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Emerging visions: career success factors in Australian screen production

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Abstract

A long-term career in screen production is elusive for most. An analysis of feature film and documentary credits by Screen Australia over the last 40 years suggests that only between 5 and 10 per cent make more than five feature films in their career.

The project based nature of the production enterprise, the uncertainty of project outcomes, and SOMETHING ELSE means that career paths are non-linear and generally unstructured. As the Australian industry has grown and developed, formal training through film schools have also grown in popularity. Australian tertiary institutions produce over 7,000 media graduates each year (Metro Screen, 2015), not including those produced by vocational education providers and registered training organisations. Census figures indicate only 22% of those employed in the media graduated in media studies.

This paper, based on research commissioned by Metro Screen, explores the career pathways of 15 screen practitioners (in both creative and technical fields) at various stages in their careers. A thematic analysis of the in-depth interviews undertaken for the research identified six factors needed for a successful screen industry career – education/training, practical production experience, access to resources, personal qualities, networks, and reputation. Understanding these career success factors will assist training providers in designing media courses to support more successful employment results and in managing student expectations of course and career outcomes.

Key words: career success factors, employability, emerging filmmakers, project based careers, networks

Introduction

The Australian screen production industry is growing. By the end of June 2012, the industry employed 15,760 people, an increase of 14 percent on the June 2007 figure (ABS 2012a). A further 8,774 people were embedded in creative screen production roles in other industries including telecommunications, arts and recreation services, and education and training (SGS Economics and Planning 2013, 84).

Tertiary education has become a crucial feeder for training and development of this workforce. The proportion of those in the screen production workforce possessing an undergraduate degree increased from 17 percent in 1991 to 43 percent in 2011 (Screen Australia 2015a). Diploma or certificate alumni increased from 21 to 25 percent. Yet not all graduate employees in the industry come from film school. The Australian Bureau of Statistics 2012 census suggests only 22 percent of people employed in media professions (Arts and Media Professionals, Media Professionals, Media Producers, and Film and TV Directors) studied media and communication (ABS, 2012b). Nineteen percent studied an alternative creative arts degree, while business, law, economics and society made up a further 16 percent (ABS 2012b).

A minimum of 61 Australian higher education providers offer media-related production courses, producing over 7,000 graduates from 30,000 enrolments per annum (Department of Education and Training 2015; Metro Screen, 2015). Approximately 8,500 students are enrolled in screen and media courses through vocational education providers (VET), with 4,200 completing their qualification (NCVER 2015).

The value of film school for a career in screen production has been questioned by academics and industry (Aquila 2015; Cunningham and Bridgstock 2012). A survey by Graduate Careers Australia, a leading specialist on graduate outcomes, suggests the importance of a media and communications degree to a graduate's main job is much lower than other fields of study, such as health or education (62.6 percent compared to 97.3 percent and 92.1 percent) respectively (Graduate Careers Australia 2013). Vocational education graduates of screen and media reported a 4.6 percent employment rate in the same occupation as their training course (NCVER 2015).

Since the establishment of Screen Australia in 2008 and the introduction of the Producer Offset a refundable tax offset (rebate) Federal funding for the professional development of early career (emerging) practitioners has decreased significantly. Subsequently, the Australian screen sector now places an increased onus on tertiary film schools to fill the gap. Christina Alvarez, former CEO of the New South Wales defunded screen resource organisation, Metro Screen, stated, "Screen Australia has made it clear that development of emerging screen practitioners is no longer part of its mandate but is the responsibility of the education sector" (Metro Screen 2015).

The purpose of this paper is to identify the components required for career advancement in screen production and establish the role of film school as a facilitator to this success. This paper, informed by fifteen semi-structured interviews with screen practitioners seeks to benefit current and potential film school students with an understanding of career success factors in the screen production industry. This offers a means to optimize their training requirements, course choice, and complementary activities during their period of study. Moreover, identifying career success components provides an opportunity to improve viable pedagogical practices in creative arts to maintain and improve graduate satisfaction and employment success rates.

