



The “Wellbeing Initiative” – Freelance journalists, health and trade union support

**The results and recommendations from a survey
carried out by a working group of
the National Union of Journalists
Freelance Industrial Council**

November 2004

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1. Summary and recommendations

GROUNDBREAKING research carried out by the National Union of Journalists into freelance “wellbeing” has revealed concerns relating to journalists’ physical and mental health. For a minority of the union’s freelance members, work-related pressures are leading to significant health problems. However, there is also evidence that many individual freelance journalists are conscious of health issues and that they attempt to take steps to ameliorate the risks.

In summary, therefore, it could be said that freelance wellbeing is a “cause for concern” rather than an immediate “problem”.

There is evidence too that, without further attention and monitoring, the situation could become more serious. Particular concerns identified by this research include:

1. the role, expectations of and contact with the National Union of Journalists;
2. the working relationships between (commissioning) editors and freelance journalists;
3. pay and isolation.

In May 2004, the NUJ’s Freelance Council commissioned a Working Group to investigate and assess the effects and implications of issues such as isolation, alcohol use, diet and health. The research followed a passionate debate on these topics at the freelance sector conference during the union’s Annual Delegate Meeting in Liverpool in March 2004.

In line with current wider trade union appreciation of potential problems facing individuals working alone, the group was instructed to establish whether these issues were affecting freelance journalists and, if they were, to what degree. Recommendations for measures that the Union could consider to improve working conditions and circumstances, with costings, were also requested.

More than 330 respondents to a survey sent to members of the NUJ’s freelance sector in July 2004 contributed an impressive 30,000 words of anecdotal evidence, making the study one of the most illuminating ever produced by the union.

Data analysis has revealed some fascinating trends – especially regarding the ages, sex and family commitments of the respondents.

Perhaps most significantly, pride in the quality of work created as much professional satisfaction for freelancers as being paid. However, poor rates and unnecessary delays in payment remain highly significant and a noted cause of poor health and dissatisfaction for many respondents.

The narrative comments revealed some major misconceptions about the size of the NUJ, its staffing and its ability to communicate effectively with individual members. They also showed that there are serious difficulties in the relationships between staffers, especially editors and commissioning editors, and freelancers.

RECOMMENDATIONS

1. Resources and guidance covering issues of wellbeing for freelance journalists should be produced and made available online, ideally within the next few months. These should include the many suggestions put forward by respondents to the survey.

These resources should be published on a section of the NUJ website dedicated to freelance matters, and including, for example, the *Freelance Fees Guide* and the *Fact Pack* for freelancers. (The working group also understands that some FIC members are keen that tax guidance should also be produced and published on this part of the website and endorses this suggestion. Information produced by the NUJ and its industrial councils covering such topics as bullying and suicide should also be included here.)

2. A member of the Freelance Industrial Council should be selected to supervise and monitor online freelance resources, which should include wellbeing. This individual should also work with the editors of *The Journalist* and *The Freelance* and the NUJ website to ensure that such concerns receive regular attention, and to promote wellbeing as a trade union issue.

3. Advertisements should regularly be placed in *The Journalist* and *The Freelance* to promote the online resources.
4. A similar survey should be undertaken in about four years' time to monitor the wellbeing of freelance journalists and review whether further action should, at that time, be required.
5. The National Executive Committee should seriously consider establishing a formal health and safety council with a remit that includes monitoring the wellbeing and mental health of all members.

• **The NUJ clearly needs to do more – and quickly – to correct misconceptions of its size and abilities. Younger members, especially, have a tendency to see the NUJ as being both better staffed and more proactive than it can be, providing services rather than being the collective, self-help organisation it necessarily is. It is not, therefore, surprising that older members with more experience of the trade union movement value the union more. There appears to be a need to education their younger colleagues, the 40s and under-40s, about the relevance, purpose and benefits of trade unions and trade union membership.**

The Wellbeing Initiative working group therefore suggests that, as its remit did not extend to staff journalists, the NUJ's National Executive Committee should seriously consider producing a *Joining Pack* for every new member, explaining the union's organisational structure, policy-making procedures, branch and chapel network, officers, the roles and responsibilities of the industrial councils, ethics council, black and disabled members councils. Work in the Republic of Ireland, Scotland, Wales and in continental Europe should also be explained, as should the NUJ's links with other unions, reciprocal memberships, and so on. This information should also be published on a dedicated section of the NUJ website. When produced, copies should also be sent to all existing members.

The Working Group felt that this approach should also encourage participation, reminding new members that while the NUJ may be a "service business", it is also a trade union based on the principles of collective self-help. Such a pack should also strongly remind recruits that the union is "us" and that it is what each of us wants it to be and tries to make it, through the time and energies we contribute to promote our collective strengths.

Freelance activism

This group recommends that each branch should establish a "freelance officer" post, electing an individual freelance each year to co-ordinate local liaison with and activities for freelance members. Such officers would also be the principal contacts and liaison points with and for each constituency's elected member of the Freelance Industrial Council.

Freelances are also recommended to establish local "forums", with the support of branches and chapels, and, ideally, facilitated and supported by these bodies.

As the issues identified in this survey related to both work and personal life, these forums should seek to meet both business and social needs. These forums should provide opportunities for face-to-face meetings, but function as the members wish, in order to best meet their needs. They could be "freelance chapels", concentrating on union matters and business. Alternatively, they could be more social, providing opportunities for freelances to meet for lunch or in the evenings, to overcome any potential problems of isolation. Ideally, they would be both.

Several e-mail networks have already been established for professional interest groups, such as sub-editors, writers and editors of non-fiction books for children, broadcasters and music writers. These are supported by the Freelance Industrial Council. Other similar e-networks should be encouraged, for those who share professional interests and/or live and work geographically close to one another. ("Mining" the NUJ's database to do this should not be difficult, despite the constraints of data protection legislation.)

The future

Survey respondents have indicated that monitoring wellbeing should be a continuing obligation for the NUJ, in the broader context of the quality of life for members and the professional regard for freelance journalists.

The issue should be regularly discussed and, following the publication of appropriate resources on the NUJ website, the working group recommends that a similar survey is carried out in 2008 or 2009.

