

Recommendations from TalentX 2015: Executive Summary Report



In March 2015, over 40 'talent developers' from across Europe and beyond came together at EYE Film Institute in Amsterdam for the inaugural 'TalentX' – a professional development forum at which experience and best practice could be shared among peers.

Defined as professionals proactively working to support and progress new and emerging writers, directors and producers (collectively referred to here as 'talent') from short-form content to feature film, the group included representatives from film funds, film schools, development labs and training organisations, along with independent producers.

Joined by sales agents, distributors, production companies and filmmaking talent, over three days the group debated some of the critical challenges they face in the context of today's global market.

Six core themes emerged from the discussion - anecdotal questions, opinions and conclusions garnered from a wealth of combined experience - and are highlighted below, to help inform and shape the way in which new and emerging feature film talent is supported:

- **Bridging the Gap Between Public and Private** – it is essential for the realistic career development and progression of talent that we find a way of enabling public and private sectors to meet seamlessly and effectively, through improved understanding of how their primary interests can better align.
- **Prioritising Producers** – acknowledging the place of producers in the 'talent triangle', supporting their role in bringing on writers and directors, and equipping them with the right skills is vital to the development of a sustainable film business ecology.
- **Supporting Talent Beyond First Features** – when considering impact on long-term career progression, public sector support should not just focus on first features, but move beyond to include second and third; and the importance of continuing a dialogue with directors through festival and publicity stages should not be under-estimated.
- **Driving Diversity & Discovery** – creating a variety of alternative approaches to developing talent is critical in increasing inclusion, alongside tackling diversity across the value chain to bring a wider range of voices into film journalism, funding and commissioning; we must also acknowledge that having a greater diversity of stories in film brings potential to create or grow audiences, increasing both cultural and commercial value.
- **Developing Creative Teams & Communities** – focusing on developing the talent triangle - rather than just the individuals within it - is critical; we need to foster a sense of community and provide 'safe' creative spaces in which to meet, explore and work; talent developers must be key advocates in connecting and championing talent within the industry.
- **Taking a Fresh Approach** – the role of the 'talent developer' within the public sector needs to evolve with the changing markets and the challenges faced by talent in the 'real world', allowing for flexibility, failure - and fun.

TalentX 2015 enabled the sharing and exploration of established, successful talent development practices. In 2016, the focus will be on creating and doing – shaping new approaches, attitudes and models for talent development across the public and private sectors. We look forward to continuing the dialogue and building practical, 'real world' solutions and partnerships.

1. Bridging the Gap – enabling public and private sectors to meet.

Contributors speaking from the commercial perspective – distributors, sales agents, production companies – agreed that for them ‘talent development’ is primarily about spotting new directors who have promise and professionalism; finding good scripts, with clear genres; and the ability of a film to work internationally. It does not necessarily matter if they are first-timers, or from another background such as theatre or TV.

Where directors are less experienced, there is a strong preference to team them up with a much more experienced producer who can safely manage and guide the project. So talent development is as much about making the right choice of producer to help protect their interests – one who is trusted, responsible and understands how to get the very best out of the director.

Many commercial companies want close engagement with the talent throughout the filmmaking process - and want filmmakers to readily engage with marketing and distribution, not just development and production. So interventions by public sector talent developers need to understand this bigger industry picture perspective.

With untested talent the commercial world also looks to spread the risk of its investment by placing filmmakers among advocates – such as public funders or broadcasters - who are willing to commit too. There has to be a well-rounded and fairly spread system between public and private stakeholders.

There is also an issue in talent development stemming from language and lexicon, good examples being ‘independent’ and ‘commercial’. ‘Independent’ is often used instead of ‘original’, referring to something based on the desire of the creator, their own unique voice, and can be seen as creative exploration, sometimes perceived as potentially fragile and not focused on audience. ‘Commercial’ is often used to mean ‘reaching an audience’ and therefore regarded as fitting with broader tastes, but something which risks encouraging too much of the same thing. However we term them, these should not be two separate worlds: they need to meet in the middle – developing talent and projects should mean trying and sometimes failing, and sharing the risks.

It is vital that public sector developers and funds acknowledge the gap between culture and commerce, and that they – along with financiers and producers - do not seek to protect ‘auteurs’ from commercial realities. It is in everyone’s interest to create an environment that is not just focused on the project but which helps the filmmaker see the market in the right way and make informed decisions, for example through:

- Emphasising the market within the producer/writer/director triangle, always giving opportunities for the producer to speak and helping them to become confident about discussing the market.
- Introducing market operators such as sales agents and distributors into talent development schemes and interventions.
- Supporting first-time producers, teaming them up with more experienced producers, especially if they are working with first-time directors – this will also minimise perceived risk.
- Championing filmmakers who achieve commercial success as role models, as well as those whose work is awarded at festivals.

