**PODCAST 6: Welcoming and retaining working class colleagues**

Many people who work in film, and the arts more generally, were raised middle-class or even more privileged, and although many of them have good intentions and want to be inclusive of working class people, it is hard for anyone to know how to do this correctly and usefully without having the lived experience. In this podcast, I offer straight-forward advice and some simple, free and cheap takeaways on how to make working class people feel included and welcome.

First, I discuss the importance of having working class people in a range of roles at all levels, then I consider the recruitment process, finances, including transparent and fair payment, career development, flexible and other types of working, staff involvement in decision making, the digital divide, and staff relations.

The term ‘working-class’, groups many different experiences together, as I discuss in more depth in the first podcast of this series. Some of us were raised in poverty, others not, some of us were raised in towns, others in cities or rurally, some of us now have rather middle-class lifestyles in terms of finances and cultural capital, while others do not, some of us are white, others are BIPOC, some have disabilities, some are queer. Working-class people are far from a homogenous group.

It is, therefore, inadequate to tick a box or meet an agenda by having one token working-class person working in your organisation. Rather, a group of people with varied experience and knowledge are needed. This can be more comfortable for working class people, and in many ways, because pushing for working class inclusion is even harder work when being used as a mere token and without a support network in the workplace. There’s a lot of emotional labour involved in equality, diversity, and inclusion work. For more on this listen to the Broader Measures podcast.

A consideration of class will ultimately enrich the arts for all. If you need a more selfish reason for hiring us: listening to working-class people is better for business as it helps to avoid the dangerous groupthink approach, while attracting a broader audience. I discuss groupthink in the first podcast in this series, about how working class people are often excluded.

So, what approaches can you take to hire working class people? Transparent and fair staff recruitment is essential. This means reaching beyond existing nepotistic arts networks. Paid roles should not be given by one person over a drink with a friend down the pub. While that can sound like quite an extreme example, I am fully aware has happened many times – nepotism is, wrongly, at the centre of the film industry, and we must reach beyond known circles.

This means posting recruitment information in new places – and please note that by sharing recruitment information widely you can avoid discrimination claims, which can happen if a job ad is posted in only one place and that place is, for example, accessed only by a particular demographic, such as people of a certain age. While working class people have no right to claim discrimination, because we are completely missed out of the protected characteristics of the 2010 Equality Act, organisations must do better than this and ensure that working class people are supported to apply for a breadth of jobs. Advertise work offline as well as on, and not just in typically middle-class arty locations.

Workplaces often talk about a culture fit when hiring, but that’s bad practice for EDI: much better is a culture add, making your team more diverse, rather than expecting employees to fit the mould.

Why not include those with no experience, allowing them to train and gain new skills and knowledge on the job? Offer mentoring, freely and easily to those within and outside of your organisation. This mentoring can be two-way.

Please keep remembering that our education and experience are based on privilege and various types of capital we have access to: economic, social, cultural. This means there are people out there who would be outstanding in post, but will never get the chance because they couldn’t afford the educational requirements and/or the – often unpaid – work experience you’re covertly requiring on your job ad.

There are many other ways to recruit more inclusively. It’s important to ask if a traditional CV is needed for the role you’re advertising. Standard CVs are unfair on those who have had career gaps, perhaps because of parenting and caring responsibilities or because of health matters. They also don’t cover the whole extent of skills and experiences people have. A working class woman may have taken a decade or so out of the workplace because her wages would not cover the cost of childcare. And in those ten years outside of paid work, she’s been managing a household, delegating, organising the diaries of multiple family members, and so much more.

One fairer solution to the traditional CV is four or five questions with word limited responses, where applicants are encouraged to draw on experience from the world of work and far beyond. Some roles in the screen industries offer applicants the chance to submit a video application, which can be great for those who are much better at verbal rather than written communication, but this relies on having a phone or camera, and there are significant biases around race and accent when someone is seen and heard. Trying to avoid bias is a reason many CVs are sifted with names removed. Remember that people hire in their own likeness, so a middle-class white hiring committee is significantly more likely to hire yet another middle-class white person. Truly diverse recruitment teams are essential.

Stepping back, please note that applications should only ask what is needed and not require lists of qualifications and suchlike just for the sake of it. This is both unfair on those who don’t have the qualifications and is also fiddly, and time-consuming to fill in.

It is also important to state clearly from the outset how long the application should take so that the applicant can set adequate time aside. I recall an application for a film role telling me the whole thing would take 30 minutes maximum before I even clicked on the form. I thought that was good practice, helping me to manage my time, but then found it to be the opposite: the form had numerous questions, some requiring hundreds of words as a response, and – 90 minutes into it, and as a fast thinker and fast typer – I contacted the organisation to let them know that stating it would take 30 minutes was incorrect and is especially unfair to those who put a set amount of time aside and whose confidence will be knocked if they believe others are getting through the answers in 30 minutes, which no one ever could.