Guidelines for editors, commissioning editors and assignment editors should be written, based on the narrative comments from respondents. These should be circulated to staff members. The group recommends that these should also be circulated more widely – to members of organisations such as the Society of Editors and the British Association of Industrial Editors, the Newspaper Society and similar bodies.

An opportunity should be provided at the 2005 Annual Delegate Meeting for staff editors and freelances to discuss these guidelines.

Dissemination

The working group agreed that copies of this report would be provided for each delegate at the conference organised for freelances in Manchester in November 2004, each branch and the NUJ's officers and industrial and other councils. It also felt that the findings were so significant that they should be brought to the attention of the president, vice president, general secretary and National Executive Council.

The Working Group would also work to publicise the findings in *The Journalist*, *The Freelance*, the media press and to other trade unions.

2. The process

JOURNALISM has had a reputation for being an hard-bitten profession, where machismo rules and where heavy drinking and heavy smoking are a way of life. Recent years have, however, seen this stereotype challenged – by women journalists pointing out the inherent sexism and by men starting to appreciate that their own health was suffering.

Most of us know that the old stereotype is no longer true and journalists are as diverse a group as any, representing the entire range of different ways of life, and that all of us are – after all – only human. Should we need reminding of this, we should note that post-traumatic stress disorder merited an entire chapter in *Live News – A Survival Guide for Journalists*, published by the International Federation of Journalists¹.

For those working independently and from home, there are many potential factors that can affect general wellbeing and, more specifically, mental health.

These concerns were raised at the freelance sector conference at the NUJ's 2004 Annual Delegate Meeting in Liverpool. Andrew Bibby, secretary of the Calderdale branch, had drafted brief notes caught the mood of the moment, sparking a discussion that was lively and passionate.

Andrew pointed out that stress was now widely viewed by trade unions as a legitimate and important occupational health and safety issue. He suggested that the agenda needed to be widened, to encompass other work-related issues affecting mental health and wellbeing. These included such concerns as depression, isolation, insecurity and lack of self-esteem, the difficulty of establishing and maintaining an appropriate work/life balance, "workaholism", and the abuse of alcohol and other drugs. Freelance members, because of the inherent nature of their way of working, could be particularly at risk.

"I suspect," wrote Andrew Bibby, "that all freelances have their fair share of bite-the-carpet days, but there is a tacit understanding that we don't mention this – that we present ourselves as bright and breezy, always upbeat, always busy, but always ready to squeeze in another commission. An old-fashioned macho attitude seems to apply, and is internalised – the idea that you shouldn't be in journalism if you can't hack it.

"But the negative consequences which freelances can face actually come from the way in which our industry is structured, and in particular its reliance on using freelance workers for whom publishers offer no long-term commitment, career progression or employment rights. In other words, these are issues which need to be tackled collectively; they are not simply individual problems which individuals have to sort out for themselves."

The freelances at the ADM responded with a range of comments, suggestions, contributions and questions.

1. *Live News – A Survival Guide for Journalists*, published by the International Federation of Journalists, March 2003, www.ifj.org

Some admitted having perpetual battles to balance their work and personal lives and to feel in control of their work and their careers. For example, how often was weekend working by choice or how often from necessity? How did this tie in with family life and commitments?

Working at home alone could clearly lead to feelings of isolation, but how many freelancers felt that this was a major concern? Were men in a different situation to women?

Depression was also seen as a potential problem, with some members present admitting that they had faced periods of clinical depression. But how many freelance journalists were affected, and what were the causes? To what extent could the way in which the media industry is now structured, with its heavy dependence on freelance contributions but a lack of close contact with commissioning editors, be a factor here?

How many freelancers resorted to excessive reliance on alcohol or on other drugs? Did the NUJ have freelance members with eating disorders?

Members unanimously agreed that more work was urgently needed to identify the extent to which these issues of mental health and wellbeing were affecting freelancers.

The newly-elected Freelance Industrial Council responded at its first meeting after the ADM by commissioning a Working Group to undertake research to identify possible concerns, to analyse the responses, to recommend action necessary and to produce a comprehensive report for the conference for freelancers planned for Manchester in November 2004. That group comprised FIC vice-chair Adam Christie, FIC member Jenny Vaughan, Andrew Bibby and freelance journalist Jean Leston from Surrey, who has a background in market research.

Research

Most of the time and energies of this Wellbeing Initiative Working Group were taken in devising and then analysing a questionnaire that was circulated – with *The Journalist* and *The Freelance* in June and July 2004 – to 8,500 members of the NUJ registered with the freelance sector.

Most of the questions were “closed” but four encouraged respondents to write in “open” answers. Also, most of an A4 page was provided for anecdotal evidence and narrative comments about life and work as freelancers. Contributions by e-mail were also invited.

The group also quickly realised that the NUJ’s freelancers were not the only trade unionists in 2004 to appreciate that living and working in isolation could present particular problems – and that others such as the TUC itself had been working with the National Association of Homeworkers on such issues. (These organisations, and others, were consulted informally. Much of the material they generously contributed should be included in the online resources that are proposed.)

The response rate, greater than is typical for a postal survey, and the time spent providing narrative contributions show that freelancers really do care about wellbeing.

Many respondents said they were pleased the work was being done. One joy of canvassing journalists was the eloquence of the contributions, a factor that meant there could be little ambiguity in the results: freelancers have spoken!

Most of the 30,000 words of responses were transcribed. The raw data was analysed by a professional statistician, with cross-referencing to allow findings to be correlated by age, sex, time spent freelancing and so on. The Working Group then used both the narrative responses and the data to draw up the recommendations presented in this report.

Findings

This study has been one of the most comprehensive pieces of research carried out within the National Union of Journalists, challenging misplaced – and unsubstantiated – assumptions about the reasons why individuals become freelancers and the satisfaction that can be gained from working as a freelance journalist.

Professional pride and satisfaction in a job well done are, for many freelancers, the most important factors in

reinforcing their feelings of self-esteem. Professional standards set by freelancers are exceedingly high. But the working group emphasises that this does not mean that payment for work done is considered unimportant, or that editors should use this as an excuse for paying poorly or slowly.