2. Prioritising Producers – recognising their role in the ‘talent triangle’.

Talent will always be there, it is how it is brought into industry that is key. That means that producers and production companies are important – they take on much of the workload and risk when projects are being developed, particularly with first and second time directors. Yet despite this investment, they are often left behind when directors gain recognition and attract a bigger range of opportunities.

The success of talent - when ‘talent’ is defined as just writers and directors - is more dependent upon a stable, collaborative and fertile relationship with the producer than anyone else across the value chain. Therefore we all have a vested interest in fostering such relationships and supporting producers.

Producers play a crucial role in facilitating funding, financing, sales and so on. They should be supported to grow in their ability to do this, and also to form production companies in order to build a combined culture across the EU of film and film business – we should not just be developing individuals who work separately, project to project.

It is vital to recognise and reward the role that producers play in development. Producers are doing the same job as developers, but usually do not get paid or even credited for it – and in instances where producers are paid in the development period, it is often more in recognition of their role in packaging the film, with financiers being reluctant to pay for their creative development skills. Too many films go into production with under-developed scripts because the producer only starts to see any money during the production phase.

Many interventions focus on first-time directors, while producers are expected to have done more of their own accord. So opportunities for new producers to build up experience should be more available and accessible. There are some excellent training programmes for producers, but there is a great limitation as to what can be taught and ultimately experience counts.

It is widely acknowledged that producers best learn their craft within a professional environment. Increasingly, new producers approach more established producers and production companies for support to help them to develop and progress. This is a time-consuming responsibility, requiring considerable investment, yet is the best place to bring on creatively and commercially savvy newcomers.

When established producers take on the role of training newcomers, they often cannot then make room to allow the newcomer to stay and grow within their company, so the newer producer leaves to make it alone, with the company not seeing return on investment. The role of the public sector here is to work with the private sector to consider how to best enable effective and sustainable industry-embedded producer development, and to help action it.

So developing producers is a vital part of developing all talent and producers are an integral part of the talent 'triangle': producer, writer, director. As such it would be beneficial to:

- Acknowledge the essential role of producers and incorporate them within the term 'talent', with clear recognition that developing a producer's skills will benefit writers, directors, their films and our industry as a whole.
- Focus on developing producers as sustainable individuals, who have the potential to also become longer-term sustainable companies.
- Invest in producers – with financial and wider support - to build sustainable careers and businesses, and help manage the risks they take when investing in and supporting less experienced talent.
- Connect producers with mentors, more experienced producers or production companies – and by extension into industry - to see the bigger picture of producing; doing this within a company environment could produce better results than a standalone 'scheme'.
- Ensure that producers are not working in a vacuum: aside from the relationship with the director, they need an open honest dialogue with the whole team and other stakeholders including film funds.

3. Supporting Talent Beyond First Features – building sustainable careers.

As a director there can be a fear after every film that if it fails you will not have the chance to try again – and indeed some European national statistics support this likelihood, demonstrating the drop-off rates from first to second feature and beyond. It is therefore essential that talent developers learn how to talk with directors about failure and to learn lessons from it. More films are developed than are made, so it is vital that we learn from experience and move on to the next project wiser from it.

Sometimes failure may be due to writer-directors floundering, because they are not collaborating with another writer. This raises a broader issue around talent being encouraged to know its limitations and to

play to its core strengths - few people are both brilliant writers and brilliant directors. Directors need to learn how to work collaboratively with writers. This is a challenge driven by film's obsession with auteurs, something not found in TV where emphasis on the writer comes to the fore.

The year following release of a first feature can be disorientating for the director, dealing with festivals and publicity. When it ends, the next circuit of festival films and talent are ready, leaving the director behind and no longer in the spotlight. Directors should be encouraged to think strategically about their careers, finding manageable ways to line up their second or third film while shooting their first.

For directors, a strong relationship with the national or regional film fund is very important – feeling that you know each other and are not alone in the process, especially in countries that do not have a strong agent system. But it can be a challenge for public funds to proactively maintain a dialogue with directors in between projects as they may be restricted from doing so, whereas other stakeholders such as broadcasters can 'woo' talent. So we have to find a way of keeping the relationships, and vitally connecting and championing talent, particularly within industry.

There could be a structural issue which sees too much emphasis placed on first-time features and being part of a 'scheme'. It is easy to be in love with an idea of talent, to make something significant and new, but this can be confused with newcomers and it is not necessarily so - it is extremely important to maintain support for directors with de-briefs and discussing what they need to move forwards beyond their first feature.