Establishing a career in screen production

“People who have regular jobs and work metronomically, live their lives in what is known as a sine wave. It is basically a wave with equal space between the troughs and peaks, and they know they can count the peaks on that wave until their next holiday. Well, in the film business we live on a seismic wave. It goes absolutely bananas when we work and then it flat-lines, and then everyone goes ‘oh is that going to ever happen again?’”

(Ben Nott, Director of Photography, Study Interviewee).

A student seeking a career in screen production faces an industry that is complex, dynamic and uncertain, not just in terms of customer demand but also investment flows and production outcomes (Faulkner and Anderson 1987). Albeit there are new models emerging in screen production, the majority of screen agencies are heavily invested in the traditional established models.

Careers in the creative industries are referred to as “portfolio careers” (Bridgstock, Goldsmith, Rodgers and Hern 2014), “boundaryless careers” (DeFillippi and Arthur 1994) and “project based careers” (DeFillippi and Arthur 1998). This defies the more traditional ideas of stability hierarchy and clearly defined job descriptions carrying particular opportunities and challenges required for career progression.

Screen production is generally not localized “in the office” with the prospect of a long career sustained by a regular succession of promotions within the one firm (Jones 1996). Rather, it is characterised by a succession of a temporary short-term projects embodied with an identifiable line of credits (Faulkner and Anderson 1987). The competition is fierce and the attrition rates are severe (Aquila 2015; DeFillippi and Arthur 1998). Only one in 80 first time feature filmmakers in Australia will go on to produce, write, or direct more than five feature films in their career (Metro Screen, 2015; Screen Australia 2015b). Access to a career is difficult due to the lack of traditional recruiting and selection criteria (Hall 1996; Jones 1996).

In screen production the majority of individuals occupy a low ranking position for the first sixteen years of career development (Miller, Glick & Cardinal 2005). The employment pathway is more precarious for graduates, who often undertake non-remunerated work experience or placements with different organisations and rely financially on immediate reference groups or employment outside the creative sector (Bridgstock, Goldsmith, Rodgers and Hern 2014; Galloway, Lindley, Davies and Scheibl 2002).

Furthermore, a survey of members of the Screen Producers Association of Australia revealed only 14 percent of internship opportunities were advertised (Metro Screen, 2015). The majority were word of mouth or through cold calling. This common commencement of a creative’s career (Bridgstock 2005; Throsby and Zednik 2010) emphasises the project-based nature of the industry.

Sheehan argues that a film industry career is rarely neatly defined and linear and involves all sorts of balances – of talent and technology, creativity and commerce, knowledge and intuition, business and art (Sheehan 1998, 13). Taylor and Litteton (2008) acknowledge a lucky break often leads to success in the industry.

Career success factors

Media studies and organisational science literature allude to a number of success factors in a screen production career. Few tackle the question directly and fewer still explore the issue in the Australian context, where government subsidy underpins the viability of the entire sector.

DeFillippi and Arthur (1994) apply a competency based 'know how, why and whom' approach to describe successful careers that do not exhibit traditional boundaries. A combination of personal motivation, knowledge and career-specific skills, and a body of experienced contacts facilitate employment attainment. Jones (1996) identifies access, industry based competencies, reputation management, network building and mentoring and work/health life as the key processes in obtaining a successful career in the Hollywood industry. Skilton and Bravo (2008) propose that project-based careers depend on reputation and connections that channel opportunities and information to an individual. They argue that a project-based career is evaluated on the dimensions of a sequence of roles, process of developing social capital and participation in different types of projects.

Given the high degree of uncertainty of the context-specific and highly collaborative production process, Jones (1996) suggests a person must learn the screen craft and culture (Jones 1996, 63). It is through socialisation of what work is done, how it is done, and how members are to act while doing it that creates common understanding, values, and goals that guide behaviours, rather than written rules or regulations.