The survey also revealed serious, and worrying, flaws in the way that staff editors and commissioning editors treat freelancers.

Freelancers are frequently the most valuable and flexible resources available to the media industry; that this was not appreciated by executives, editors, commissioning editors and assignment editors indicated that media organisations – and the NUJ – should put appropriate education programmes into place, quickly.

Age, experience and children

The women who responded were slightly younger on average than the men; being aged 44 rather than 49. The questionnaire also revealed clearly that, on average, freelance journalists were older than the staff colleagues commissioning their work.

The findings also showed that freelancing is predominantly an urban profession, especially for singles and women. Men, the data revealed, were more likely to have partners, and children, than the women.

Surprisingly few had children at home, but that may be a reflection of the ages of respondents. Of the women with children under five, 86 percent said they chose to go freelance because of their offspring. Women, singles and the under-30s were far less likely to have other adults around during the working day, directly relating to increased feelings of isolation. Actions to tackle this must, therefore, target these groups, especially as twice as many singles than those with partners reported *often* drinking or smoking too much and these groups were also those which reported feeling dependent on alcohol or tobacco.

Income and money worries

Although the questionnaire did not ask directly how much individuals are earning, incomes were clearly insufficient in many cases. Over a half of freelancers surveyed said that they had “some” or “a lot of” money worries. This anxiety was more pronounced among younger freelancers, those who were single, and those who did not have previous staff experience. Two-thirds said that freelancing often or sometimes contributed to their money worries.

There is a correlation between those who reported many money worries and those who identified themselves as drinking or smoking too much.

Health and work

Work matters vary according to experience and where freelancers live, with those with the least experience doing most “on spec” and being city dwellers. Singles did the most shifts. Working at weekends was a necessity rather than a choice for many. Women with children and singles said they had more problems separating work and home life, especially as feeling in control of work was seen as one of the biggest benefits of freelancers. The questionnaire also revealed that freelancers also “go with the flow”; they are not planners.

Mental health is more of a concern than physical health. There was a clear call for online resources to provide links to organisations such as Mind, Alcohol Concern and other mental health organisations.

Experience and confidence

These findings may well surprise editors, and many members of the NUJ. They show that freelancers on average have more journalistic experience than those for whom they work. The idea that freelancers are amateurs or failed staffers is clearly very far from the mark.

Most freelancers have deliberately chosen this way working, for the independence it offers. However, the situation may be different for younger members, the under-30s, who may have begun freelancing to try to establish themselves in the industry.

The resulting picture is one of a highly professional group of journalists who care deeply about the quality of the work they produce, and who plan to remain freelance for the foreseeable future. Few are actively considering moving to staff jobs.

However, there was also a clearly articulated demand to be treated with more respect. Relations with editors are clearly a major problem. Freelances are also aware that pride in their work leaves them vulnerable to financial exploitation: Greater self-discipline in working to a brief and not over-performing are perhaps necessary, but many saw this as problematic in terms of obtaining repeat work.

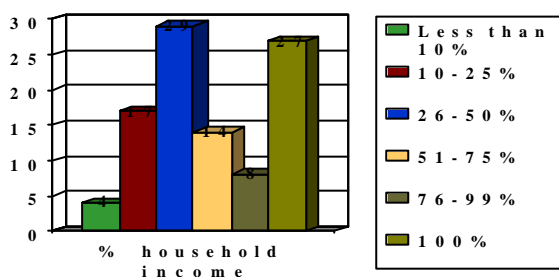
On balance, freelances seem content with their working life "We may be poor, but we're happy," said one respondent. Those with previous staff experience also pointed out the drawbacks and stresses of staff journalism, in comparison with freelance life. Nevertheless, a significant minority did report problems, with more than half reporting that they "sometimes" or "often" suffered from depression.

The data analysed

1. GENERAL DEMOGRAPHICS

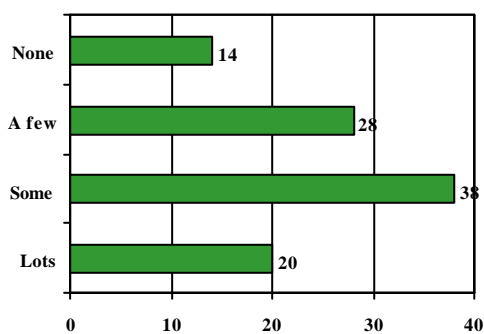
- Even split male/female
- An ageing membership (average = 46 yrs)
- Majority (52%) are city-based
- Majority (69%) are partnered
- Only 29% have young kids at home
 - high percentage under 5s (42%)
 - having kids an important reason for going freelance among women
 - 3% are single parents (vs 6% England/Wales)

2. FREELANCE INCOME



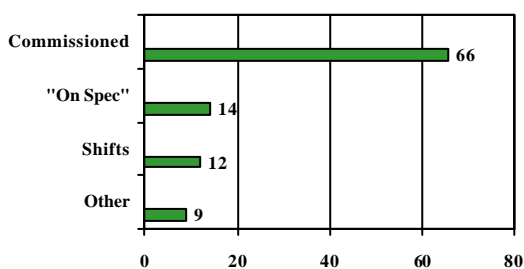
- Average = 60% household income
 - 16% variation between men/women
 - 6% variation between singles/partnered
- Household income equally split between partners
 - suggests one freelancing income isn't enough to live on
- Majority (73%) have another income coming into household

3. MONEY WORRIES



- 64% say freelancing often/sometimes contributes to money worries
- Majority (58%) have some/lots money worries
 - most pronounced among under 30s, singles, sole income, those without staff experience

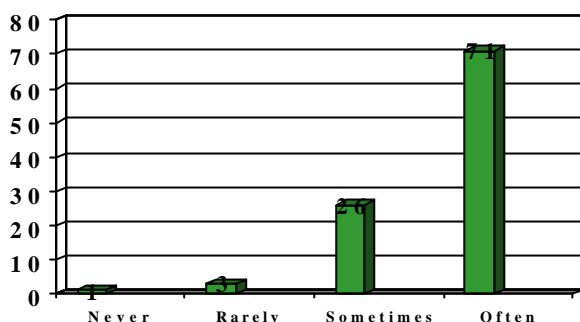
4. TYPES OF WORK



- Commissions by far the most important
 - good editor relationships therefore essential
- "On specs" most prevalent among those getting started
- Shift working highest among urbanites and singles
 - antisocial hours not family friendly
- Other work includes PR, newsletters, websites

