



## **“Thriving on Set”: establishing a new standard for creative, safe, and sustainable film and television production**

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### **Executive Summary**

“Thriving on Set” is a proposed forward-looking production model that goes beyond minimum safety standards and harm prevention. It actively restores and replenishes the physical, mental, social and creative energy of cast and crew so that people do not merely survive the intense demands of filmmaking—they thrive because of the work. Anchored in the Harvard Center for Work, Health and Well-Being’s “Thriving from Work” framework, this approach positions crew well-being as a fundamental driver of creativity, productivity, safety, innovation, retention, and long-term industry sustainability.

**Thriving on Set** can be envisioned as the necessary new benchmark, deliberately designed to foster a film/TV production environment that:

- Replenishes rather than depletes human resources.
- Builds structured recovery into schedules so intense creative pressure leaves people stronger, more innovative, and more fulfilled.
- Treats crew well-being and talent retention as an essential investment in creativity and productivity, not a peripheral cost.

Recent industry surveys paint a stark picture of the current extractive model: high rates of poor mental health, injuries, bullying, harassment, fatigue-related risks, and talent attrition. This paper outlines the core principles, practical elements, robust evidence base, and compelling business case for adopting **Thriving on Set** as the industry standard. It calls on producers, studios, directors, unions, guilds, and industry organizations to embed these practices into contracts, budgets, schedules, and protocols from pre-production onward.

### **Introduction: From Extractive to Regenerative Production Culture**

For decades, film and television production has operated under an extractive model defined by excessively long hours, insufficient rest, chronic fatigue, and a “heroic exhaustion” culture. This approach treats human resources as expendable, leading to measurable harm. These conditions drive high turnover, reduced creativity, increased errors, and safety incidents.

Industry data confirms the crisis:

- 35% of UK film, TV, and cinema workers rated their mental health as “poor” or “very poor” in 2024 (up from 24% in 2022), with only 12% viewing the industry as a mentally healthy workplace.
- 30% experienced suicidal thoughts in the past 12 months (far above the national average of ~5%), and 63% said work negatively affects their mental health.
- 64% have considered leaving the industry due to mental health concerns (up from 60% in 2022), with 15% becoming workless (tripled from 5% in 2022).
- 85% of respondents (or colleagues) reported workplace injuries; 79% were personally injured.
- Average working days exceed 11 hours (often 12–13 hours including prep/wrap), with frequent overtime, weekend work, and schedules that negatively impact mental wellbeing for 62% of global crew.

## Core Meaning and Practical Elements of Thriving on Set

Thriving from Work is defined as:

“the state of positive mental, physical, and social functioning in which workers' experiences of their work and working conditions enable them to thrive in their overall lives, contributing to their ability to achieve their full potential at work, at home, and in the community.”

Productions committed to thriving on set implement these evidence-based elements:

- **Strict maximum day lengths:** 10-hour workdays with enforced turn-around time (minimum 10–12 hours rest between wrap and next call).
- **Comprehensive on-set support systems:** Accessible mental health resources, well-being facilitators, intimacy coordinators, safety coordinators, and a protected culture of speaking up about fatigue or overload.
- **Anonymous injury and near-miss reporting system:** An easy-to-use, confidential, non-punitive system allowing cast and crew to report injuries, hazards, and near-misses without fear of retaliation. Reports feed directly into safety reviews and future planning. An anonymous system boosts reporting, enables early risk detection, prevents injuries, reduces costs, and builds greater trust and psychological safety on set.
- **Mandatory built-in recovery:** Scheduled rest breaks, adequate meal times, and downtime supporting sleep and personal life.
- **Sustainable scheduling and job design:** Realistic shooting plans that prevent chronic sleep debt, minimize unnecessary overtime, and reject “heroic exhaustion.”
- **Psychological safety and purpose:** Conditions supporting the Harvard Center’s domains of thriving from work—positive mental, physical, and social functioning enabling full potential on set and beyond.