A typical production period lasts six to twelve weeks and most successful subcontractors make between 12 and 13 films in a three-year period. A smooth-flowing project system consists of well-structured organisational roles (Bechky 2006) of subcontractors and freelancers who have shared collective experiences on other projects (Daskalaki 2010). Subcontractors that work less than once a year find it hard to make a living and the number of production credits acts like an informal accreditation system.

Closed project networks (Antcliff, Saundry and Stuart 2007) are advantageous in offering a competitive advantage for further employment (Baumann, 2002). However, these boundaryless careers often make significant demands on time, energy and lifestyle (Jones 1996). The short-term nature of projects and the need to develop strong closed networks leads individuals to expend considerable effort in building networks to enhance future employment opportunities (Rowland and Handy 2012).

An additional theme echoed in the literature is also the notion that there are no success factors beyond "passion" and "creativity". But as Kelly and Champion (2015) signify, such a discourse denies the institutional and collective basis of screen production. While there is a substantial body of literature on the subject of screen careers, this preliminary review suggests that there is limited theorisation or clear definition to the fundamental drivers of success across academia and industry.

Method

This exploratory study seeks to identify career success factors in screen production and is guided by DeFillippi and Arthur's 1998 research methodology. Fifteen semi-structured interviews with screen industry practitioners from a mix of experience and production roles were undertaken between 25 January and 7 February 2015. Below-the-line service providers (cinematographers, editors, sound engineers) and above-the-line personnel (producers, writers, and directors) were included in the sample (refer Table 1). A practitioner specialising in online production was included, in recognition of this emerging platform. Actors and screen composers were not included because their nature of employment is more sporadic and there is a lack of data.

The sample skewed towards established practitioners possessing career longevity and a comprehensive portfolio. Emerging practitioners and those considered on the threshold of a more established career were also interviewed to gain insight into the different stages of a career stages (see Table 1). The background literature review and NVIVO thematic analysis of in-depth interviews revealed six factors required for a successful career.

The interviews were led by a reflective statement, for instance,

If your career was the subject of a movie or documentary, tell me the story from the beginning to today. The beginning, being the moment you decided a career in film was for you; when you got to make your first professional production; the highs the lows, the key success factors and challenges and where do you consider your career lies for today and in the future.

Further questions were largely focussed on identifying the career pathway of the practitioner and probing for incidents that were deemed significant to where they were in their career at time of interview. For example, “What do you consider was the big break in your career and how did it come about?” and “Thinking about the big break in your career, what were the critical factors (skills, experience, awards, personal qualities) to that point that you believe really made the difference?”

Table 1: Participant Characteristics

Career Stage	Primary Role						
	Producer	Director	Writer	Editor	DOP	Sound	Online
Established (9)	++	+	++	+	+	+	+
Mid-career (4)	+	++			+		
Emerging (2)	+	+					
15	4	4	2	1	2	1	1

Findings

The five factors identified in the interviews include formal education and training, production experience, networks, personal qualities (including “talent”) and overall reputation. Access to resources such as finance, time, equipment or personnel is a sixth factor. All factors other than formal education are proposed as necessary conditions. None, however, is posited to be sufficient on its own for a successful career.

Education and training

The interviews suggested some advantages of film school included exposure to film history and film theory, access to equipment, experimentation, and an early network of possible collaborators. Networking could be harder for some students.

“I didn’t participate as much in the University activities as I think I should have, because I went in as a mature age student, so it was a bit harder for me to connect with people”

(Fadia Abboud, Director, Study Interviewee).

Film school was viewed as a source of inspiration but could be disappointing. Two interviewees were concerned about the qualifications of the teachers, perceiving schools could be the home of “failed” filmmakers. There was concern over the ability of the academic environment, particularly the university sector, to make their graduates “industry ready”. This has been noted in other studies (Cameron, Verhoeven and Court 2010; McKee and Silver 2012).