5. FREELANCE FACTS AND FIGURES

Freelance enjoyment



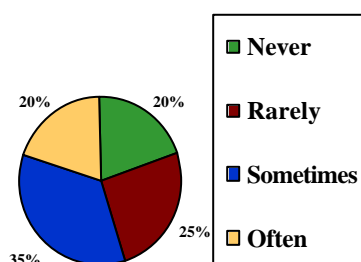
- We are very experienced
 - 11 years' average freelance experience
 - 68% have worked previously as staffers (also with 11 years average experience)
 - only 25% have always been freelance
- We have chosen to be freelance (70%)
- We enjoy being freelance (97%)
- We have few regrets (64%)
- We enjoy variety (89%)
- We write about what interests us (61%)

6. CAREER ISSUES

- We have a long term commitment to freelancing
 - 86% expect to be doing it in five years time
 - only a minority (14%) actively seeking to leave freelancing
 - only 6% seeking to leave journalism altogether
- Only 30% would definitely take a staff job
 - part time working of greatest interest
- Biggest regret (56%) lack of career progression in freelancing
- 74% don't have a career plan
 - inherent unpredictability of freelancing?

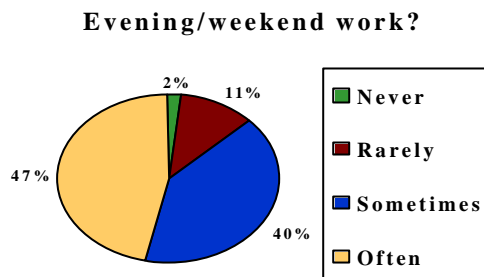
7. WORKING FROM HOME

Is isolation a problem?



- 69% of time (average) spent working from home
 - highest among women, most experienced freelancers
- Only a minority (18%) have an outside office
- Half have other adults around
- 55% admit that isolation is a problem
 - much worse for women, under 30s, singles

8. WORK/LIFE BALANCE

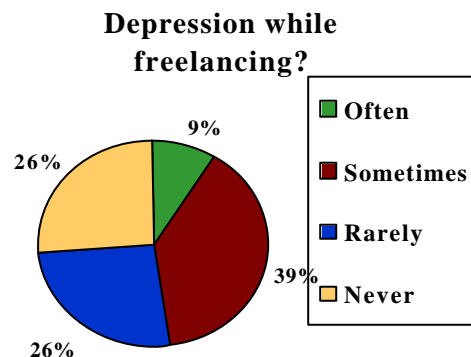


- Evening/weekend working a fact of freelance life (87%)
 - the downside of having flexibility
- But this is mostly by choice (68%)
 - overwork plus deadline pressures are significant factors
- Even so, freelancing doesn't take over your life
 - 75% adequately separate work/home life
- Majority (83%) also feel in control of their working time

9. PHYSICAL HEALTH

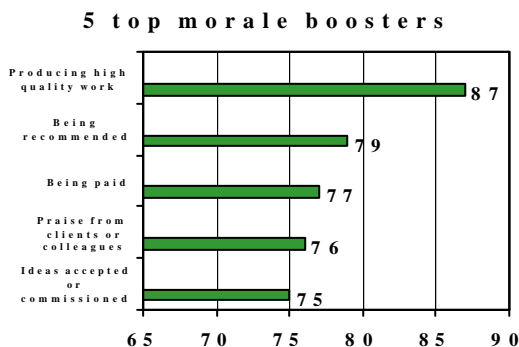
- Freelancers are physically healthy
 - 85%+ rate health good to OK, get exercise, eat well and get enough sleep
- 34% admit smoking or drinking too much
 - more prevalent among singles, those with money worries
 - freelancing a contributing cause (57%)
- 35% feel dependent often/sometimes on alcohol, tobacco, coffee/tea, medications or other “substances”
 - more likely to be caffeine or biscuits than anything serious

10. MENTAL HEALTH



- **Depression is a significant issue**
 - 51% have experienced often/sometimes as staffer, 48% as freelance
 - most pronounced among singles, under 30s
 - lack of work is the leading cause
 - compares with 10% prevalence in UK (*Mind*)
- **We do something about it**
 - over 75% with depression have sought medical help or counselling, 52% have been on anti-depressants

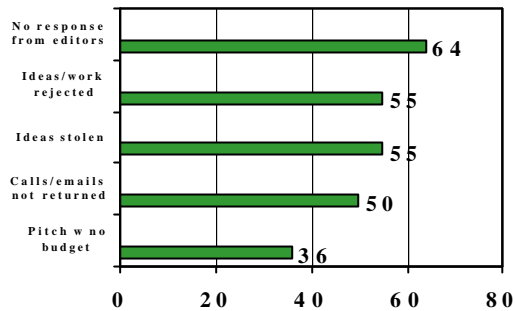
11. IMPROVING MORALE



- We need lots of morale boosting as loss of self-esteem is a common problem
 - 61% suffer often or sometimes
 - particularly a problem for women, singles, under 30s
- We are motivated far more by professionalism than financial concerns
- Other important morale boosters are having lots of work, respect/authority, getting positive feedback

12. UNDERMINING MORALE

5 worst morale deflators



- Bad behavior from editors makes our lives a misery
 - women find no response, not having calls/emails returned particularly hard (*sexism?*)
 - older freelances most likely to dislike having ideas/work rejected (*ageism?*)
- NUJ only significant to oldest members (46 years+)
 - lack of contact with chapels
 - poor contact with branches/other parts of union
- Not earning enough money a major gripe

