

Absent Friends: Scaling the film and TV industry's retention problem

Estimating the number of workers aged 50+ missing from the UK film and television industries

David Steele
Research and Insight Manager
Film and TV Charity

Executive summary

- The UK's film and television industries appear to find it difficult to retain workers, leading to a particularly youthful skew in the age distribution of the film and TV workforce.
- The retention problem arises from long hours of work, high pressure and the difficulty of combining film and TV work with family life and work-life balance.
- The number of 'missing' older workers (aged 50+) is estimated to be between 24,000 to 35,000, depending on which estimation method is used.
- The larger estimate (35,000) assumes an expansion in the total size of the film and TV workforce, which is the appropriate estimate given the current production boom.
- Improved retention of experienced workers could help meet the film and television industries' current labour shortage.
- Labour shortages in the film and TV industry are occurring in the context of an overall UK workforce that has shrunk since the beginning of 2020. So, without better retention, it may continue to be difficult to meet the staffing needs of the UK film and TV industry.

The Leaky Pipeline: early exit of film and TV workers

It has been known for many years that the UK film and TV industries have a problem with retention¹. Many workers leave the industry early. This is especially pronounced among women from their mid-thirties onward, but also applies to quite a lot of men as well. They leave for a variety of reasons. These include burnout, practices such as long-hours, unsociable hours and away-shoots, the pressure of deadlines and budgets and the seeming inability (so far) of the industry to adopt family-friendly working practices². Those who leave are experienced workers, many with management and leadership skills: exactly the sort of people the industry needs and has been finding hard to recruit. The retention problem has been observed by film and TV support bodies, by academics and recently by us at the Film and TV Charity in responses to our 2021 *Looking Glass* survey of the mental health of film and TV workers. A typical comment made by one of our respondents was:

“As someone who has returned to work with a small child, I find the biggest stressor is the long hours pressure when I have to balance work within childcare hours (or after the child's bedtime). Without Covid having made it acceptable to work from home some days, I could not have continued in my role.”

A related problem - especially relevant in the context of a production boom - is that loss of experienced staff may lead to premature promotion of less experienced people, sometimes without the training they need to do the job properly:

“This capability gap is exposed when the demand for people encourages early promotion into higher roles. In these scenarios people tend to rely on the strategies of impersonation and improvisation... The most commonly requested intervention to support improved wellbeing was better line management.”³

¹ A large-scale tracking study of British television production workers undertaken between 1994 and 1997 found that stress from work uncertainty was already becoming a problem - most notably, among those in their 40s - leading people to consider leaving or leave the TV industry (Dex, Willis, Paterson and Sheppard, 2000).

² See *Raising Films*, 2015; Percival, 2020; van Raalte, Wallis et al., 2021.

But how many?

How many older workers are 'missing' from the film and TV industries? Or to put it another way, how many more workers aged 50+ would we expect to see in the industry if it had an age profile typical of the general workforce? This question is particularly pertinent at the present time, with productions calling urgently for experienced people to fill key roles. Just as we do not try to fill a sink with the plug taken out, it arguably makes little sense to pour new young workers into the industry if we do not at the same time address the pressures forcing people to leave prematurely.

This paper estimates the number of missing older workers.

The skewed age profile of the workforce

Compared to the total UK workforce, the film and TV industries have an age-skew towards the young and away from the middle aged and older. A higher proportion of film and TV workers are aged under 40 than in the wider UK workforce. From ages 40-50 the percentages are about the same. The proportion of film and TV workers aged 50+ is considerably lower than the UK workforce average. For women, the skew begins younger than men, with women leaving the industry from their mid-thirties onwards.

The various sources are in close alignment:

Table 1:
Estimates of the 50+ workforce

Source	Proportion of the workforce aged 50+
Ofcom (2021) UK television	21% ⁴
Diamond 5 th Cut (2022), UK TV, Off-screen	21.7%
ScreenSkills (2019) UK screen industries	20%
Film and TV Charity (2022) respondents to Looking Glass 2021 film and TV mental health survey	19.8%
Compared with: ONS (2022b) Total UK workforce	32.7%

³ Film and TV Charity, 2022, page 10.

⁴ Ofcom 2021 found that the retention rate for women aged 50+ was six percentage points lower than for older men.