Bridgstock et al. (2014) believe that higher education can do more to smooth the transition from education to the workforce through building critical engagement with creative workforce issues, knowledge of wider range of career destinations, and higher self-management capabilities.

“I think there’s an issue with isolating yourself in an academic environment, and then coming out the end and standing there going ‘what am I going to do?’ ...I’m just concerned about what type of people are coming out and whether they are prepared for it.”

(Rosemary Blight, Producer, Study Interviewee).

The interviews revealed tertiary education had the potential to create barriers to entry through costs and academic ability, which may preclude talent coming from regional, social and ethnically diverse backgrounds. Kelly and Champion (2015) identified the need for establishing “recognisable routes of progression” in order to attract individuals from diverse backgrounds, as well as recognising the role of higher education in identifying and nurturing talent.

“I didn’t really have much time with the staff, but that is a common thing. You hear that all of the time. I got out of there. It was actually too expensive for me. It just put too much financial stress on me. I think it’s sort of, in a way, unnecessary.”

(Shane Krause, Screenwriter, Study Interviewee).

Formal education was seen as a good pre-requisite and to some extent, expected, but not a necessary or sufficient condition for career success (see Table 2). Any relative advantage that film school once might have had has been weakened by the proliferation of those with degrees. Indeed, not having a film school degree, or a degree from another discipline, may be of more value now.

“I always wanted to go to film school but then the timing never worked.”

(Kristina Ceyton, Producer, Study Interviewee).

“I don’t think it’s essential but it helps.”

(Ben Nott, Director of Photography, Study Interviewee).

“I think, in terms of directing, you could probably learn a lot from a film school but producing is about being business savvy and understanding the machinations of the capital system and getting out there and networking.”

(Michael Robertson, Producer, Study Interviewee).

While most respondents that attended tertiary education appreciated their time at university or through other formal studies, they saw production experience, particularly professional production experience, as much more important for their career.

Table 2: Formal Education Benefits and Limitations

Benefits	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • An opportunity to gain early networks that may pay off later • Access to resources (only while enrolled) and mentors of varying quality • Production credits on student films • Opportunities for experimentation and academic discipline • Exposure to film theory and generalist knowledge can be inspirational.
Limitations	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Access and equity. High tertiary entrance scores may preclude people from low-income, regional or CALD backgrounds • Tertiary education can be expensive in terms of both fees and time (1-3 years) and may not offer value for money when compared to production experience • Lack of strong practical components to prepare students for production realities • Loss of access to resources upon graduation • Potentially facilitates false career expectations and a sense of entitlement.

Production Experience

Production credits are the key differentiator between emerging, mid-career and established practitioners. Credits demonstrate the level of skill and attainment of an individual practitioner and are currency for a screen career. As Faulkner and Anderson state, “certification of performance capacities requires a system for monitoring and evaluating candidates, and accumulated credits are yardsticks for the assessment of performance capabilities” (1987, 889).

Interviewees mentioned the relative importance of production experience over formal education in building their knowledge and skills.

“I think [education] is great, it doesn’t do any harm but I think it’s also the kind of industry where you have to just do it to be honest.”

(Kristina Ceyton, Producer, Study Interviewee).

“I became very aware when I was at university that I needed to get practical experience as much as my degree.”

(Lisa Gray, Digital Producer, Study Interviewee).

“I’ve seen a lot of first-time directors who don’t have experience just fall apart, and it is kind of difficult and it doesn’t always happen, but [production experience] is almost like an insurance policy. It’s a bit more insurance that this kind of person knows what they’re doing.”

(Michael Robertson, Producer, Study Interviewee).

Learning the craft and learning the culture occur simultaneously on the set because:

the culture identifies how one’s career is to evolve: through on-the-job experience, where one starts with low-level menial tasks, and works one’s way up to more prestigious, challenging and interesting tasks based on past performance (Jones 1996, 63).