That kind of thing can stop someone mid-application. The organisation was brilliant and changed it immediately, making the process fairer from that point.

Please know that it is time consuming to be poor. Poverty often means shopping around, taking on multiple tasks rather than paying to outsource them, and so on, so when people in poverty can do something quickly, it’s such a relief.

Because the digital divide exists, it is important that someone can apply without having their own device and data so you can list, for example, libraries in your town or city and beyond with free internet access alongside their opening hours, so more people can apply. There is often a friendly face in local libraries who can lend a hand if the applicant needs help with digital literacy or has more general questions.

While many job adverts include an email address as an informal contact for potential applicants with queries, this can cause a divide twofold: it is usually those with more confidence and more privilege who do reach out informally, others can be nervous about wasting peoples’ time or not know how such a reach out is done in terms of formalities, and of course, the email reach out is only for those who have email access. Could you, in addition to email, include a phone number or drop in office hours for applicants stating a few different time slots when you can be available, both within and beyond standard 9-5 hours is the most fair. A friendly note saying all enquiries welcome, that they are informal, and won’t be used to judge the application process would also help.

The job advert should, of course, always clearly state salary so that no one feels awkward asking about it and so that people are not being paid different amounts for the same role. Salary negotiation is too often about confidence rather than brilliance.

Indeed there always needs to be transparency about payment, including who receives it. Many cinemas and film festivals don’t pay all of their guest speakers, for example, and some have no policy or transparency about who receives payment and why.

Some choose to offer transport and/or accommodation in lieu of payment for work. And make no mistake that being a guest speaker and suchlike is work, and they should be paid, unless the speaker declines payment because they are, for example, already salaried elsewhere and want the money to go to the poorly funded festival or suchlike.

It is especially important to offer remuneration to working-class people, Black, Indigenous, and People of Colour, people with disabilities, and others who are more likely to be disadvantaged by capitalist systems.

Arts venues and organisations need to work *with*people, rather than have people work *for*them, too often for free. I want to see more mutuality and reciprocity in film and the arts. ‘Come and showcase yourself and your work’, people are too often told, but for every minute they work for you for free, that’s a minute they are not working elsewhere for payment. And everyone needs to eat.

Do you offer, for example, paid internships and volunteering roles for long-term unemployed people and stay-at-home mothers who want to gain skills and confidence and get back into paid employment? Sometimes these are available with government funding so it’s worthwhile investigating.

There should be career development for all, both employees in every role and freelancers, if you work with them often. This career development should include a fair and transparent allocation of ‘perks’ and opportunities to network and travel for those who want them, such as attending film festivals and conferences, and of course to professional development and training, which should be paid for by the organisation and happen within work time. It should never be the case that the people at the top of the organisation’s hierarchy are the ones who always travel, network, and take courses, therefore making the gulf between colleagues even larger rather than narrowing this through opportunities, training, and payment.

However, please don’t try to correct inequalities in opportunities by imposing work travel on everyone. Ask your staff. Some with parenting and caring responsibilities, especially single parents to young children, or colleagues who are only children and have elderly parents to care for, as well as colleagues with disabilities, will often have to make more sacrifices in their private lives to travel for work.

Merit is meaningless in a society so deeply entrenched with privilege so why not shatter the ‘class ceiling’ and the class pay gap?

If people from a working class and poverty background do make it to leadership roles, they may have imposter syndrome because their job and their opportunities now are so different to where they were led to believe they would end up. I’m always astonished how many working class people have imposter syndrome, which is an inability to believe that your success is deserved and achieved through your effort and skills. To the working class people listening to this: you made it despite your background, not because of it. You deserve career success.

However, I do believe that more horizontal structures are needed in arts organisations. One or two very privileged people at the top can make or break the careers of others and too much depends on nepotism and pre-existing networks. Freelancers sometimes have to keep certain people sweet at all costs. These privileged key players not only have the benefit of including their friends and excluding those who don’t meet their agenda but they also set the tone of publicly-funded festivals and events. Publicly-funded events do not just need to *appear* to be inclusive, but they need to actually be inclusive, in front of and behind the scenes.

Ask yourself: how comfortable are you making the lives of your employees and colleagues? This incorporates a range of things including types of working, and the atmosphere in work.

It is important to offer flexible and hybrid working in all instances. Something very noticeable since Covid lockdowns is that the least well paid people are often on site and the well paid ones are working from home. While it’s clear that a cleaner, cafe worker, or projectionist need to be on site to complete most of their work, there are many other roles that can be hybrid and flexibility could be available for all.