The age-skew can be seen in the following charts, comparing Ofcom’s estimate of the UK TV workforce with ONS estimates for the total UK workforce. The Ofcom (2021) estimate of the age distribution of the UK TV workforce is shown in Chart 1:

Chart 1:
Age distribution of UK TV workforce

Source: Ofcom Sept (2021), *Five-year review: diversity and equal opportunities in UK broadcasting*, page 29. Percentages are those of the total disclosed and collected.

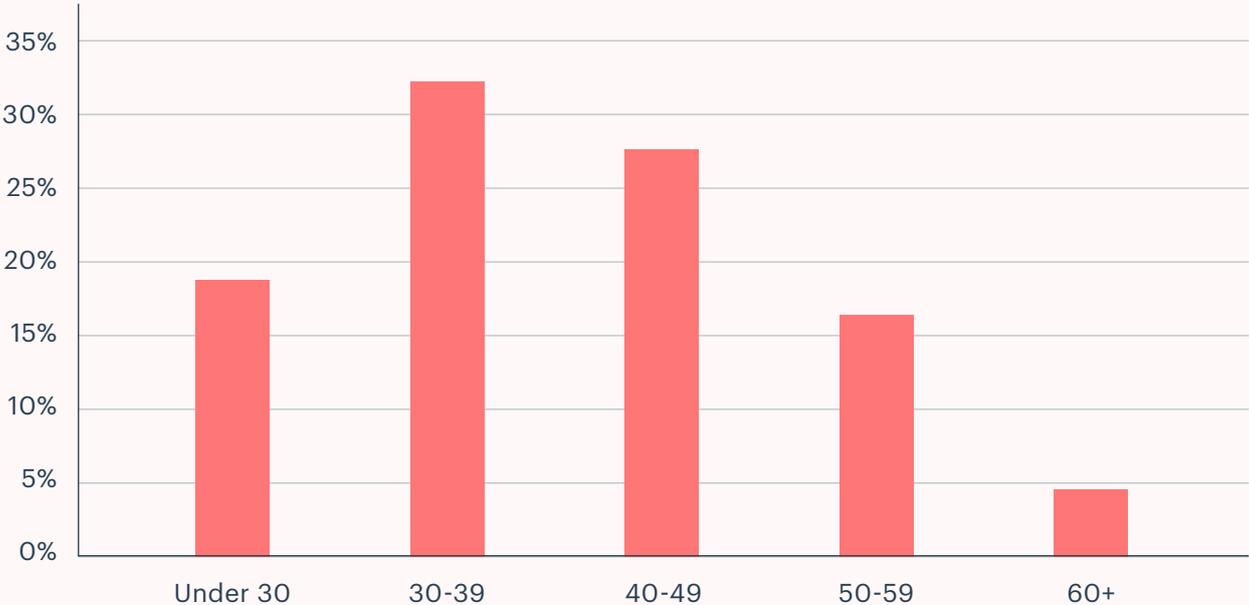
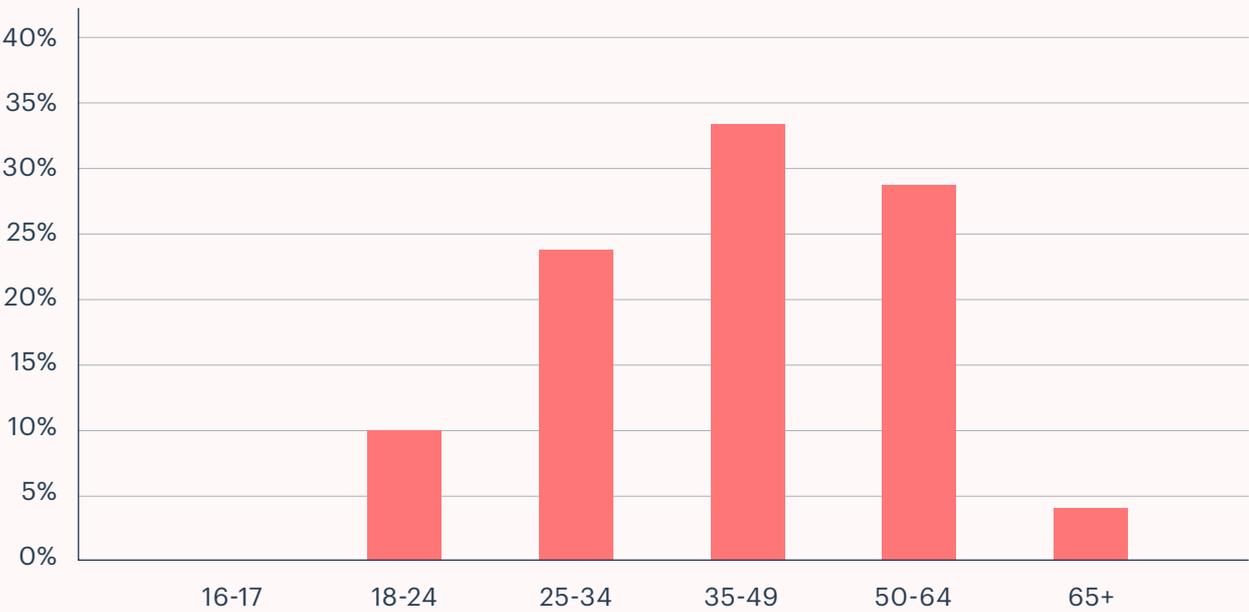