Production experience is also a process of socialisation as well as skills development. DeFillippi and Arthur discuss a participant's learning as particular to the project role performed and this impacts the unfolding of his or her own career (1998, 136). Production context and role context is an important component of on-set learning which is difficult to replicate in the classroom.

"...it prepared me for the challenges that lay ahead and still lie ahead."

(Ben Nott, Director of Photography, Study Interviewee).

"It made me tougher, and it taught me about hours, it taught me about cramming and about sometimes you can't do the pretty shots."

(Cate Shortland, Director, about how *The Secret Life of Us* prepared her for *Somersault*, Study Interviewee).

Every film is labour intensive, and "made from the inside out" (Faulkner and Anderson 1987, 884). Production planning and product cost forecasts are continually revised (DeFillippi and Arthur 1998, 130). Experience on a wide variety of productions, on a scale beyond what is possible to undertake at film school, is the primary access point for this type of skill.

"The challenges are that they don't usually exist before you try to create them. And the challenge is making something innovative... Sometimes when you're making something for the first time you'll come across things you didn't plan for because it's new."

(Lisa Gray, Digital Producer, Study Interviewee).

Interviewees also spoke about how production experience gave them "confidence".

I feel like I have something to back it up. I've got the confidence to do it because I'm not pretending. I've got a few credits now under my belt.

(Megan Wedge, Sound Editor, Study Interviewee).

Kelly and Champion (2015) cite numerous authors who observed a high level of success in a field like screen production is not the primacy of talent that people are born with but the quantity and quality of purposeful practice engaged in. The main benefits of practical production experience are addressed in Table 3.

Tacit Knowledge	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Production etiquette, set processes, industry norms and on-set hierarchy • Leadership and management with professionals • Opportunities to make mistakes under the guidance of experienced practitioners • Learning by osmosis.
Benefits of production experience	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Access to a source of mentors • Real-life problem solving • Credibility - pending product outcome (awards, box office) and role played • Chance to build networks and peer-based reputation • Access to resources (sets, facilities, equipment, crew) • Income source (if paid) • Confidence • “This is where they learn to be professionals”.
Limitations	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Often unpaid • Barriers to entry (insurance, know-who) • On larger projects, emerging practitioners often get mundane roles where learning is just observational • Benefits come from being attached to the “right project” with the “right people”.

Networks

Interviewees suggested that networking was the “business’ side of the industry, “what has long existed in this business is a form of socio-economic organisation built up from this constant weaving and interweaving of credits and relationships” (Faulkner and Anderson 1987, 887).

“It’s about having access to and knowing the right people.”

(Fadia Abboud, Director, Study Interviewee).

“You have to have connections overseas because that’s where the funds come from.”, Michael Robertson, producer

“The network sort of slows down a bit and you have to make an active effort to get out and be involved with other editors, producers or directors.”

(Fiona Strain, ASE, Study Interviewee).

“I think it’s 90 percent the relationships you have.”

(Jason Hargreaves, Director of Photography Study Interviewee).

Skilton and Bravo (2008) identify key success factors in a screen career as to become known, trusted and liked by people who control access to better jobs. Jones and DeFillippi theorise that an “‘active elite’ gives access to the industry according to a person’s persistence and motivation” (Jones and DeFillippi 1996, 60). Networks are therefore a primary source of career opportunities. DeFillippi and Arthur (1998) describe the screen industry as “a small, socially interconnected network, and it was through inclusion in that network that future project opportunities were identified”.

“I think network building is very important, but trust is what this industry is about. Faith, trust, maintaining relationships with people is actually what it’s about.”

(Rosemary Blight, Producer, Study Interviewee).

“There was this film that I was involved with development-wise which had a writer attached called Joe... Joe knew this guy called Michael...and he called and said ‘Michael needs a director for this project’.”

(Dean Francis, Director, (Road Train), Study Interviewee).