13. WHAT EDITORS SHOULD KNOW

- We're highly experienced professionals
- We have chosen to be freelance and enjoy it
- We are in it for the long term
- Producing high quality work is what matters most to us
- We expect fair payment for the job, bearing in mind our extra overheads
 - increase our rates
 - pay promptly
- We appreciate, and want to build, good editor relationships
 - return our phone calls/emails
 - respond to our ideas
 - tell us when we've done a good job
 - respect our copyright
- We would like more opportunities to come together
 - trade forums/seminars

14. WHAT WE LOVE

- Having freedom and flexibility
- Being our own boss
- Having control over our work
- No office politics
- No commuting
- Having a richer, fuller life
- Working around children or other commitments/interests
- Having greater variety/opportunity in what we write about

15. WHAT WE HATE

- Poor treatment by editors and staffers
- Low pay/no rate increases
- Isolation and loneliness
- More domestic responsibilities—because we're at home
- Low status
- Financial insecurity/"feast or famine"
- No sick leave/pension/healthcare provided
- Constantly pitching new ideas/"reinventing the wheel"
- No career path
- No training
- Computer problems

16. HOW WE COPE

- Business skills and organisation
 - define clear work space and time
 - set targets/earning levels
 - put a price on your time (and stick to it!)
 - keep on top of filing, archiving, accounts
 - don't work for idiots
 - learn to say no
- Work/life balance
 - take time off
 - cultivate outside interests
 - get plenty of exercise
 - meet with other freelancers
- Positive thinking
 - don't take rejection personally
 - do work you enjoy
 - be proud and value yourself
 - keep remembering all those bad things as a staffer

17. WHAT YOU SAID YOU WANTED

- Political priorities
 - better rates (collective negotiation, anti-low pay campaign, stamp out payment on publication, more detailed rates data)
 - more rights (chapters to include freelancers when negotiating rates, sickness and holiday benefits)
 - editor education (publication of findings, NUJ-sponsored booklet, events)
- Professional support
 - cheap courses, including online (copyright, tax/business issues, pitching ideas, dealing with desks, negotiation, keeping up with computing technology)
 - professional service referrals/recommendations/discounts (accountants, legal services, insurance, mortgages, pensions, computer support, life coaches)
 - bigger *Freelance*
 - mentoring
- Networking
 - online network—"a coffee machine in cyberspace" with chat-room/contact board
 - more "positive events" at local branch level, not just in evenings

18. THE WAY FORWARD?

- Raise findings/ issues within NUJ
- External reporting within TU movt and outside
- Maintain initiatives on pay, copyright
- Keep the wellbeing issue alive
- Encourage concern for staff wellbeing too
- Two particular focuses:
 - Relations with commissioning editors – ADM workshop session, guide
 - Overcoming isolation – "freelance forums" – informal structures/networks
- Professional support and self-help – resources on freelance section of www.nuj.org.uk

Narrative responses

1. The NUJ

PERHAPS the most damning comment in the narrative responses came in one line: "I have never had contact with the NUJ."

Another wrote: (There is) "no support from the NUJ that I've heard about that would help".

A third said: "There was no active local branch when I first joined the NUJ, so as an author and a journalist, I joined the book branch. It would be nice to be asked to local NUJ meetings/events as a freelance.

"I think local branches *should actively reach out to all* NUJ members in their areas and invite their participation," that member said, adding their own italics.

"Other than London Freelance Branch's excellent newsletter and the NUJ mag, I have no contact with the union," said a fourth. "This is despite being a former branch secretary. I have tried two branches; both were useless and made no contact after my approach."

A fifth wrote: "I sometimes question my NUJ membership. Every e-mail I receive seems to refer to a staffer strike and has a request to help, yet I never receive anything by e-mail that concerns me, although *The Freelance* is good.

"Also, I have made a couple of requests to be put in touch with a local chapel – I have recently moved – and/ or other freelances locally, but have never received a reply," said a sixth.

"For my monthly fee, the union does very little for me," said another. "We have tiny local branch meetings run by one or two dedicated and political souls and there's the back-up in knowing I have legal support if I need it – but the NUJ could do with being a *helpful professional association*, and it's far from being anything of the kind."

These – and other – comments suggest that members are very poorly informed about the size of the NUJ, its resources and professional staffing.

The impression was that some members thought that branches, and chapels (despite employers' obligations to allow time for union business), had paid staff who could "chase" them.

"Branch meetings and branch newsletters are also very good for all of the above, but our branch says there is not enough money in the kitty for newsletters this year and branch meetings are poorly attended," said another.

"I had been both an activist and member for 30 years when my change occurred and the NUJ was of minimal help," one writer said.

Another was concerned that the NUJ does not support those freelances who are fighting the copyright war. "This has reduced me to destitution," that person wrote. As this suggests that one member at least is not aware of the union's campaigning work around this issue, it does indicate serious internal communications problems.

Contact with the union

Many were concerned about the contact they had with the NUJ locally. "Working from home in an isolated rural location leaves me feeling disconnected from time to time. I would value some contact from the local NUJ branch," said one.

"It would be nice if the NUJ did anything for freelances that was comparable to what they do for staff, particularly those in newspapers," added another.

A third said: "I came to seek help at the NUJ because a fellow NUJ member owed me money. I felt let down by the attitude of the freelance branch and the damage they caused me among fellow colleagues. It's 2004 and I am still owed the money!"

A fourth added: "My only disappointment with the NUJ is that I thought I would get some back-up with contracts, such as negotiating them. (A member of the NUJ's staff) accused me of asking for 'free legal advice'. I thought that was included in our subscriptions, so I was surprised and disappointed by that."

A for a fifth, priorities seemed inequitable. "The NUJ could help by supporting chapel negotiations that fully respect the role of freelances alongside staff," that writer said.

Concerns about communications were implicit in other comments. "The NUJ should set up an e-mail discussion list. May be you already have, but nobody's told me about it," said one respondent.

"I don't think the NUJ does much for me. I get the membership card, which I find valuable as a freelance, and also if I get into a legal scrape, I want to know I have the NUJ to fall back on. These are the only reasons I retain my membership; I have recently thought about quitting," admitted another.