Chart 2:
Age distribution of total UK workforce

Source: ONS, Labour Force Survey, March 2022.



Calculating the number of missing over-50s - fixed total method

The latest ONS estimate for the size of the UK film and TV workforce is 202,028.⁵ A simple method for estimating the number of missing older workers is to adjust the numbers of film and TV workers aged over and under 50 using the ONS percentages for the total UK workforce, then calculate the differences. This is shown in the following table:

Table 2:
UK film and TV industry: the missing over-50s
– fixed total method

	Aged under 50	Aged 50+	Total film and TV workforce
Actual age distribution of film and TV workforce (based on Ofcom's 21% aged 50+)	159,602	42,426	202,028
Film and TV workforce re-based to ONS percentages for total UK workforce (32.7% aged 50+)	135,965	66,063	202,028
Differences	+23,637	-23,637	

This calculation suggests that the film and TV workforce is missing around **23,600** older workers, which is about **12%** of the total. These are the people who, if the industry were age and family friendly, might have stayed in their jobs as they grew older or been recruited or re-hired at older ages. Many would be experienced workers, who could have helped fill the posts needed to expand UK film and TV production and participated in the training of the next generation of film and TV workers coming up.

Gender-wise, the missing workers split roughly 50/50 male and female, around **11,800** women and **11,800** men. The reason for the 50/50 split is that women account for a smaller proportion of the film and TV workforce than men, but their lower retention rate increases their share of missing older workers.⁶

⁵ This is for film, video and TV production, post-production and distribution, film exhibition and TV programming and broadcasting, SIC codes 5911, 5912, 5913, 5914 and 6020. ONS 2022a, Annual Population Survey, calendar year 2021.

⁶ This is based on the ScreenSkills (2019) estimate of the female share of the film and TV workforce, combined with Ofcom's (2021) estimate of the female youth skew of the UK TV workforce.

There is a shortage of sources capable of splitting survey data by both age and race and ethnicity at the same time⁷. However, there is some evidence that the Black, Asian and minority ethnic film and TV workforce has a more youthful skew than the film and TV workforce average. For example, Creative Diversity Network has found that Black, Asian, and minority ethnic film and TV workers are under-represented in senior positions⁸, which are likely to correlate to some extent with age, and in the film and TV Charity's Looking Glass 21 survey, only 15% of Black, Asian, and minority ethnic respondents were aged 50+, compared with 20% of white respondents.⁹

To correct this age-skew assuming a fixed total workforce would require the employment of an additional **4,600** Black, Asian, and minority ethnic workers aged 50+, within the total 23,600 extra older workers.

Calculating the number of missing over-50s - higher total method

An issue with the first method of calculating the number of missing over-50s is that it assumes a constant size for the film and TV industry and suggests that to accommodate the increase in older workers, there would be **23,600** fewer younger workers in the industry. But why would we wish to remove younger workers who have already joined the industry, especially during a production boom?

So, the second method (Table 3) is to hold the number of younger workers constant and increase the number of older workers until they reach the ONS UK all-industries proportion. Using this method, the number of missing older workers rises to **35,122**. Adding these to the film and TV workforce increases the size of the workforce from 202,028 to **237,150**, substantially addressing the labour shortage brought about by the production boom.

The gender split in this case would be around **17,500** extra women and **17,500** extra men.

The required number of additional older Black, Asian, and minority ethnic workers would rise to **6,100**. Note that this number only corrects the age-skew. It does not correct the overall under-representation of Black, Asian, and minority ethnic people in the film and TV workforce.¹⁰

⁷ For example, neither ScreenSkills nor Ofcom yet do this, and the ONS sample sizes are too small to split by industry, age and race at the same time.

