



How a *Thriving on Set* Framework Can Change the Culture of Film and TV Production

Paul Heinzemann, MD, MPH

The Harvard Center for Work, Health and Well-being created the six domains of the Thriving From Work framework. These domains are briefly explained below in the context of film and television production, along with a proposed “Thriving on Set” initiative to evaluate and improve the workplace culture in the industry.

1. Physical and Mental Well-being (health, injury prevention, recovery)

Depleting factors: Chronic fatigue from long/irregular hours, insufficient turnaround (<10 hrs rest), night shoots, heavy lifting, repetitive strain, weather extremes, special effects (haze, noise).

Common conditions:

- Musculoskeletal disorders (back/neck pain, tendonitis, repetitive strain)
- Acute trauma (falls, rigging injuries)
- Hearing loss, respiratory irritation
- Sleep disorders, hypertension, metabolic syndrome, increased stroke (35% higher risk) and heart disease (17% higher) from long hours
- Fatigue-related cognitive impairment (equivalent to alcohol intoxication)

Thriving practices: Strict 10-hour days, enforced 10–12 hour turnaround, scheduled recovery, on-set medical support, fatigue monitoring.

Outcome: Reduces injuries (currently 75–85% report personal/colleague injuries) and allows true recovery.

2. Social Well-being (relationships, inclusion, support, community)

Depleting factors: Freelance isolation, hierarchies, bullying/harassment (41%), fear of retaliation, exclusion of marginalized groups.

Common conditions:

- Chronic loneliness (52% of workers)
- Exacerbated anxiety/depression
- Higher suicidal ideation (especially disabled/neurodivergent workers — 53% poor mental health vs 29%)
- Social withdrawal and strained personal relationships

Thriving practices: Well-being facilitators, intimacy/access coordinators, inclusive protocols, protected speaking-up culture, post-shoot debriefs.

Outcome: Builds support networks that buffer stress and reduce unreported harm (53% of harassment goes unreported).

3. Psychological and Emotional Well-being (positive emotions, low stress, resilience)

Depleting factors: Constant uncertainty, creative pressure, low psychological safety (only 7% always feel safe speaking up), fear of being labeled “difficult.”

Common conditions:

- Burnout and emotional exhaustion

- Anxiety disorders, clinical depression
- Suicidal thoughts (30% overall, 54% under 30 in some data)
- Stress-related physical symptoms (headaches, GI issues)

Thriving practices: Protected reporting, on-set mental health resources, recognition of emotional labour, resilience-building routines. **Outcome:** 35% currently rate mental health “poor/very poor”; thriving restores positive emotions and resilience.

4. Job Design and Experience of Work (meaningful tasks, autonomy, learning, recognition)

Depleting factors: Rigid hierarchies, “creative vision over safety” (69%), repetitive tasks, lack of input or feedback.

Common conditions:

- Demotivation and learned helplessness
- Increased error rates and preventable injuries
- Contributes to overall burnout and depression

Thriving practices: Realistic shooting plans, crew input on safety/scheduling, cross-training, recognition of good work.

Outcome: Turns potentially meaningful creative work into draining repetition; thriving fosters engagement and innovation.

5. Work-Life Integration (balance, rest, flexibility)

Depleting factors: Unpredictable schedules, frequent overtime/weekends, travel, no downtime between gigs.

Common conditions:

- Chronic sleep debt
- Family/relationship breakdown
- Substance use as coping mechanism
- Worsened cardiovascular and metabolic disease

Thriving practices: Predictable 10-hour days, built-in recovery, schedule protection from pre-production.

Outcome: Currently 62% say schedules harm mental well-being; thriving enables sustainable personal and family life.

6. Basic Needs for Thriving (fair pay, security, safe resources)

Depleting factors: Freelance precarity, inconsistent income, pressure to accept unsafe work, inadequate PPE/tools/transport.

Common conditions:

- Financial stress worsening anxiety/depression
- Delayed injury treatment and poor return-to-work support
- Higher attrition (64% considered leaving due to mental health; 15% became workless — tripled recently)

Thriving practices: Fair transparent pay, injury/mental health support, safe equipment and resources, anti-retaliation protections.

Outcome: Lack of basic needs creates survival-mode stress; meeting basic needs provides the foundation for all other domains.

Summary

When **multiple domains are depleted at once** (the current norm), the result is a public health crisis: high injury rates, mental illness, chronic disease, and even talent loss. The industry treats human energy as expendable rather than renewable.

Thriving on Set reverses this: 10-hour days with real rest, psychological safety, support roles, and sustainable planning recharge all six domains. Crew leave productions physically healthier, emotionally stronger, socially connected, and creatively energized.

Key Takeaway for Film & TV

These harms are not inevitable — they are structural. Measuring progress with the Harvard *Thriving from Work* Questionnaire and implementing regenerative practices (enforced rest, protected reporting, well-being roles) can shift the industry from extraction to replenishment.

Quick Reference

Domain	Current Industry Risk Level	Most Common Harms	Thriving Solution
1. Physical/Mental	Very High	Injuries (85%), fatigue, sleep disorders	10-hr days + 10–12 hr turnaround
2. Social	High	Loneliness, bullying (41%)	Well-being coordinators + inclusion protocols
3. Psychological/Emotional	Very High	Burnout, suicidal thoughts (30%)	Psychological safety + mental health support
4. Job Design	High	Demotivation, errors	Crew input + realistic schedules
5. Work-Life Integration	Very High	Family strain, chronic exhaustion	Predictable rest & recovery
6. Basic Needs	High	Precarity, unsafe resources	Fair pay + protected systems

Recommendation: Adopt the Thriving on Set framework and pilot the Harvard Thriving From Work questionnaire. This is a practical first step toward a healthier workplace.

Healthier crews mean safer, more creative, and more sustainable productions.

Special Thanks to Susan Peters, PhD, of the Harvard Center for Work, Health and Well-being for guidance and support.