Production managers are leaving TV. What happens next?

As freelance and staff roles disappear, Liz Burton-King asks how the industry can retain the experience that keeps productions safe, compliant and deliverable.

Most people reading this know exactly what production managers do. You have worked with us. Some of you are us, or were, once upon a time.

A good PM can be almost invisible. The schedule works. The hotel is close enough to the location. There is breakfast before the early call, transport when it is needed and enough money and time to buy the props and do the wrangling. Contributors are cared for, crews know where they should be and the programme comes in on time and on budget. Nobody notices the dozen problems that were anticipated, negotiated or quietly solved before they became problems at all.

That quiet competence is built over years. Experienced PMs join the dots between editorial ambition, compliance, health and safety, access, sustainability, delivery and crew welfare. We spot the budget hole, know when a quick turnaround is becoming unsafe and understand when a saving in one department will create a larger cost elsewhere. We are not gatekeepers blocking creative ideas. We are allies of the editorial team, the crew, the indie and the commissioner, working out how to make the idea happen without breaking the people making it.

But we can only do that if we are brought in early enough and given the time, authority, money and resources to work out the format and schedule before filming. A properly resourced PM can help test the plan while there is still time to change it: how many locations can realistically be covered, how far the crew can travel, what access and duty of care require, if we can still maintain the carbon footprint promised in the Albert prediction, comply with the Ofcom regional spend quota and ultimately whether the budget genuinely matches the programme being promised.

When that work is squeezed or ignored, problems multiply quickly. An ambitious schedule becomes an impossible one. Hotels are booked miles from location because they are cheaper, even though the extra travel shortens rest. An early departure leaves no time for breakfast. Props, coffee, additional fuel and locations have not been budgeted for, and there is no time or staff to source them. The team becomes trapped in constant firefighting and crews work longer hours, miss meals and drive tired. The danger to physical and mental health is real.

Bringing in more people once the production is already unravelling creates another layer of work when the team has least capacity. They must be found, hired and briefed while the filming window closes. Missing GVs and cutaways become pickups, archive purchases and longer edits. What looked like a saving becomes an expensive recovery operation. The production is remembered as a bit of a nightmare and assumed to have been badly managed, when the underlying problem was that the plan exceeded the budget and experienced production management was not given enough support or authority at the outset.

This is why it matters that experienced production managers, line producers and production executives are walking away. The Production Managers Association has seen members leave television, take work elsewhere or piece together short contracts in other fields while they wait for the WhatsApp to ping. For many, it does not. And this loss is not confined to production management. Across commissioning, development, editorial and production, people carrying years of hard-won knowledge have gone, increasing the pressure on everyone who remains.

A couple of years ago, many of us warned the industry that it needed to retain this experience so it would be ready when commissioning bounced back. No simple bounce-back arrived. Indielab analysis found that 40% of the small independent producers it examined could be at risk of going out of business

within two years. Channel 4 is planning to cut 340 roles, around 28% of its workforce. That signals tighter commissioning and pushes more experienced people towards an already crowded freelance market.[1][2]

The question is no longer how we hold on until things return to normal. It is: what should happen to us now?

Bectu has called for workforce sustainability to be central to UK media's future, while government freelance champions recognise that the employment framework does not fit the people on whom this industry depends. The TV Mindset provides vital connection, advocacy and peer support. But industry bodies cannot commission programmes or employ production teams, so the industry itself must answer.[3]

Commissioners, executive producers and development teams are already working harder than ever to secure and shape programmes from an ever smaller pot. They too are stretched, with less money and time available to develop ideas before they must compete for a commission. This is not about suggesting that experienced PMs should take over work or responsibility that sits elsewhere. It is about recognising that the brain drain affects the whole chain, and asking how those of us who are still here might help rebuild some of that collective capacity.

Productions still need experienced PMs properly embedded in their teams, with the time, authority and pay to do the job well. But it need not be the only way the industry draws on our expertise. Some senior PMs could help stress-test development pitches before budgets and promises harden, review schedules before filming, advise across a slate, mentor developing teams or support particularly complex shoots. Those are possibilities, not a ready-made answer. I do not pretend to know what the right models are, especially when development money is already scarce. But experience brought in early can prevent far greater costs later. Perhaps the starting point is to recognise the knowledge that is still available and begin imagining, together, how best to use it.

We also have to support ourselves by staying connected, sharing opportunities and describing our skills confidently beyond a list of credits. Taking those skills elsewhere for a while is not failure, and returning should not require anyone to pretend the gap never happened.

Production managers do not grow on trees. In many ways, we are the trees, shaped over time, job by job and crisis by crisis. Many have already fallen. Once that knowledge is gone, it will not spring back simply because demand picks up.

Content remains at the heart of this industry, and all of us are experts in making it. The UK still produces some of the world's best formats and most trusted, truthful storytelling. In 2024 it was the world's largest exporter of unscripted formats. If we want to remain at the forefront, we need commissioners, executives, editorial teams and production working together, drawing on the experience that remains rather than allowing more of it to disappear.[4]

What should happen to us? I do not have a neat answer. But we are still here, and we should be part of designing what happens next.

Production Managers Association
https://www.pma.org.uk/

1Mark Sweney, “BBC boss concedes real prospect of strikes over pay and job cuts”, The Guardian, 9 September 2026.
2Mark Sweney, “Tiny financial buffers leave small UK TV firms at risk of going bust, analysis finds”, The Guardian, 7 September 2026.
3Bectu, “Bectu calls for focus on workforce as government sets new strategic direction for UK media”, 26 August 2026; “Bectu welcomes appointment of freelance champions”, 1 September 2026.
4Daniel Thomas, “UK becomes world’s biggest unscripted TV exporter”, Financial Times, 8 May 2025, citing K7 Media data.