⁸ CDN 2020, page 22.

⁹ Film and TV Charity, bespoke report from LG21 survey data.

¹⁰ Given the London-skew of the film and TV industries, correcting Black, Asian, and minority ethnic under-representation would require an additional 38,000 Black, Asian, and minority ethnic workers (of all ages).

Table 3:
UK film and TV industry: the missing over-50s
– higher total method

	Aged under 50	Aged 50+	Total film and TV workforce
Actual age distribution of film and TV workforce (based on Ofcom's 21% aged 50+)	159,602	42,426	202,028
Film and TV workforce re-based to ONS percentages for total UK workforce (32.7% aged 50+)	159,602	77,548	237,150
Differences	0	-35,122	

Retention of older workers over the last twenty years would not on its own have been enough to achieve these numbers. The film and TV industry has grown substantially during this time, so the pool of older workers would not have been large enough to reach the additional 35,000 needed. However, a significant portion, perhaps three-quarters¹¹, could have come from retention of those already in the industry. The remainder would have had to be recruited from other industries with comparable skills, attracted to work in the film and TV industry by the pay, conditions and other attributes of film and television.

¹¹ The film and TV workforce grew from around 129,000 in 2002 (Cambridge Econometrics 2005, page 56) to 208,000 in 2021 (ONS 2022a).

Stocks and flows

The above estimates are “stock” estimates. In other words, they reflect the number of missing older workers at one moment in time – early 2022. What they do not capture is the full flow of older workers out of the industry over time. Twenty years ago, the industry had a youth-skewed age profile. Older workers had been leaving in the 1990s¹². They carried on leaving in the 2000s, then in the 2010s, and in the early 2020s. What we see in Tables 2 and 3 is the deficit of older workers as *it is now*, not the full number of experienced workers who have left the industry over the last thirty years¹³.

It has been argued that for various reasons the industry has historically found it convenient to take a “disposable”¹⁴ approach to the workforce and that it has not worked hard enough to retain people. However, with the impact of the pandemic and labour shortages brought about by the production boom, there is a strong and pressing case to adjust working practices to keep experienced workers in the industry.

The bigger picture: the UK's declining labour force

The focus of this paper is on retention of the film and TV workforce, but there is a larger picture, which is that the total number of economically active people in the UK has been falling since the beginning of 2020. “Total economically active” is the sum of people working and officially unemployed. The number of economically active people grew strongly – by 2.4 million – between January 2012 and February 2020. A trend-change then occurred, with the number falling by 655,000 (1.9%) between February 2020 and February 2022.

The numbers of economically active people are shown in Chart 3.

