

Multi-union training helps media freelances

Whether it's due to employers wanting to decrease their fixed costs, or workers wanting to increase their opportunities to earn, freelancing is on the rise; and nowhere more obviously than among the people who entertain and inform us through the media.



NUJ member Gary Herman helping members attending a freelance survival toolkit session.

Most of these freelance media workers are unseen and unsung photographers, writers, technicians, sub-editors and jobbing actors. Not exactly glamorous household names off the telly, just the people without whom there would be no household names.

So far so good - there may be fewer and fewer jobs, but at least there's no shortage of work. The problem is that as media freelances grow in number, their work gets harder and their livelihoods less and less secure. Rapid technological change and increasing competition for work can be a dangerous mixture. Just surviving can be a full-time job.

And that's why the Federation of Entertainment Unions (FEU) in the North West applied to unionlearn's Learning and Skill for All Fund (LSfAF) last year to organise a programme of training days aimed at helping media freelances in the region develop some of the skills they increasingly need. The programme was to build on earlier work by the national FEU's training committee which identified suitable collaborations for the Federation's affiliates - which include BECTU, the union for workers in the audiovisual industries, the NUJ, for journalists, the MU for musicians, and Equity for performers.

Our proposal was successful and the resulting programme of seven courses saw over 80 members of FEU affiliates receive training in money management and basic business skills, presentation, promotion and marketing, web design and development, and basic blogging.

The course we called 'The Freelance Survival Kit' was undoubtedly the most successful - in fact, the demand was so great that we ran it three times. "Although I have been a freelancer for 18 years I got a phenomenal amount out of the course," said Mike Thornton, a very experienced sound engineer and BECTU member. "It helped me to look at how I present myself to potential clients and how I go about finding new clients.

It confirmed in me the need to start to blog as a marketing and profile awareness tool."

Luckily, we were also running a course in 'Basic Blogging'. Several people started blogs as a result of this course - among them Mike Thornton and gardening writer Frances Laing who use their blogs to promote their work, build networks of contacts, and even to generate a little extra income from 'bells and whistles' like Google ads and links to booksellers.

Even a financial journalist, who you might think wouldn't need any tips and hints, found the 'Money Management' course useful. "The course helped me to set up systems to manage cash flow," said Marianne Curphey, "something which I had been meaning to do for a while but for which I thought I would need specialist accountancy software." Curphey benefitted to the tune of several thousand pounds when her new cash flow system revealed just how much she was owed.

Of course, not everybody found a pot of gold at the end of our courses, but there were other benefits.

The co-operation of the unions involved was itself a positive and exciting outcome, as was the involvement of a local authority through the Manchester Digital Development Agency, who provided the training rooms and facilities. Perhaps even more important was the mix of people that the project enabled - old hands and new entrants, writers and performers, engineers and artists. One learner - a freelance journalist - found a story in a fellow learner - an Equity member. Others were encouraged to become union learning reps, and some - we hope - may even get involved with training in order to continue the mission to help their fellow freelance union members.

Gary Herman (NUJ) and John Crumpton (BECTU)