In an environment so dependent on people solving creative problems, a network also is a source of solutions.

“We had this one challenge with finding a coder... it wasn’t until I was having a beer with a friend of mine who use to work at The Feds, he said ‘I’m in a heavy metal band and I can do that’ and did it in an hour and a half.”

(Lisa Gray, Digital Producer, Study Interviewee).

Writing and answering emails and attending industry events, markets and functions are key tasks and activities. It was important to target specific networks with the aim of moving from the periphery into the core to get into “an exclusive club”, as one respondent called it.

Mentoring as a subset of networks

Mentors, positioned here as a subset of networks, were seen by the interviewees to bring a host of benefits including the transfer of knowledge, career advice, and emotional support. They could also become a champion, providing opportunities and introductions.

“I look at the emerging producers who have been successful and they’re all saying that they have attached themselves or mantled themselves to somebody who is a player.”

(Michael Robertson, Producer, Study Interviewee).

“I really believe in mentors and I’ve had a series [of them].”

(Rosemary Blight, Producer, Study Interviewee).

In addition to mentors, individuals could also gain status through involuntary associations such as family, gender or race. Kelly and Champion (2015) consider environmental factors, such as place and date of birth, access to instructional resources and family support as being important for success.

Career success in the screen industry may be determined for newcomers by who they work for, what kinds of projects they work on, and non-work related factors such as gender. There are benefits that spill over from high ranking individuals to his/her close associates (Skilton and Bravo 2008).

“What really helped with The Babadook was the support of Jan Chapman in the early stages. She came on board as an executive producer down the road but it was great having her as a sounding board on script level, financing – I just felt really supported by her, even emotionally.”

(Kristina Ceyton, Producer, (on the benefits of mentors), Study Interviewee).

Personal qualities

Interpersonal skills and being highly motivated are what is required to “get your foot in the door” in screen production (Jones 1996). Sheehan (1998) describes the selection process in the Australian industry as “an intractable mechanism for reproducing sameness, with producers seeking characteristics and qualities compatible to their own – excellence on their own terms” (Sheehan 1998, 11). The ability to match these values was seen to be important.

A large proportion of the attributes cited by interviewees as necessary for a successful career also support the notion that personal qualities or traits are fundamental to success. Many match the core skills outlined in the Core Skills for Work Developmental Framework (CSfw) and which can be acquired through experience and training (DIICCSRT and DEEWR 2013) (refer Table 4).

“You’ve got to be a self-starter.”

(Kristina Ceyton, Producer, Study Interviewee).

“I had to write 70 letters before I got the job on Always Greener. Like, I sat there and watched the TV shows I thought were great and went through the credits and thought I’m going write a letter to that person. And yeah, it was letter 70 or something like that that got me the job.”

(Lisa Gray, Digital Producer, Study Interviewee).

It is often only over time personal qualities are either developed or reveal themselves. The interviewees often referred to this time to develop proof in the emerging career. The outcome is being able to meet the creative and technical challenges of production uncertainty.

“I wish I would have had thicker skin... I don’t think you can learn that. I think you just have to learn through life’s experiences.”

(Cate Shortland, Director, Study Interviewee).

“He said ‘...the reason why we are letting you into the second year is to do one thing for a whole year’. I went ‘Oh, what’s that?’... ‘To trust your instincts’.”

(Adrian Russell Wills, Director, on his experience at the AFTRS, Study Interviewee).

Creatively, a strong point of view, a ‘vision’ or a ‘voice’ is required. Persistence and determination is needed to weather the inevitable ‘dark hours’.

“I was making films to make a point – and that was a very powerful emotional push that I think can blind you to the risks around but I had nothing to lose... unless you take that approach you are going to be basing decisions on fear and I think that is when you make very poor decisions.”

(Dean Francis, Director, Study Interviewee).

