

Future of work: Crowd-funded creative careers

A toolkit for creatives, educators, industry bodies and platforms



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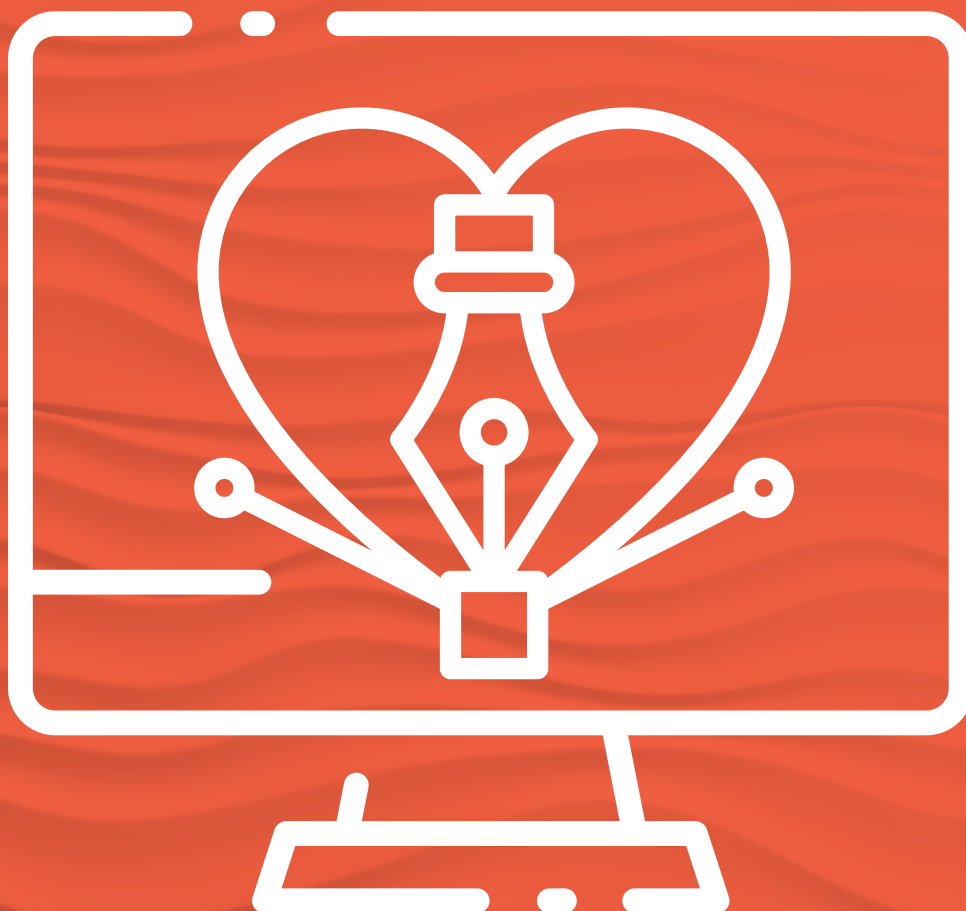
FOREWORD

Technologies are transforming work, changing ideas of employment and self-employment. This changes notions of 'career', career management and the skills needed to build and sustain careers. This is of central interest to IES and we are keen to deepen insights and consider the implications for individuals, industries, employment practice and policy.

Accordingly, we explore new, emergent forms of work and their consequences. This has included deep dives into zero-hours contracts, work in the gig economy and different forms of self-employment. We explore the dynamics of work in different industries, considering equity, diversity and inclusion, such as engineering, and nursing, but also careers that take a less traditional format, for example, creative careers.

Our aim is to be objective – examining work impartially to understand motivations and drivers for pursuing careers and identifying what might need to change and why.

We are pleased to collaborate with colleagues – Dimitra, Krysta and Hong – from Universities of Sussex and Warwick, through the ESRC-funded Digital Futures at Work Research Centre, to bring findings from their qualitative exploration into crowdfunded careers in the creative sector to a wider audience to influence policy and practice.



What do we know about creative careers and being a creative?

The latest data, covering the 2022 calendar year, showed there were 2.4 million filled jobs in the creative industries. In the recovery from the pandemic, the data show that employment in the creative industries grew faster than the UK average. The creative industries in 2022, made up 7.1% of total UK filled jobs ⁽¹⁾.