A cleaner may need to be on site for most of their work, aside from things such as placing product orders, but those working hours could be flexible to fit in around other things. Childcare, and indeed caring work in general – whether paid or unpaid – has a gender imbalance with women taking on the majority of the labour. This becomes even more difficult for working class women who often have to find part-time jobs within school hours because they cannot afford to pay for childminders or wraparound care. Is there a way that you can make their lives easier by advertising a whole range of jobs within school hours, for example? Is there then an option to make those hours up to full time by working a few evenings a week from home once the kids are in bed, if they so wish? Perhaps the home-based tasks are different to the in-person ones: cleaning within school hours and admin work, including ordering supplies, on an evening.

Of course the best way to deal with working hours and styles is to ask your colleagues, in post and at interview, what work would best suit them as individuals. If you can make their requests work, then do it. You should get a lower turnover of staff if you’re making their lives comfortable in a way that many other organisations don’t.

What about things your employees need for work, like clothes? If their day to day role is in a uniform or very casual clothing, then can you make outfits available for them if they need to attend a more formal event? Clothing is often very classed, so don’t attach value judgements to colleagues’ style.

Another way to show respect for all colleagues is to make sure they are all well-informed about the organisation, that they know where to go to seek help or information, that they have a say in how things are run, and they are always kept informed of changes that will impact them. Often, people in management and office-based roles are kept in the loop and asked their opinion about things that may impact cleaners and bar staff significantly more, while those most impacted only find out after decisions have been made.

This means taking into consideration work meetings: who is typically invited? Do meetings always happen outside of some staff members’ working hours? Are all staff given the time and pay to attend?

It also means considering the digital divide in the workplace: do you communicate all key decisions via email? Which colleagues have a work-supplied device and data to access this and which colleagues are expected to use their own device and data – if they have these things at all – and access the information in their own time? Again, the more senior and privileged a colleague is, the more likely they are to have been given a work device.

It’s important to have a culture of inclusion for all staff members as well as all audiences. What would happen to an employee who used a term such as ‘chav’ in a conversation? Would they be challenged? Asked not to use that term? Receive training? Or would it go unnoticed by all or most people in your organisation? I discuss micro-aggressions, banter and harassment in the free measures podcast, so please head over there for more information.

There is frequently the assumption in spaces dominated by middle class people that everyone there had a background, an upbringing very similar to their own. Indeed, I recall someone I have worked with speaking to me about Old Etonians and how they aren’t like us as we are, and I quote, ‘just normal’. When I asked what ‘just normal’ meant to them, the person – in a management role – told me we all have ‘normal middle class backgrounds’. When I told that person my background was working class and one of poverty they still tried to brush aside any differences, until I told them that there were times as a child when we couldn’t afford to eat. The person recoiled. The message hit home. I give this example as I’ve been part of such conversations far too many times in places of work, where middle-class people with high-paying jobs and whose parents are GPs, professors, lawyers and suchlike try to group my lived experience of a childhood in poverty raised by a single mother who worked as a cleaner and claimed benefits, with theirs as ‘normal’ and unlike the childhoods of the very rich. To me, those people claiming modest backgrounds were raised in very wealthy families with childhoods worlds’ away from my own. Most working class people I’ve spoken to, who work in middle-class environments, have experienced this too.

Remember we cannot make assumptions: people may pass as a different class – there is certainly pressure on working class people to do so in middle class spaces – and we have to spend more time listening to those with different lived experiences rather than imposing what we think these experiences are.

Think about who your patrons and suchlike are. Having a royal in such a role gives out a very strong message about your organisation’s stance on the class system. Think about the use of OBE, MBE, and so on by wealthy, white board members, and the classist and colonial messages these send.

If your working class colleagues cannot feel comfortable, you have no chance of sustaining working class audiences.

Leadership expert, Mike Robbins wrote about bringing our whole selves to work. This means that we don’t have to hide who we are. If colleagues are chatting on a Monday morning about their weekend, for example, a man can freely discuss his time with his husband just as a heterosexual woman can. This would also mean that working class colleagues can talk about who they are and where they are from without judgement from others or having to try to pass as middle class.

The benefits of being open at work often are seen both in staff wellbeing and in the business. People who don’t have to hide who they are or worry about working in a discriminatory or uncomfortable environment are more productive.

The flip side of this, however, is that people being open about who they are can result in those with protected characteristics and other disadvantaged identities being relied upon to undertake the emotional labour of equality, diversity and inclusion, and teaching other colleagues. That’s not always fair.

Important for everything staff-related, is that working-class people can raise issues and ideas with non-working class colleagues at all levels in the organisation and that they will always be listened to and treated with respect. It also means those colleagues with the power to effect change should do all they can to make the environment comfortable for all.

To conclude, a key take away with staffing is that many working class people must be present in an organisation, at all levels, and they should be listened to, in order to make the culture better for employees, which will, in turn, positively impact on audiences.

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