Table 4: Personal qualities for work success

Core Skills for Work Developmental Framework	This Study
Cluster 1 Navigate the world of work Manage career and work life Worth with roles, rights and protocols.	Focus and commitment.
Cluster 2 Interact with others Communicate for work Connect and work with others Recognise and utilise diverse perspectives.	Confidence (self-trust) Collaborative and able to communicate with others Easy going.
Cluster 2 Interact with others Communicate for work Connect and work with others Recognise and utilise diverse perspectives.	Point of view, vision, singular voice Initiative, determination, tenacity, persistence, patience Passion, charisma and enthusiasm Adaptability (willingness to change) Courage and bravery.

Motivation

All screen practitioners require self-motivation to make the “best film possible”. Intrinsic motivations were often cited as being very important as well, particularly for above-the-line roles.

“I’m always drawn into writing. It’s a compulsion. I enjoy doing it so I don’t feel like my life is being sucked away when I do it... You wouldn’t do this career for the fame or the glory because there is really not much; it’s only amongst a certain circle.”

(Shayne Armstrong, Writer, Study Interviewee).

“If you want to be a filmmaker you want to know why. If it’s just for the glamour or just to get a credit, that’s not good enough.”

(Kristina Ceyton, Producer, Study Interviewee).

Pursuing a career for the right reasons was often an ethical consideration that may have some links to success and the driving force behind personal qualities (refer Table 4, above).

“There has to be something behind it besides ‘I want a career in film’... if you’re not honest about that need, I don’t think you’re sort of pushing yourself to do the best you can do.”

(Cate Shortland, Director, Study Interviewee).

“There’s a division between people who feel like filmmaking is an art form and therefore people should be doing it out of passion rather than money. And then there are people who are out to make money.”

(Megan Wedge, Sound Editor, Study Interviewee).

Because of the long development times for some projects, particularly feature films, a screen practitioner needs to believe in the project. This is particularly the case for writers, directors and producers.

“I think people are looking for visions. Fresh ideas. Fresh views of the world... I would say you really need to have a passion for it and a great love of cinema... deep down you’ve got to really want to do it.”

(Rosemary Blight, Producer, Study Interviewee)

Reputation

The interplay between previous work and networks is crucial for a long term successful career – a good reputation is critical (Jones, 1996). Faulkner and Anderson (1987) argue that

as capabilities and reputation cumulate across contracting and recontracting events... persons with successful performances and good reputations move ahead in their careers, those with moderate reputations do not, and those with poor reputations experience employment difficulties and fail in the market (Faulkner and Anderson 1987, 881).

The interviews from this study support the importance of reputation for career success.

“You have to start to brand yourself.”

(Kristina Ceyton, Producer, Study Interviewee).

“You are suddenly invited into what you realise is a club, an exclusive club of those that have done it. You know, if you have done it you are more trustworthy for the apparatus. You are more trustworthy to producers. You are more trustworthy to funding agencies and you start to become part of a deal.”

(Shane Krause, Screenwriter, Study Interviewee).

“I’m careful to market myself in a particular way... you want people to know you for a particular thing.”

(Jason Hargreaves, Director of Photography, Study Interviewee).

Awards and high-profile festival screenings for emerging practitioner projects is one way to build a brand or reputation among industry peers and attracting the attention of powerful people. Possessing a popular fan base or an audience following could also help build a reputation, as will high TV ratings and strong cinema and DVD sales.

Among our interviewees word-of-mouth from the peer-based production network for being reliable, producing high quality work, or being expert in a particular role through professional experience is seen as the best kind of reputation.

“We got the gig because Shane and I at that point had gotten the reputation as the horror guys in Australia.”

(Shayne Armstrong, Screenwriter, Study Interviewee).

“He said ‘Look, if Robyn Kershaw has told me that I should take a look at you, I’m going to take a look at you’. And then he offered me Rush.”

(Adrian Russell Wills, Director, Study Interviewee).