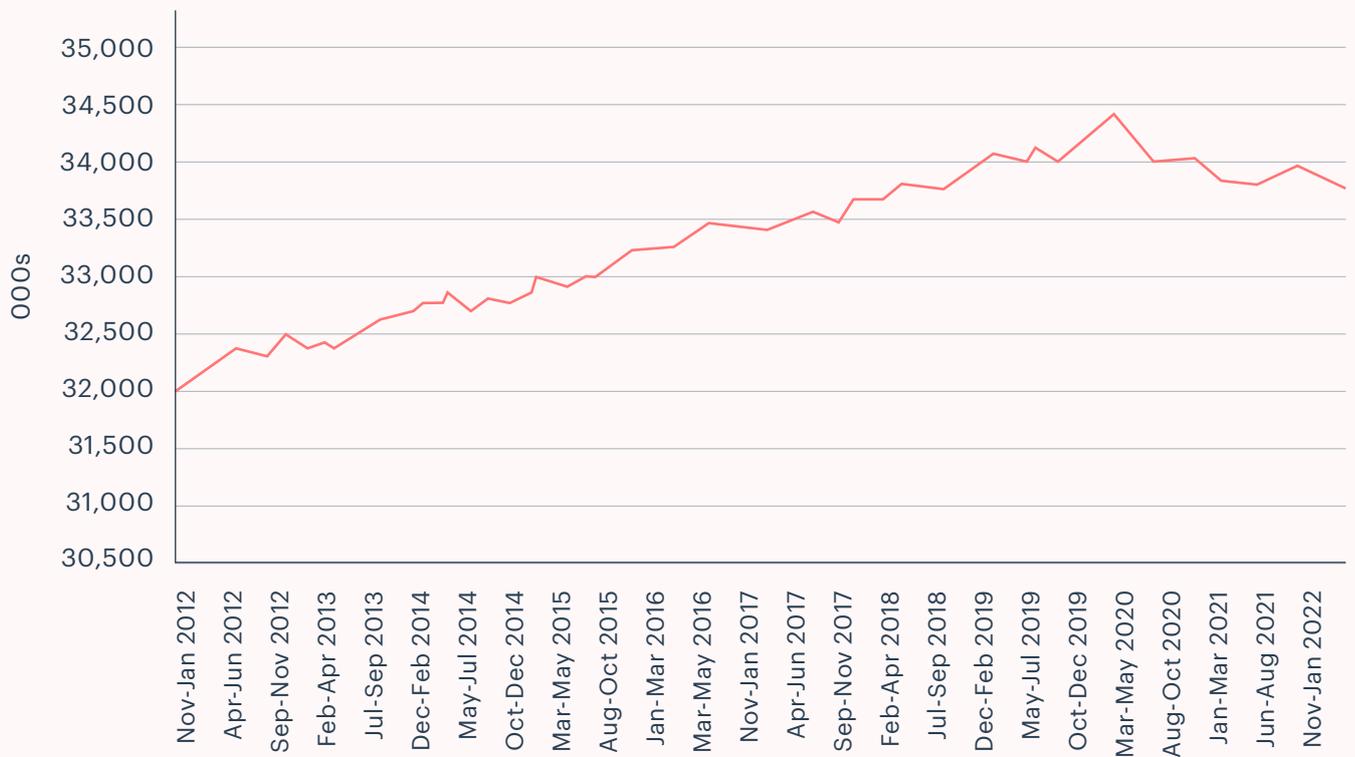
¹² See Dex et al 2000.

¹³ Neither does it take account of biases affecting the UK's total workforce. Advocates for the older population argue that there is too much attrition of older workers in all industries and that the percentage of over 50s in the total UK workforce should be higher than it currently is.

¹⁴ See, for example, Percival 2020, p 425; Richard Wallis and Christa van Raalte (forthcoming, 2022), ‘Britain's Got Talent? A critique of the ‘talent pipeline’ crisis in the UK's film and television industries’, *Media Industries* vol.8, iss.2.

Chart 3: UK Total Economically Active

Source: ONS Labour Force Survey



Untangling the reasons for the decline in the number of economically active people in the UK is beyond the scope of this short paper. However, potential reasons are discussed in the following BBC story, with contributions from the ONS, Resolution Foundation, Institute for Employment Studies (IES) and the Recruitment and Employment Federation:

<https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/business-60039923>

According to the IES, nearly three-fifths of the UK's "missing million"¹⁵ workers are aged 50+. Since February 2020, there have been particularly large falls in the number of self-employed men and part-time-employed women:

<https://www.employment-studies.co.uk/system/files/resources/files/IES%20briefing%20-%20Labour%20Market%20Statistics%20March%202022%20.pdf>

¹⁵ The IES is referring to the difference between the number now and the number that would have been active if the pre-2020 trendline had continued.

The Work Foundation has also studied this issue, highlighting the loss of older workers from the labour market. In its March 2022 commentary, they say:

“**Recent evidence from the ONS** shows that older workers can have different reasons for leaving work. While retirement remains the main motivation, nearly one in five (19%) workers aged 50-59 reported leaving work for stress or mental health reasons. Another 14% indicated wanting a change in lifestyle, and 13% stopped working because they did not feel valued in their job.

A substantial share of older workers who left their jobs during the Coronavirus crisis are not interested in re-joining the labour market, but two in five (39%) are. For these workers, flexibility in hours, the ability to work remotely, and fitting work flexibly around caring responsibilities will play an increasingly important role in encouraging them to look for work again. Additionally, workers aged 50-59 were more likely than their older counterparts to prefer a permanent, rather than a temporary role. All this goes to show that working conditions and job quality will play an increasingly important role in increasing labour market participation among older age groups.”¹⁶

For those aged 50+ who would consider returning to work, the priorities were:

A job that offers flexible working hours	36%
A job where I am able to work from home	18%
A job that fits around my caring responsibilities	16%
A job that offers permanent employment	12%

¹⁶ <https://www.lancaster.ac.uk/work-foundation/news/blog/supporting-inactive-older-workers-back-into-work-will-require-a-focus-on-job-quality>

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