Creative careers are dominated by freelance and short-term contracts, especially in the early career phase (Ball et al, 2010) ⁽²⁾. For many creatives, setting up an enterprise to fulfil their creative ambitions is an important aspiration and they may do this alongside more traditional forms of part-time employment, meaning that portfolio-based careers are also common. These work formats provide limited career progression and income security.

Nonetheless, creatives prioritise personal satisfaction that derives from being creative over financial rewards. Their work satisfaction comes from being creative and collaborating with others to evolve new ideas. However, they also recognise that to sustain creative practice and achieve their career and personal goals, creatives need to build secure and stable income. Consequently, creatives' concerns for the future centre on the necessities of juggling their work portfolio to gain the experience to build career progression, with the need for stable income as they anticipate the demands of future family life.

What is crowdfunding and how does it differ from gig work?

Fennel (2024) ⁽³⁾ estimates that the gig economy in the UK comprises 1.7 million workers. The CIPD estimates that 1.4% of UK workers are employed in the gig economy.

The term, gig economy, was coined during the 2009 financial crisis ⁽⁴⁾. Initially, this type of work was best known through activities such as ride-sharing or food delivery and raised concerns about one-sided flexibility due to the algorithmic controls enforced on workers. However, gig work is much broader and platforms straddle ride-sharing and delivery, freelancing and professional services, micro-tasks and small jobs, creative and media services, home services and manual labour, care services, education and tutoring, and other miscellaneous or specialised gigs. Prominent in the academic literature are work-quality concerns spanning positive elements such as high levels of flexibility, autonomy and task variety, to more negative ones such as low pay, social isolation, long and irregular working hours and exhaustion (Wood et al., 2019) ⁽⁵⁾.

McKinsey (2016) ⁽⁶⁾ frames work quality by the rationale for people to be involved in gig work.



30% OF GIG WORKERS ARE 'FREE AGENTS'

ACTIVELY CHOOSING INDEPENDENT WORK
And deriving primary income from this.



40% ARE 'CASUAL EARNERS'
CHOOSING TO DO INDEPENDENT WORK TO SUPPLEMENT OTHER INCOME.



14% ARE 'RELUCTANTS'
making their primary income from independent work but wanting a traditional paid employment.



16% ARE 'FINANCIALLY STRAPPED'
supplementing their main income with independent work out of necessity.

McKinsey (2016) ⁽⁶⁾

What is crowdfunding and how does it differ from gig work? cont'd

Crowdfunded work represents a distinctive approach within the gig economy. Rather than short-term task commissioning, it emphasises community engagement, creative freedom, and recurring revenue. The European Commission summarises it as 'a way of raising money to finance projects and businesses. It enables fundraisers to collect money from a large number of people via online platforms' ⁽⁷⁾.

There are multiple formats for crowdfunding, suited to different business types and industries, from peer-to-peer lending, to debt-securities crowdfunding and to reward- and equity-based crowdfunding. In common with gig work, is the requirement for workers to navigate financial instability and platform dependence, highlighting the need for strategies to mitigate these challenges.

MAIN TYPES OF CROWDFUNDING PLATFORM IDENTIFIED BY THE EUROPEAN COMMISSION ARE:



PEER-TO-PEER LENDING:

The crowd lends money to a company with the understanding that the money will be repaid with interest. It is very similar to traditional borrowing from a bank, except that you borrow from lots of investors.



EQUITY CROWDFUNDING:

Sale of a stake in a business to a number of investors in return for investment. The idea is similar to how common stock is bought or sold on a stock exchange, or to a venture capital.



REWARDS-BASED CROWDFUNDING:

Individuals donate to a project or business with expectations of receiving in return a non-financial reward, such as goods or services, at a later stage in exchange for their contribution.



DONATION-BASED CROWDFUNDING:

Individuals donate small amounts to meet the larger funding aim of a specific charitable project while receiving no financial or material return.



PROFIT-SHARING / REVENUE-SHARING:

Businesses can share future profits or revenues with the crowd in return for funding now.



DEBT-SECURITIES CROWDFUNDING:

Individuals invest in a debt security issued by the company, such as a bond.



HYBRID MODELS:

Offer businesses the opportunity to combine elements of more than one crowdfunding type.