Access to resources

Access to relevant resources such as time, money, equipment, expertise, brands, and goodwill is the final key success factor identified by the interviews. The quality of resources available is different at different stages of a screen production career and are seen to be a function of the practitioner's own reputation and networks, as well as the industry infrastructure that is available.

Time and money, as resources, are important for all screen practitioners but particularly above-the-line practitioners who needed money to live on and time to develop and prepare a project. Resources provide a career advantage that rises sharply after successful performance (success or failure).

"I never could have made those films to that quality without the money, but also the people around that were helping me."

(Cate Shortland, Director, Study Interviewee).

"Now that I've joined forces with another producer we got [Screen Australia] Enterprise money ... and that's made a huge difference because we can share resources, we've got an assistant, and we've got time to work these developing projects."

(Kristina Ceyton, Producer, Study Interviewee).

Below-the-line practitioners also need time and money to build and support their network to ensure their next job. Working with brands such as A-list actors or an international head of department may also be important for screen technicians, but in this case it would be for non-commercial reasons (acclaim, skills).

Reputation was cited as a factor that helped break down barriers to access, as was quality networks (champions and mentors). Goodwill was often what fuelled a career in its early stages when financial resources are scarce.

"We got sets from Channel 7 and we ended up with this massive team of volunteers."

(Dean Francis, Director, Study Interviewee).

Geography can play a significant role in access to resources. In their 1998 study, DeFillippi and Arthur argue that Hollywood is valued as a regional cluster of competencies, a place to access the overall scale and diversity of resources, rather than the location of any particular firm. What appears to sustain the ability of workers, particularly drivers of artistic and commercial visions, is access to geographically clustered networks of film industry resources.

Conclusion

Film schools often promote themselves as a key entry point for a screen career. The literature and the results of this study raise the question of higher education in film mandatory to success. The three- to four-year period required for film school is criticised for not preparing its students for the challenges of a project-based career in screen production (Jones 1996; Kelly and Champion 2015; McKee and Silver 2012). Given the rising cost of a degree, online access, and the importance of production experience and reputation, as suggested by this study, film schools in Australia will require diversification in the total service offering to manage student expectations and improve graduate employability.

Film schools offer many advantages, including a support structure and the ability to form early networks. Given the long-term career development, support for alumni, particularly in respect to access to equipment and crew post-graduation, might be an opportunity for film schools to remain relevant and increase satisfaction and add value for money to their graduates. Strong mentor programs and networking with industry need to be key elements of any formal study program, and a healthy alumni program can form the basis of this. However, film schools need to actively market their students to the “active elite”, or at least assist their students to do this themselves.

While film school plays a role in developing “excellence” and identifying “talent”, it is interesting to note that the interviews rarely mentioned “talent” as fundamental. This could be due to the limitations in the method, asking practitioners to identify the key factors in their own success. Further study in the area of talent, defining what it is and its characteristics, is warranted given the emphasis of “talent” development by the screen agencies. This would better enable film schools to engage their students with the industry.

While most film schools offer the opportunity to engage in practical production experience through short films, identifying opportunities for students to build their reputation through alternative forms of exposure should be an important aspect of the film school experience. Exploring opportunities for students to work on and development bigger productions, for instance Griffith University and the feature film *Bullets for the Dead*, would also add value.

McKee and Silver (2012) argue that film schools tend to focus too much on the aesthetic of screen practice and not enough on the business of entertainment. They list a range of skills, including business and legal skills, that are needed to be a successful producer and have formulated an *Introduction to Entertainment* course co-delivered with business academics. Branding and marketing are important components of managing reputation and a personal brand. This would mean embracing arts entrepreneurship as an emerging concept in higher education for film school students.

Softer skills in the art of personal development, networking, and collaboration are also critical for students, as is preparing then for the reality of a life as a freelancer and managing expectations. In a world of online teaching and film resources, film schools will have to work harder to provide value to their students where the alternative is to work and spend their would-be student fees instead on paying for high-risk entrepreneurial endeavours.

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