

FST - Strategy Development Workforce Group

Workforce Stability, Fair work and Well-being

Coalition of the Willing - Written by Jenna Watt

I hadn't heard of the Fair Work Convention until I started working with the FST's - Strategy Development Workforce Group: Workforce Stability, Fair Work and Well-being in Autumn 2020. In December we had our last workforce meeting where we were introduced to Helen Martin, Head of the Fair Work Convention Secretariat. As a self employed artist, I was really keen to understand more about the [Fair Work Convention](#) its [Fair Work Framework](#) and how it could potentially underpin the FST's ongoing [Strategy Development](#) work.

During the early months of COVID 19, I was very thankful to be a member of a few different unions and organisations that were advocating for the roles of self employed workers in our sector. As a result, I was fortunate enough to experience less precarity than that of many of my self employed peers as I found myself eligible for SEISS. Some found themselves ineligible because of the very nature of freelancing in our sector, piecing together a, hopefully, living wage on a project to project basis across many organisations and institutions and balancing those commitments with zero hour contracts and employed roles. With Creative Scotland's Hardship Fund came another wave of relief for those eligible, but also a confronting realisation that many were not earning the living wage, and were in fact 'in work poverty'. As we tentatively approach a post COVID sector, many of those fundamental sources of employment will have either a significantly reduced capacity for the foreseeable or perhaps no longer exist and many of our freelance workforce, many of whom are the underrepresented voices that we so desperately need, will have disappeared, no longer able to accept eking out a less than living wage.

With these considerations in mind, is it possible to build back a less precarious and fairer sector for both workers and employers with the support of all stake holders? The Fair Work framework has the potential to help us understand and identify the drivers and pressures that cause precarity for 'workers' and employers' in our sector. Built on a foundation where "Employers, Unions and Workers coming together to discuss and address areas of shared concern" the Fair Work agenda drives economic growth, productivity and innovation by bringing together a range of voices with equal weight to create outcomes that can benefit a workplace or sector. Five concepts of Fair Work make up the framework, helping employers to analyse their organisations, enabling them to systematically look at issues in the workplace. The five concepts are summarised as:

- Effective Voice
- Opportunity
- Security
- Fulfilment
- Respect

The Fair Work Convention have used these concepts to develop two online self assessment tools for workers and employers. Each tool can give an understanding of the issues that might exist in workplaces and Fair Work is about taking the next step on that journey to create a coalition of the willing to lead change that delivers fair work. The previous Fair Work inquiries can give an indication of how the framework can support employers and even whole sectors to enshrine a fair work agenda into its practices, which are predicated on evidence gathered via these tools.

Whilst we can see similarities between the issues in our sector and those in social care or construction for example, this can lead us to make presumptions about our own, as I have. The discursive nature of the framework can help us identify, not only why we have a high dependency on freelance workers for example, but potentially how to better support this aspect of the workforce, and to 'smooth the edges'. There's no reason why a self employed worker should be a low paid worker and no reason why a self employed role should be of lower quality to an employed role, but data confirms that the most 'in work poverty' is experienced by the self employed and more specifically self employed women, like me. Language is of course hugely significant in this discussion, the previously mentioned term to 'smooth the edges' can be interpreted as positive in one sense, it can mean creating more certainty, stability and fulfilment. But a much more detrimental understanding would be to 'smooth off the edges' where the rights of workers is gradually eroded in favour of cost saving measures, which is apparent in some of the practices established during COVID, which we can't allow to be accepted as standard industry practice going forward and not an aberration. Our larger stakeholders have an opportunity to create levers around Fair Work making them better placed to interact with the public sector and its growing endorsement of the Fair Work agenda.

For the Fair Work framework to best benefit our diverse and complex sector, we must bring in as many voices as possible from our vast range of workers and employers, our trade unions, our larger stakeholders with structural barriers removed. We must come together and collectively agree that workers and their representatives need to present at all discussions, that there aren't any side rooms, and there are effective ways of oversight and challenging issues that aren't working in our mutual favour. We must move from a coalition of the willing to be undervalued to a coalition of the willing to lead change.