backstage in theatre, but in a very different role to the world I'm in now. I worked in that original role for six years as a freelancer and then I just physically couldn't do it and it wasn't accessible to me. I had to pivot my career and I sort of took a few steps back in my career to get something at a more junior level that I was then able to learn on the job."

Production Manager, Producing only, London

Actively engaging with different audiences through outreach and training initiatives could create a more diverse workforce

Participants had suggestions on how diversity and inclusivity could be improved in the theatre industry.

Recruitment: Take part in schemes like '10,000 Black Interns' and advocate for blind recruitment. Encourage an expectation that employers have to take on apprenticeships.

Education and awareness: Influence how schools promote technical theatre careers to change schools and parents' attitudes towards theatre roles. Additionally, demystify the industry by showing pathways and different opportunities

Outreach: Ensure regional outreach shows lead on to careers by inviting people to start apprenticeships.

Diverse representation: Creating more diverse shows would bring a more diverse audience and encourages people to engage in the conversation. Participants felt representation is key, as it is important for people to recognise themselves in others, and to see people in more senior roles who can provide inspiration and mentorship.

Training and development: Train those who aren't experienced, keeping an open mind for those even without qualifications. Participants felt many more senior people had been promoted during the pandemic without having the necessary experience, and therefore training for this level would also be useful. They thought it is important to create a more sustainable career with realistic career progression.

Pay and economic barriers: Pay should be representative of an individual's skills, and pay rates should be equal among different roles at the same level (bands). Many individuals aren't able to take on unpaid training schemes/internships and therefore participants felt better funding to support them would be beneficial.

Work environment and well-being: Adapt more, like other creative sectors have, to encourage a better work/life balance.

Conclusion

Skills shortages

From this research, it is clear that skills shortages are prevalent across all off-stage technical roles. These shortages are especially pronounced among sound, lighting and automation technicians.

Across all specialisms, mid-level and freelance roles were where skills shortages were the biggest concern and respondents felt this was because candidates lacked appropriate technical or practical skills, the pay was low compared to other sectors, and not enough people were interested in working in off-stage technical roles.

Covid-19 has had an impact, causing people to re-evaluate their careers and look for a better work/life balance. Some moved out of the sector altogether, while others chose to move across to film and TV where the pay and working conditions were seen to be better.

Company restructuring after Covid has resulted in some job roles, particularly mid-level roles, being removed. This has meant those that remain have sometimes progressed into higher level positions with somewhat limited experience – which, in turn, has had a knock-on effect on more junior roles as more senior individuals may lack the necessary experience and technical skills to train them effectively.

Practical experience was seen to be more important than a technical education and respondents highlighted on-the-job training as the most effective. That said, participants recognised technical education's potential value, but thought that where the graduate had studied was an important factor, feeling course relevance was variable.

From an inclusivity perspective, respondents thought that the theatre industry was welcoming and inclusive, but often failed to appeal to a diverse population, which in turn meant that the industry was not representative of society.

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