Source: https://single-market-economy.ec.europa.eu/access-finance/guide-crowdfunding/what-crowdfunding/crowdfunding-explained_en ⁽⁷⁾

Crowdfunding trends in the creative industries

The pandemic had a dramatic effect on the creative industries globally, with a total of 10 million jobs lost worldwide (UNESCO, 2022). This catalysed a more concerted drive towards digital forms of work (Tosattonet al., 2019) ⁽⁸⁾ which was particularly important for creatives who could no longer make a living through live performances or events. This has led to a permanent change for some creatives.

The predominant format for crowdfunding in creative industries is rewards-based which allows creatives to build a recurring income stream; digital platforms match creatives to supporters (patrons) who pay a subscription in exchange for access to exclusive content and benefits. This can include behind-the-scenes footage, early access to a musical release, or opportunities for a one-to-one interaction with the creative. From the creatives' perspective, successful digital patronage relies on devoted supporters who are willing to offer long-term, stable support.

There are multiple platforms operating in this space and facilitating slightly different forms of relationship between creative and patron. One in common use is Patreon, which according to the statistics (Church, 2020) ⁽⁹⁾, witnessed the registration of 30,000 new artists and the number of new patrons increased by 36.2% across the US, UK, Germany, and Australia in March 2020, demonstrating the catalytic effect of the pandemic on uptake.

COMMON PLATFORMS IN THE CREATIVE INDUSTRIES



KICKSTARTER: is used for funding creative projects including films, music, art, theatre, games, and design. It operates an all-or-nothing funding model, meaning projects only receive funds if they meet their financial goals.



INDIEGOGO: offers more flexibility than Kickstarter, allowing creators to choose between fixed funding (all-or-nothing) and flexible funding (keep what you raise). Indiegogo is popular for project workers, including those leading technology innovations and creative works.



GOFUNDME: is often associated with personal and charitable causes, it is used by creative professionals to fund individual projects. It allows users to keep all funds raised, regardless of whether they meet their goal.



PATREON

PATREON: Unlike other crowdfunding platforms, Patreon focuses on ongoing support rather than one-time funding. Creators receive monthly payments from patrons, who subscribe to their content, making it ideal for artists, musicians, podcasters, and writers looking for continuous financial support.



Crowdfunder

CROWDFUNDER: is tailored for entrepreneurs and businesses, including those in the creative sector seeking equity crowdfunding. It allows companies to raise capital by selling equity, debt, or revenue shares to investors.



FUNDLY

FUNDLY: is known for its ease of use and social media integration, and is an option for creative projects. It supports continuous fundraising and is suitable for personal and charitable campaigns.



SEED&SPARK: is specifically designed for filmmakers and content creators. It provides funding opportunities as well as resources and support to help creators build their audience and distribute their work.

Sources: Shopify (2024) ⁽¹⁰⁾; GoodFinancialCents (2024) ⁽¹¹⁾

Background to the research

Despite the growing popularity of crowdfunding for creative careers, research on subscription-based crowdfunding is limited.

Regner (2021) ⁽¹²⁾, examined transaction data from Patreon between 2013-2015, finding that substantial numbers of creatives receive more than \$2,500 monthly as a steady revenue stream via the platform and that the perceived quality of creatives' communication with their patrons correlates with funding success. Crosby and McKenzie (2021) ⁽¹³⁾ find that creatives who do not reveal their platform earnings have more subscribers as a result, suggesting that social information does not increase subscribers. Similarly, Lin, Rai and Yang (2022) ⁽¹⁴⁾ find that concealing earnings improves brand authenticity, but private postings foster brand differentiation, co-creation, and attachment. These lead to a positive impact on the financial returns and fan participation from subscription.

To build further insight, the team at University of Sussex and University of Warwick explored how creatives are using crowdfunding to support their careers. They took Patreon as their focus as it is the world's leading subscription crowdfunding platform with over six million active patrons who support over 200,000 artists and other creatives via monthly subscriptions in exchange for access to exclusive content. The entry barriers to start a campaign on Patreon are negligible, creatives simply need to set up an account. Patreon turns a one-off interaction between creator and the crowd into a continuous relationship. The platform is particularly popular and, since 2013, it has paid out over \$2 billion to Patreon creatives (Crosby and McKenzie, 2021) ⁽¹⁵⁾.

Research approach

The research explores the experience of employment through crowdfunding, how the platform affects creatives' relationships with their supporters, and the creative process. It was developed through 29 in-depth, qualitative interviews with creatives, mainly musicians but some visual artists too, who use Patreon.