"I'd love the NUJ to do more naming and shaming of publications who treat freelances badly," said a third. "It's all very well telling freelances not to work for the national newspaper that does not pay until after publication and then holds on to your copy for four months. Most of us cannot afford to blacklist publications or editors. Word soon gets around that you're a prima donna."

Attitudes towards freelances

Editors came out at the top of the freelance hit list, raising the question of why their treatment of freelances is sloppy and poor. Is it pressure, power tripping or simply bad manners? Better relationships with editors, plus earning more, would transform many freelances' lives – and remain priorities for the NUJ.

"What really matters to me as a freelance are not the emotional issues but the financial ones. Nothing matters more to me in my work than being able to earn money and support my family. Here, I feel, the NUJ is lacklustre in its support for freelancers," said one respondent, adding: "Even now, with the suggestion that freelancers should band together to negotiate higher rates, the NUJ's line is that this should be done on the initiative of the freelancers themselves."

"So a freelancer begins to wonder what's the point of being an NUJ member. Much of the NUJ's valuable campaigning activity is directed toward provincial newspapers and book publishers, while freelancers ... have to do it all on their own bat."

That respondent clearly stated that money was the priority and that getting a discount on an Apple computer was all that prevented them quitting the union.

Discrimination and confidentiality

One respondent was highly critical of the NUJ's response to disability discrimination. There was "no support to protect against disability discrimination *before* it happens. After it happens is too late. Organisations can stay just within the law and still reject disabled people again and again. The current NUJ system does nothing to guard against this."

"Asking the NUJ to help on legal issues involves going through many tiers of people," the writer added. "Confidentiality should be more protected by having less people find out about a situation. Freelances should be able to have a drop-in advice session with an in-house lawyer initially before having to go through lots of people," wrote the respondent.

Quite how this would be organised, or paid for, or made available to members living outside London, Manchester, Dublin or Edinburgh was not suggested.

Other NUJ members, even freelances, were the cause of worry. "I was disappointed to read in ... *The Journalist* that one (well-to-do) member resented subsidising low-income members," one said. "Was he never a trainee? Did he walk straight into a highly-paid job?"

2. Editors and freelances: a hate-love relationship

FREELANCES are among the most valuable – and flexible – resources available to editors, but they are also subject to the most abuse.

This research has revealed that most freelances have more experience than those who are commissioning or buying their work.

The attitude of staffers – many of whom must also be NUJ members – towards their freelance colleagues was also found to be a significant concern.

“Can you imagine,” one respondent asked, “any other union where members – ie staffers – would happily work alongside individuals – ie editors – who treat other union members – ie freelances – like dogs?”

“The whole point of a union is to prevent individuals being subject to the abuse of power – and yet when confronted by freelance complaints about yet another abuse, the NUJ’s response is to shrug as if that’s all just part of being freelance, and if you don’t like it, get out.”

These responses revealed that while low pay rates and slow payments continued to be concerns for freelances, basic courtesy and communication, together with the “theft” of ideas were most irritating – and considered to be highly unnecessary slights on their work and professionalism.

“Staff people have *no* idea what freelancing is like. They’re smug, wimpy, and tell you you should feel great being able to refuse work. Even my friends were damagingly unsympathetic,” wrote one, passionately.

“There is a fairly common misconception floating about whereby ‘freelance’ equals unemployed and the negative stigma attached to that can be depressing,” wrote one member.

“I don’t think people in offices understand how demanding freelance work really is. It takes considerable strength, originality, perseverance, self-discipline and organisational skills to make it as a freelance, never mind having to produce damn good copy that makes an editor come back for more,” said another.

“(Editors) may depend on us for their big profits, but their attitude is often dismissive, the pay derisory, and then frequent blatant attempts are made to ‘grab’ rights. When this is objected to, their response is often patronising, over simplified and reassuring – a sign, I believe, that in their experience, many freelances are amateurs.”

“Going freelance after 28 years as an editor,” wrote another, “shows me how many incompetent people are features editors – the NUJ should run a course on how to answer the phone and use e-mail!”

“Many (staff) still give the impression they’re a higher form of life and that freelance copy is there to be ripped off – with payment made as difficult as possible.”

“I spent all weekend working because I had three deadlines co-inciding on the same day – and I am now going through that frustrating phase waiting for editors to reply to my ideas,” another respondent wrote.

“I send out ideas and receive no response. In one case, one editor actually contacted me and asked me to send her stories. I obliged, to which she initially replied, but now she hasn’t replied for two weeks and I am left feeling puzzled and slightly paranoid.”

“You frequently have to bite your tongue when you are dealing with wet-behind-the-ears commissioning editors who have less experience than you, clearly don’t know a news story when it bites them on the nose and irritating subs who rewrite for the sake of it and make you look stupid in front of your long-established contacts when they change the meaning,” said another.

“There is a lot of rejection in freelancing. Often e-mails are not returned, sometimes they are returned but not for many months,” suggested one. Another backed the argument: “When editors fail to return e-mails or calls or give any response to work, it can seem like it’s hardly worth it.”

“There are the problems of sloppy management by editors – not replying to e-mails, changing projects but not informing (the freelance), being edited by 19-year-olds with no training,” said one. “It can be especially isolating when commissioning editors – even former colleagues and friends – don’t return calls and messages when you have taken the trouble to submit ideas or copy.”

"I do find it especially irritating to be patronised by commissioning editors or staff journalist who conclude that because you are freelance you must be straight out of journalism college and know nothing," the same contributor went on. "There is an assumption that if you freelance you have somehow failed or are not good enough for a staff job."

"I'd say one of the most demoralising factors is the 'fluff' verbal 'commission' from an editor – usually from a high-ranking consumer magazine – whom you've never dealt with before, who doesn't know you or your work, but says they would really like a suggested article you've proposed to them in a cold phone call. Don't believe a word of it unless you're getting something in writing!"

The biggest problem, said one writer, was that "a staffer will (produce) an inferior, less newsworthy piece on exactly the same subject than a freelance. How is it that a staffer, often of high repute, comes up with a highly-heralded exclusive some days after the exact same story has been submitted by a freelance and turned down?"