Sustainable development of directors should consider:

- Supporting filmmakers through the stages of publicity, and looking at whether agents and peers can play a stronger part in connecting them to industry during this demanding phase.
- Equipping directors with soft skills to build their robustness in areas such as managing success and failure, and how to build supportive emotional connections, as well as strategic career planning.
- Teaming writer-directors up with other writers, and equipping directors with the skills to work with writers to provide a valuable development mechanism in ensuring more fluid, continued progression.
- Maintaining contact with directors in between projects, through regular informal discussions or formal interventions such as mentoring.
- Enabling directors to stay in touch with actually 'making' in between feature film projects, for example looking to other forms such as TV or online.
- Dissecting and learning from mistakes and failure, rather than 'sweeping them under the carpet'.
- Considering whether public sector support can be structured to support those on their second, third or later features, as well as first-timers.

4. Driving Diversity & Discovery – opening up alternative routes & approaches.

It is important for film to reflect the widest range of voices, experiences and backgrounds, telling authentic stories directly from the heart. Views about, and the approach to, encouraging such diversity in film differs greatly across individuals, organisations and countries. It is worth acknowledging that TV drama largely shares this issue with film – for all its differences and its current 'boom', diversity remains a challenge there too, even with continuing and returning shows to nurture talent through.

Talent developers and wider industry must be proactive in encouraging and nurturing new voices, giving people the confidence to tell their story, and importantly, presenting effective role models.

Quotas are one means of intervention, which can be applied to tackle such aspects of diversity as gender, ethnicity, sexuality, and social mobility. Such systems provide a benchmark against which to assess an organisation's commitment to widening diversity in both the content of the film and the

behind-the-camera team. 'Positive action' schemes targeting filmmakers from specific groups are another common approach among public film funds.

But not every filmmaker from an under-represented group wishes to be selected because of what they are perceived as or seen to represent – and a new generation of content creators are 'bypassing the system' to seek their own routes to finance and audiences through canny adoption of technology and social platforms.

This complex issue has a market perspective too: telling a more diverse range of stories offers the potential to create or grow new audiences. Bringing more people to film in this way may unlock exciting new enterprises and new visions for the industry.

There are many other layers to consider – it is not just about filmmakers themselves. There is the question, for example, of whether there are enough female film critics in the world, enough female 'gatekeepers', enough female funders, and so on. There may be more hidden factors at play too, for example do fewer female film school graduates go on to make a first feature than their male counterparts – if so, why?

Solving all of these challenges in one scheme or intervention is not possible: there are many things to balance and as with wider aspects of talent development there is not a 'one size fits all' solution – and increasing diversity should be considered as an embedded part of all activity. There are questions to test our thinking in considering how film funds and developers can make a positive impact among a broader pool of talent:

- How do we reach and encourage people who do not want to be chosen because of what they are seen to represent - does the quest for diversity sometimes have to be covert, rather than overt?
- Is it a matter of confidence and if so whose? Does lack of confidence in asking for funding hold some groups of filmmakers back? Or perhaps conversely there is a lack of confidence about funding them?
- Can we think of it as building different routes to reach the same place – like creating ramps as well as stairs? Accessibility should not necessarily be seen as a special route or short-cut, just an alternative.
- What can we learn from other creative sectors that may have a better track record of reaching wider groups and voices, such as art schools or pop music? Are there industries used to a more multicultural approach, across talent and teams, that do not make a particular issue about it – it is just accepted?
- What are we doing to understand, reach and support those proactive new creators who are operating online, outside of our comfortable or traditional talent development models?
- If we introduce quotas, how do we make sure that we do not compromise on creativity or further alienate talent for the sake of them?

5. Developing Creative Teams & Communities – not just focusing on lone talent.

Effective, sustainable support from the public sector may be better focused on building creative teams and communities, bringing into question the way forwards for the 'lone talent'. The value and importance of matching the right people and partners (across the value chain) is crucial to achieve success which none alone can.

Working in teams, encouraging and facilitating peer support, connecting people and providing 'safe' creative spaces in which to meet, explore and work are all key characteristics in successful lab development models. Are distinct programmes or 'schemes' the only place in which to take this approach or can a wider pool of talent be supported by taking a community approach on a wider basis?

Valuable lessons could be learned from newer industries, such as digital content development, whereby practices such as open sourcing are embraced and the 'end user' is seen as part of the development process. Such approaches encourage better access and attitudes to creative networks, and collaborative

and community engagement, which ultimately enable us to tackle challenges such as new ways to use and build film or content funds.