The sampling strategy was purposive; creatives who were active on Patreon and whose background was primarily either art or music, were contacted independent of gender and other demographics. Their email addresses were collected from their Patreon pages, social media profiles, or personal websites and invitations to participate in the research were sent.

Those who opted in to take part were interviewed. Only five female creatives responded to the invitation for an interview. Qualitative interviews lasted between one and two hours and were undertaken between September 2022 and March 2023.



Key messages

The research gathered information from creatives on themes including their background and employment history; initiation of their Patreon campaign; their experience of social media and crowd-funding platforms; and everyday activities including strategies to grow their patron base and relate to their patrons.

To examine the quality of the creatives' employment, the analysis draws on the work of David Hesmondhalgh, Sarah Bakers, and Mark Banks, who contribute extensively to the debate on job quality in the creative industries (Banks and Hesmondhalgh, 2009 ⁽¹⁶⁾; Hesmondhalgh and Baker, 2010 ⁽¹⁷⁾; 2011 ⁽¹⁸⁾; Hesmondhalgh, 2020) ⁽¹⁹⁾. Through this, four aspects of job quality were identified and interrogated in the analysis: job security, autonomy, recognition, and social contribution. The figure to the right summarises main findings related to the quality work experienced by crowd-funded creatives under these four themes.

FOUR ASPECTS OF JOB QUALITY EXPERIENCED BY CROWD-FUNDED CREATIVES



Key messages cont'd



Autonomy and new identities

Crowdfunding platforms re-shape the autonomy creatives have to decide what to create, and how. Some of those interviewed feel more autonomous in their careers due to the regular subscriptions they receive. These allow them to select and develop their own projects, in contrast to responding to commissioned client briefs with fixed outputs and delivery dates. Creatives enjoy this autonomy and feel freer to take creative risks.

However, for some, artistic freedom can feel restricted as creation is mandated by subscribing patrons, who may ask for content. Patrons' expectations can restrict or impose experimentation and new directions, and creatives risk becoming 'crowd pleasers'.

They hold differing views on ownership of creative output. Some feel that through subscriptions they maintain ownership over their work and intellectual property, which is not available when working on commissioned briefs. In contrast, others identified a risk of exploitation from the crowdfunding model, centred on patrons' sense of entitlement to demand creative outputs. Some patrons can subscribe only to access and download content and then stop their subscription.

Creatives also started identifying themselves as 'content creators' and 'entrepreneurs' as a result of the new work tasks and responsibilities they undertake on platforms. These include promoting, advertising and disseminating their work in order to attract and maintain patrons along with the development of a range of technical skills such as to set up, use and maintain sound and video equipment and edit recordings.



Job security

Where it works well, Patreon provides a stable and regular income to creatives. This financial support is a strong motivation to join the platform. While most interviewees use more than one digital platform in their creative careers, all agree that the financial gain from Patreon is significantly higher than from others. Creatives pay a fee to join the platform which most consider reasonable and the platform provides services such as handling payments and technical support, which reduces workload and risks for creatives. Some creatives pay higher fees for Patreon to handle merchandise and returns/refunds. Creatives use other platforms, such as YouTube, to share some of their content for free to build a fan base that they can then prompt to join Patreon to have access to all their work.

To be successful in using crowdfunding to support their careers, creatives need to develop entrepreneurial skills to manage and incentivise their patrons' relationship with them. They have the option to operate a tiered fee system charging supporters for different levels of access or can offer a flat fee. Offering tiered subscription creates demand for additional, 'exclusive' content such as first release access on a regular basis. Creatives maintain relationships with their patrons by providing access to content not available elsewhere such as backstage footage, clips and previews or rewards for being a patron. This leads to a new identity as a content creator entrepreneur.

Some interviewees perceive their situation as precarious as they are financially dependent on the platform and patrons. They identify that platforms can change terms and conditions or charging structures and there is little they can do about this. Typically, they accept it as a necessary risk of platform work, comparing it to the precarity of responding to commissioned briefs which are short-term and temporary. They need to assess and understand the transactional basis of their relationship with patrons, as well as where the balance lies on reciprocity, to ensure it truly works for both sides.

Key messages cont'd



Recognition

Analysing creatives' perspectives on their relationship with patrons reveals that these do not naturally evolve. They are working relationships where creatives actively promote their content, attract fans to the platform and work to sustain the relationship and the financial support they receive. Patreon does not provide services for this; it is the responsibility of the creatives to build and sustain relationships. This means creatives see it as necessary to engage with patrons' comments on the platform to continue to foster their engagement, either through providing answers or recognising comments with a 'like' emoji. This means dedicating time to being on the platform.