Some respondents said they wanted to get to know editors better, but "many jobs go to people who are friends of editors," wrote one. This was backed up by another, who suggested that: "Greater support from branches and chapels when work is rejected and a 'pal' of the news editor is commissioned instead might not be practical, but it would help."

"I feel vulnerable as a freelance who desperately needs the work and this can create an unequal relationship with commissioning editors. I feel exploited and angry when I know publishers are making money out of me and paying me a pittance for my efforts. I work hard and always deliver on time."

A third was more analytical. "The relationship with commissioning editors is a fraught one. On a couple of occasions, I feel I have been unfairly treated by editors: pieces have been spiked and the first I've known is when the article doesn't appear in a day's paper, or a piece of work I've done has been rewritten completely and I've had a snotty e-mail saying it wasn't up to scratch when I'm always willing to undertake any necessary rewrites."

"I've worked as a features editor and I know that sometimes you tend to take these things out on your freelances in a way you wouldn't with a staffer: there won't be direct confrontation, and there's an attitude that the freelance needs the editor more than the editor needs the freelance. Sticking up for yourself takes balls and whenever I've done it, I haven't been commissioned by that person again. So, I tend to bite my lip and put up with substandard treatment, just because I need the work."

Pitching, idea thefts and working for nothing

"Commissioning editors who fudge and don't give you a straight 'yes' or 'no' are really annoying. I'd prefer an abrupt 'we haven't got any work for you, sorry' to lots of evasiveness when you hopefully and assertively phone back several times," said one contributor.

A second said: "You can put an enormous amount of work into a pitch which is then ignored, forgotten or turned down. I know from having been a commissioning editor myself that the idea might well have been accepted if proposed from the inside."

A third added: "The main problem has been having ideas pitched by me then written by staff journalists, with no credit, payment or acknowledgement."

A fourth had a slightly different concern: "The biggest gripe is having a by-line stolen by a staffer on work you have produced."

"I get upset when ideas I have sent to magazines on spec are turned down and then appear about two months later, with the same standfirst, but written by a staffer."

"My ideas have quite clearly been stolen many times," said a fifth. "I have no comeback."

Other freelances have found editors who seem to think that they do not need to be paid at all. Magazines and periodicals seem to think that the offer of *unpaid* work is OK because you might wish to see your name in print – *and* failing to give by-lines for work, which is quite common."

Another respondent had found a different form of abuse. "If you freelance a lot for one company," the writer

suggested, "you tend to get sucked in to performing lots of extra tasks – favours, advice and lots of admin – which are strictly beyond the scope of the project you've been paid a set fee for, yet you feel duty bound to perform them. A staffer would do these tasks in office hours and therefore be paid for them."

"The biggest problem I have is getting regular work because, as I am more experienced than most commissioning editors, there is a reluctance to use mature hacks as we might show up their lack of ... knowledge!" said one contributor.

Implications for the industry

While it is unlikely that every freelance will take umbrage and decide not to work, there are those who deliberately do not offer material or their time to some editors or publishers – for personal or political reasons.

For on, editors were too short-sighted. "Overall, those who employ us do not regard themselves as having any 'duty of care' to us above and beyond the health and safety issues at the time we are actually employed," one argued. "Long-term wellbeing is not on their agenda."

"It really is a sad indictment of the world of journalism that the hard work and effort of freelances could not be recognised," wrote another respondent. "After all, where would our newspapers, magazines and so on be without us freelances? Who is the first person an editor will ring when he has a good lead but no journalist available? Us freelances. Who is the first person an editor will contact when he urgently needs a photograph taking at an event? Us freelances."

Perhaps most blunt was the contributor who wrote: "Belligerent males, newspaper-types should be encouraged to take freelances more seriously – it *is* the future!"

3. Pay and isolation

PAY is still a major concern. Many respondents called for the NUJ to campaign more actively to raise rates for shifts. One said these had not increased for at least five years.

"Working as a freelance ... has become increasingly difficult," wrote another. "The pay for a feature hasn't changed and in some cases has decreased in the last 10 years. I feel vulnerable as a freelance who desperately needs the work and this can create an unequal relationship with commissioning editors. I feel exploited and angry when I know the publishers are making money out of me and paying me a pittance for my efforts. I work hard and always deliver on time. I know I'm not alone in this as I have talked to other freelances who feel equally put upon. Sometimes I fantasise about filling shelves in Tesco to regain my self-esteem! I know I'm good at what I do. I have a wide knowledge of my subject and an excellent track record which counts for nothing."

"Rates appear to be falling," said another. "You feel obliged to take on more, which eats further into valuable personal time."

"Freelance journalism is unviable as a business for me," said one, adding that rates in computer magazines had fallen since 2000.

"I've come to the – reluctant – conclusion that trying to live on the income of a freelance critic is a fool's enterprise. I'm good at what I do; many punters in the arts would feel that I am one of the best and best-known writers in my field, but they would be shocked to know how little I earn, how grotesquely disproportionate is the effort-reward ration and how discourteous the staff and management on newspapers treat even fairly prominent contributors like me."

"Although I write for newspapers," said another, "the pay is abysmal and often comes late. I sometimes wonder why I bother working so hard for so little reward. And I hate having to chase late payers."

Another said simply: "I don't make enough to pay into my pension or pay off my debts."

"Striking", one writer said, "was not an option. I need the pay and someone else will always undercut me."

Staffers again did not help. "I do find it quite hard to hear of small increases being rejected when freelances hardly ever get increases at all," said one writer.

Another added: "The usual comment from editors of local papers is 'if you don't like it, you can always quit'. I only once braved asking for a pay rise, but was refused. That's provincial papers for you ... and I shouldn't work for them anyway."

"Although I would probably be regarded as a 'successful' freelance," another member said, "... I'm still struggling financially at 54 and have reached the conclusion that it's impossible to make a living writing serious journalism as a freelance."

"I feel that in the era of the NUJ pushing for workplace agreements that we are the forgotten factor; those staff positions are happy to forget about freelance rates – which are stagnating – if they can only get some sort of agreement in their workplace," was the view of one.

"The attitude is 'we can't push for too much now'," said another, "and 'negotiations on these issues can wait'."

Late payment remained a major worry too, causing significant anxieties for many, either about the effects of cash flow itself, or towards their relationships with editors.