Thinking differently about the impact of our work through communities could help to build stronger emotional connection, maintain value and create a more fulfilling experience, whereby not only the impact on individual participants of a fund or scheme are considered (such as progression or recognition), but also the impact on the local or wider economy and on the audiences of the films. Developing talent not in isolation, but as part of a bigger ecosystem.

Looking to the wider filmmaking team, beyond the talent triangle, is another valuable lesson from which to draw from some lab models when considering developing as a communal process. Experienced heads of department can offer a wealth of insight, expertise and support to first-time feature filmmakers as they make steps forwards (indeed some directors may already have had a career in features as a director of photography or an editor, the experience of which should not be dismissed).

Keeping more experienced filmmakers in the fold – whether as mentors, advisors or simply just good people to hang out with is also a critical part of ‘giving back’ and providing a vital source of ‘received wisdom’. We must build confidence in the ability to trust peers and encourage supportive peer-review, and seek to:

- Foster a culture of sharing experiences – this applies as much to developers as to talents on the ground and filmmaking as a whole.
- Develop in teams or groups. It is difficult to develop talents alone; the strength and balance of a producer/writer/director team or ‘triangle’ is crucial.
- Encourage better understanding of what happens in the creative triangle - a critical factor in enabling talent to let go and work as a team.
- Create a ‘safe’ communal space in which to enable talent to explore, learn and flourish as an effective way to maximise and multiply the impact.
- Help talent respond to the changing factors in domestic and international markets by sharing intelligence, ensuring that people network, do not work in silos, find new ways to raise funds and build emotional connections with audiences.
- Use communities to build and maintain a dialogue of ‘received wisdom’ and peer support, that is to say sharing and benefitting from the experiences of others.

6. Taking a Fresh Approach – allowing for flexibility, failure and fun.

The talent developer could be seen as ‘a conduit between vision and pragmatism’. As such they often must balance the risk, innovation and choices needed for the commercial world with the security, planning and practicality required by the public funding world.

It is important to know where the line is when developing talent. Funders can give validation to talent or a project, but developers are also enablers, there to listen and ask questions, not to be overly reactive or proactive. Developing talent is a very private thing, it is about supporting a personal search to find the right story. Everybody is different, requiring a flexible approach according to individual needs, backgrounds and experiences.

Finding the right terminology is also key. Language is important in how we relate to the people we are developing. Does the very term ‘talent’ define or suggest a particular point in a career or is it something that applies all of the time? Does ‘artist’ have the same implication, or is it more acceptable?

Talent (or artists) may find it humiliating if they feel they are being ‘developed’, as though they are still at film school instead of being allowed to prove themselves as professional filmmakers. Tackling personal and career development through the development of a project can alleviate such feelings, though it remains essential to ensure that a wider range of support is offered, from soft skills to market awareness, to keep the whole potential progression path in view.

An endemic weakness in the way that many development relationships are structured, i.e. to fit projects rather than careers, must be addressed otherwise a stilted project-to-project relationship may occur, instead of a longer-term dialogue and relationship.

A culture-shift is needed to allow more room for making and failing. Looking at attitudes and approaches practised in other industries may prove useful. In the video games sector, for example, development and associated failure are viewed as research and development (R&D), an inevitable and acknowledged part of the process. In feature film – and TV - it is not accepted in this way, and talent are not necessarily supported or paid through those times. Development is frequently judged on whether a project ‘converts’ to achieve market success or critical acclaim, and little else is seen as important or relevant.

Equally important alongside failure is fun – sometimes the processes dictated by publicly funded interventions can stifle creativity and take enjoyment away. Some projects or people can also be ‘over guided’ and it shows in the final film. Fear of creativity and lack of flexibility can actually prevent some voices from coming through.

In reality, talent developers have to sense their own redundancy - talent do not just need people to develop them, they need the right funds, time and space. Funds should proactively seek to bring about culture-change from within and create the best conditions in which talent can thrive, looking to:

- Establish long-term trusted relationships, consider the terminology (e.g. ‘artists’ vs. ‘talent’), and build empathy – thinking about how it feels to be told you are ‘being developed’.
- Be and remain flexible – individuals have different needs that must be recognised and catered to.
- Acknowledge and allow for failure and mistakes; look to other sectors for inspiration.
- Enable talent to spend more time immersed in making - practice makes perfect.
- Encourage talents to think about their long-term voice, not just bouncing from project to project.
- Work in teams of talent developers to get a varied mix of styles, approaches and representation.
- Keep the creative process at the heart of the approach and have fun!

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