Some creatives discuss feeling under pressure to constantly produce content to keep up with the expectations of their patrons or to be online continually to respond to patrons comments and questions. Being on a crowdfunding platform and receiving regular subscriptions creates an urgency to supply regular outputs to maintain and please supporters. This can lead to work intensification as creatives feel obliged to regularly give something back to patrons, to keep them entertained and to ensure they feel they are getting a return on their investment.

However, this pressure is not always perceived negatively. Some creatives describe it as a push to continue their creative work. They also see it as a form of reciprocation for the loyalty shown by patrons in providing monthly financial support; they value this relationship and so want to produce new content for patrons to engage with.



Social contribution

Compared to relationships with a more standard audience, some creatives describe their relationship with patrons as more intimate, and akin to 'an online friendship'. Some describe meeting their patrons as friends on online platforms or in person to attend events together. Others described discussing personal matters with patrons, with an argument that patrons' loyalty comes from the cultivation of an authentic relationship.

In some respects the dynamics in these relationships seem to re-establish an older model in the creative world where sponsors funded the careers of creatives, providing mentorship and personal support alongside financial support. At their best, platforms can be seen as reinvigorating this model and creatives feel the benefits of continuing support and authenticity in that support.

This can be an essential ingredient in creatives' career development. Nonetheless, not all feel they have this engagement with their patrons, instead feeling that the relationship is highly transactional and reliant on their supply of creative output to foster ongoing subscription.

The high number of patrons providing small subscriptions in a crowd-funded career may be a factor here; the traditional model more usually sees one patron to one creative, providing substantial funding.

CASE STUDY: SOPHIA

Sophia is a lawyer based in Italy, who, after being prompted by friends, turned her hobby into a job.

She is now a visual artist on Patreon. It was difficult for her to believe that other people would pay for her artwork, but she has increasing numbers of subscribers. She believes that the platform transformed her into a content creator and it gives her all the tools she needs to work as an independent artist. Sophia promotes her art through several social media channels where she offers previews of her artwork to attract supporters to her subscription channel.

Sophia aims to develop strong relationships with her supporters. Initially when they were few, she contacted them directly. Now she has found alternative ways to engage with them; for example, through polls asking what they would like her to create. Sophia also sees her supporters as potential collaborators; one of them helped Sophia translate content into Spanish.

Sophia sees subscription-based crowdfunding platforms as offering unique opportunities to artists to be independent whilst also building stable income. It is an opportunity that pushes artists to create the best quality artwork they can, as the supporters-subscribers are constantly there, waiting and should not be disappointed. Sophia understands that this places some pressure on artists to perform continuously and at a fast pace.

Overall, though, she is a supporter of Patreon seeing it as a platform that 'helps artists go through their path'.



'With some of them, I have a kind of friendship relationship... And I have a lot of comments from them. It has been a way to have a connection with them.'



CASE STUDY: MICHAEL

Michael is a musician from the US.



He joined Patreon in January 2020 after having worked as a full-time musician for over three decades primarily doing live shows in different parts of the country. Michael had an established fan base who became subscribers to his Patreon page during the pandemic to financially support him. He started with 1,000 subscribers and dedicated time to super-serve them. He does this by doing live streams for them, twice a week; meeting them one-to-one; playing for their events such as birthday parties and anniversaries; writing songs for them — not necessarily songs that will progress his career but those to make his supporters happy. He believes that in his career stage he prefers to super-serve existing fans rather than to expand his fan base.

Michael is a firm believer that subscription-based crowdfunding is not driven by philanthropic values but is a service whereby clients pay a fee to get access to certain creative products and services. He is thus committed to constant production of music.

Michael believes that crowdfunding platforms turn artists into content creators. This is primarily because of the amount of technical work they are now expected to do such as editing videos; setting up appropriate lights; setting and checking the quality of the sound system; handling social media accounts; planning for merchandise, engaging with promotion and advertising of their work. He is also grateful for the work-life balance he enjoys by being on the platform, as he now spends less time doing live shows and touring and enjoys more time with family at home. He accepts that through subscription crowdfunding he has now more freedom to decide what to work on without feeling the pressure to constantly tour to maintain income; in his own words: Patreon 'gives me a feeling of safety and security'.

'I'm super-serving them in a way that is trying to make them happy.'