Outside the UK, other concerns came to the fore. "Unless one has a particular specialism," said one respondent in Ireland, "it can be difficult to work from home and make a living. Most of the regions (in Ireland) have a number of freelances flogging news to the national papers and radio stations, so unless it's possible to find a niche area or town where there isn't good freelance news coverage, again it's almost impossible to make a decent living from home. The rates simply don't cover the expenses."

"I also find features are generally not worth the effort for the money they pay, unless one finds a feature that captures the imagination and that can be done almost for the enjoyment. They are far too labour-intensive. I'd also rather not produce mediocre, badly-researched work under pressure simply to make a buck."

As for another: "What makes me feel really vulnerable is when people try to knock down my daily rate."

Depressingly, one wrote: "My main worry is financial security and getting depressed by not getting contracts. I have taken one step forward recently. I have started accepting boring work or agreeing a lower rate if a company will give me a contract for 12 months to two years."

"I worry a lot about money," said another. "(I try) hard to remember the freelance mantra that something will turn up. I've been freelance for more than 20 years, and it always has. That, I suppose, means I am moderately successful."

Holiday and sick pay

Sick pay and holiday pay concerns were identified by many. These respondents felt that newspaper managements especially had failed to grasp recent law changes and some felt that the NUJ had not been doing enough to try to rectify the problem.

"If you can live by the dictum 'if you don't work, you don't eat', then be a freelance. If you can't and your health isn't good, then don't," said one respondent.

"Last year I was quite ill and earned no money for five months," said another, "so my savings took a hammering. I know you can get insurance, but when I investigated this at the start of my freelance career, I thought premiums were very high and didn't bother."

For some the concerns of pay and confidence went together. "One of my biggest problems is my inability to 'talk money'," one said. "I always find myself accepting less than my worth."

There were those for whom freelance rates added to their anxiety levels. "If I was the sole income earner in our household, the pressures would undoubtedly be greater and the ebb and flow of work more stressful."

Another backed this up: "I could not do this if I was the only breadwinner; the stress would kill me. (I am) always worried work will run out – always, always, always."

Working independently and alone

Opinions of working independently were nothing if not strong, sometimes to the point of bluntness. "Freelances often feel second class, ignored," one respondent said.

"Loneliness is a concern as the job is not always taken seriously by others," said one. "It is tempting to work in the evenings and weekends to the detriment of family life."

A second said being freelance was lonely by nature but being a single parent was even more lonely. "Working from home can be tough and lonely," another added, but optimistically went on to say it "was much less tough and lonely than struggling to survive in a back-stabbing office."

Loneliness was "the main problem" for another, who even when spending time with other journalists, found that "guilt, for not getting on with the job in hand, was the biggest downside. I didn't mind wasting time when I was an employee!"

For a disabled member, the difficulties had become more serious: "I live, eat, work and sleep in one room. I have become totally isolated," that person wrote.

"In my situation," said another, "depression has been a major problem and is now treated by medication."

"It's harder (as a freelance)", one member wrote, "to get away from work and switch off. Home feels less of a sanctuary from a day's stresses."

For another, the main problem was the isolation and lack of camaraderie.

"I didn't like working from home," said one writer. "I would go straight from bed to desk, by-passing bathing and dressing until lunchtime, often not leaving the house until after dark. Some days my only personal contact would be with the postman. Meetings had to be held in cafes or hotels. And I felt hemmed in by cuttings, catalogues and paperwork."

Another said: "I would love to work outside these four walls – where I inevitably am quite a bit when I am not working because I have two children ... and I have no intention of handing over my kids, even if I could afford a nanny, to work full-time."

"I rarely see anyone for substantial periods," wrote another, "certainly not enough to establish any kind of social relationship."

"I think the isolation and potential for mental illness working from home are grossly underestimated. It is very easy to feel that you are losing touch with normality," added another.

The problems appeared more severe for those working in places considered geographically "remote". One respondent from west Cornwall felt neglected by NUJ chapels and training organisers. Similar views were reported from Ireland.

Solace

Despite such obstacles and frustrations, freelance journalists remain determined and stalwart in trying to maintain their way of life.

Some have analysed this. "I joined the NUJ," one wrote, "because I hoped it would combat the isolation of working from home, and help with career development.

"Freelances don't help themselves, because they are reluctant to speak to others, in case they 'steal' their ideas. It should be possible to support each other generally, without discussing specific pieces of work."

"I am pleased this topic is being investigated," said one member.

"Highlighting the pitfalls of freelancing like this is helpful as it communicates to people that they are not on their own, that feeling depressed is part of the job and it isn't a personal failure," one reported.

There is realism too. "A couple of times over the years," one member noted, "there have been attempts to start and sustain freelance networks, but it's not easy. There needs to be lots of input by lots of parties. We can't expect people to do it for us."

"I won't sell to particular titles, groups or publishers," said another. "I am poor but principled."

5. Moving forward

Writing and editing this report means that some progress has already been made in drafting guidelines for editors and commissioning editors, collating the many suggestions for "coping" into a format that can be put online and in producing an overview of the comments about the NUJ itself.

The Working Group recognises that the general secretary has started reviewing the union's communications strategy as a consequence of the *Building our Collective Strength* review, adopted at the ADM in 2003. As well as the recommended *Joining Pack* for all recruits, the Working Group hopes that the president, general secretary and NEC will appreciate the short- and long-term significance of the perceptions reflected in these responses.

The other drafts will be brought back to the Freelance Industrial Council with the recommendation that publication and dissemination take place as quickly as possible.

Despite the major obstacles facing them every (working) day, freelance journalists remain largely positive and optimistic. Perhaps this is self delusion in the face of adversity, a coping mechanism in itself. At the end of six months' intense work, the feeling of the Working Group could be summed up as being relieved that the problems were not as bad as they could, easily, be, but simultaneously fearing that it would be all too easy for complacency to set in and circumstances develop in which wellbeing for freelancers did get worse.

As a trade union, the NUJ provides some structure whereby freelancers can collectively monitor their wellbeing. The value of this should not be underestimated.

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