## The Evidence Base: Why Thriving on Set Is Necessary and Effective

Current practices within the culture of film and television production have demonstrated widespread harm. Key statistics include:

### Mental Health and Wellbeing Crisis

- 30% experienced suicidal thoughts; 52% often feel lonely at work (vs. UK average ~20%).
- 41% experienced bullying, harassment, or discrimination; 53% of those did not report it.
- Freelancers, disabled, and neurodivergent workers face disproportionately worse outcomes (e.g., 53% poor mental health among those with disabilities vs. 29% without).

### Harassment, Discrimination, and Accountability

- 82% aware of unacceptable workplace behaviors.
- Only 31% believe powerful harassers would be held accountable; 41% would not report misconduct believing nothing would be done.
- Women (25-39), LGBTQ+, disabled, and Black workers experience significantly higher rates of unwanted sexual attention, bullying, discrimination, and retaliation.

### Physical Injury and Safety

- 85% of respondents or colleagues injured on productions; 69% believe creative vision is prioritized over safety.
- Only 7% always feel safe voicing safety concerns.
- Injuries lead to stress (45%), anxiety (38%), pressure to work through pain (36%), and lost future work (12%).

### Working Hours and Fatigue

- Average days of 11–13 hours; 80%+ witnessed mistakes due to fatigue; 90% felt unsafe on set or traveling while tired.
- Long hours (55+) linked to 35% higher stroke risk and 17% higher heart disease mortality.
- 84–90% experienced mental health challenges; 55% considered taking their own life; 93% experienced or witnessed bullying/harassment.

Fatigue science consistently shows that sleep debt and long/irregular hours impair cognition equivalent to alcohol impairment leading to increased errors, retakes, and accidents on set.

**Harvard Center for Work, Health and Well-Being – Thriving from Work Framework** (Peters et al., 2021 & 2023): Defines thriving as positive mental, physical, and social functioning enabled by work conditions. Validated questionnaires (8-item short form; 30-item long form) show higher thriving correlates with better performance, lower burnout, higher retention, and improved life satisfaction. The framework is structured around **six core domains**:

1. **Physical and Mental Well-being** (health, injury prevention, recovery)
2. **Social Well-being** (relationships, inclusion, support, community)
3. **Psychological and Emotional Well-being** (positive emotions, low stress, resilience)
4. **Job Design and Experience of Work** (meaningful tasks, autonomy, learning, recognition)
5. **Work-Life Integration** (balance, rest, flexibility)
6. **Basic Needs for Thriving** (fair pay, security, safe resources)

Studying the problem: Under the direction of Susan Peters, PhD and Paul Heinzlmann, MD, MPH, The Harvard Center for Work, Health and Well-being plan to pilot the *Thriving on Set* survey in a small sample population. A formal structured study will follow if key stakeholder organizations agree to collaborate and resources are secured.

## **Making the Case: Better Conditions Yield Better Results**

Rested, supported crews make fewer errors, need fewer retakes, collaborate more effectively, generate fresher ideas, and stay in the industry longer. This produces safer, more innovative, and more economically sustainable productions. Thriving on Set reframes the false “safety vs. creativity/budget” trade-off, and acknowledges that superior working conditions are a competitive advantage.

## **Conclusion and Call to Action**

The film and television industry faces a critical choice: continue extractive practices that drive talent loss, safety failures, and diminished creativity, or adopt Thriving on Set for a healthier, more sustainable, and vibrant future.

We urge immediate, concrete action by producers, studios, directors, unions, guilds, and organizations to:

- Embed these principles in budgets, schedules, and contracts.
- Champion cultures of recovery and psychological safety.
- Prioritize these standards in negotiations and develop implementation toolkits, training, and metrics (including the Harvard Thriving from Work Questionnaire).

The future of great filmmaking depends on energized, supported teams inspired by their work—not exhausted crews pushing through limits.

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