'I'm a content creator now. Three years ago I wouldn't have called myself a content creator...doing, you know, posts, and working on social media....create videos and performances and special moments online.'



CASE STUDY: KEVIN


Kevin joined Patreon when it first started.

He is a professional musician from the US with decades of experience. He decided to join Patreon from fear of being left out of the evolution of the music industry.

He thought that through crowd-funding platforms he would be able to play catch up and to find ways to monetise his music. In his music career he has experienced a rapidly changing landscape; music is less of a physical object – an LP or CD - that is bought by fans and can be more understood as digitalised and livestreamed and so, copied, replicated and pirated in numerous ways and in an uncontrollable manner.

Kevin believes that subscription-based crowdfunding is not a service but sets up a tip jar relationship whereby artists make their creative work available, and fans consume the part they like. Kevin is concerned about the precarity of his work on the platform. He described it as risky as building your house on somebody else's land, without any guarantees for the future.

He argued the platform only provides artists with 'a shelf in a store to put things' to describe the amount of work that he needs to do to maintain his Patreon account with no support from the platform. Kevin has been feeling under pressure to constantly produce music and be creative to create a trustworthy relationship with his patrons. He feels accountable to produce regularly for all his supporters who pay a monthly subscription fee to enjoy his music.



'It pushes me to be creative, it pushes me to produce, you know, it's not like I just published a book and now I can just sit around. I'm constantly, I feel pressure and maybe this is self-imposed, but I do feel a constant pressure to produce.'

What are the implications?

Some industry bodies are providing support and advice for creatives who wish to build subscription funding through crowdfunding.

This includes the Musician's Union ⁽²⁰⁾ which has drawn together a series of tips for creatives following this path and using Patreon. More broadly, the academic literature explores the psycho-social effects of career building through crowdfunding, and there are strong resonances with the findings from this research, particularly on the nature of the relationships, changed identities and work intensification. Navigating careers through crowdfunding brings undoubted benefits, not least the financial security from subscription, however, work demands on creatives require considered career management approaches and significant resilience.

Understanding of this new form of work will continue to evolve, however while the research base is small, the highlighting of consistent experiences between studies indicates there is a need to start better preparing creatives for these careers. This leads to recommendations for creatives themselves, their educators, industry bodies and platforms.



For creatives

The research offers insight into the employment benefits and the drawbacks crowdfunding platforms have on creators' careers and provides an opportunity to learn from the experiences of other creative artists building careers using the crowdfunding platform, Patreon.

Key messages

- Look to industry bodies for hints and tips on how to generate your fan base then move to sustainability through crowdfunding.
- Build awareness of best platforms to launch access to freely available content related to your creative practice and how to push fans to subscription services to build sustainable income.
- Consider how you want to engage with fans – what nature of transaction can you support, how much of yourself you are bringing.
- Be aware of the work intensification risk and so aim to manage fan expectations and your own feelings of duress.



For educationalists

The research identifies the skills (including digital, technical and entrepreneurial) that are needed for creative artists to build successful careers using crowdfunding.

Key messages

- New skill sets and entrepreneurial approaches are needed within the curriculum to support crowdfunded and social media careers.
- Input is needed on career management and creatives' curating their own pathway through portfolio working and crowdfunding.
- Help creatives build resilience to navigate relationships with fans and patrons while maximising the benefits of sponsorship.
- Support creatives to build a skill set centred on content creation – creatives may need to extend their practice to encompass video, photography, non-fungible assets.



For creative industry bodies/policy

The research provides insights into the growing role that Patreon plays in the creative industry and its effects on employment in the sector.

Key messages

- More advice and support as crowdfunded careers evolve on managing the fan base and developing the skill sets.
- Best practice examples and role models.
- Advice on managing creativity, relationships and avoiding burn out.



For Platforms

The research identifies the importance of crowdfunding platforms in the employment of creatives, providing regular income which helps build more sustainable careers and enables creatives to cope with shocks such as the pandemic.

Key messages

- Clarity on services and fees.
- Commitment to terms and conditions for specified periods on signing to reduce precarity risks for creatives.
- Helping creatives manage the transactional relationships with fans through sharing practice examples.
- Ensure the crowdfunding model is fair to both sides; introduce minimum subscription periods for patrons or disallow mass download of creative assets.
- More support for early-career stage creatives, for example, offering options to promote and advertise their work to support them to recruit patrons.

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