

Technical Paper 042
Dance Employers Consultation Exercise

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Aim

The aim of the consultation is to investigate the ways in which dance employers seek out and recruit dance performers, the importance they give to CV/job history and their current perspectives on dancer “employability” across a wide range of dance working contexts. This paper reports on the first (questionnaire survey) stage of the consultation.

Methodology

In the context of the DADA project, dancer employment contexts range across Musical Theatre, Classical Ballet, Contemporary Dance and culturally-diverse forms. Working contexts include cruise ships, commercial video work, television, film, West End theatre production companies, large/medium scale touring companies and project-based companies. There are different types of selection and employment practices across these categories.

The consultation was planned in partnership with the Council for Dance Education & Training (CDET) and Ofsted. The starting point of the consultation was to be a focus group with planned workshop activities but it proved difficult to arrange an event across the desired range of employers. Instead questionnaires were circulated and follow-up face-to-face and telephone interviews are planned.

The Employer Database

An employer database was constructed covering the variety of types of dance working contexts. The DADA schools train Classical ballet, Contemporary dance and jazz/musical theatre/commercial dance performers and so the study has focused on a range of direct employers and agencies responsible for selecting and promoting dancers for work in these sub-sectors. Given the lack of differentiated data on the size and scope of the dancer labour market and its sub-sectors, it is difficult to be sure of the coverage achieved. The study does not include the entrepreneurial self-generated work that is a common feature of the contemporary and jazz dancer’s working life, for example.

Earlier discussions with dance employers indicated that in general the touring company directors and dance project producers recruit, select and employ dancers directly. However, other (non-employing) agencies are involved in the selection of dancers for musical theatre shows, TV, musical theatre touring, film, adverts, corporate, commercial, cruise ships and video. Casting directors and theatrical agents engage in a two-stage filtering process, proposing dancers for work when notified by producers, directors and choreographers of work opportunities. They therefore have an up-to-date understanding of the skills and qualities required by the Musical Theatre employment market.

Other individuals and agencies feature in the employment landscape as providers of work because they commission or manage dance projects. For example, the Royal Opera House operates a programme of choreographer-led projects and commissions both choreographers and dancers for these projects. This model is even more

prevalent in contemporary dance through the network of national dance agencies. A category of “project producer” has been invented for this type of employer. Care was taken to ensure that a mix of large, middle and small scale companies was contacted.

The culturally-diverse category includes companies specialising in S.Asian/contemporary dance styles, African peoples’ dance and integrated able-bodied/disabled performer contemporary dance.

A total of 66 questionnaires was sent out to the full employer database (included at appendix A), covering the following categories:

Working context	Dance type	Employer type
Touring company	Classical ballet	Artistic Director
Touring company	Contemporary dance	Artistic Director
Touring company	Culturally-diverse dance	Artistic Director
Touring company	Jazz/musical theatre	Director/choreographer
Dance project	Classical ballet	Producer
Dance project	Contemporary dance	Producer
Dance project	Musical theatre	Choreographer/producer
Theatre show	Musical theatre	Producer/director
TV Producers	Musical theatre	Producers/HOD
Theatre show	Musical theatre	Casting director
Theatre, tours, film, TV, adverts, corporate, cruise ships & video	Jazz/musical theatre/commercial	Theatrical agent

Questionnaire Returns and Coverage

The percentage return of questionnaires was 33.33%, covering the following categories:

Employer Type	Sent Out	Responses received
Classical Ballet co. director/admin	2	0
Contemporary Dance co. director/admin	8	3
Culturally Diverse co. director/admin	6	4
Classical Ballet project producer	1	1
Contemporary dance project producer	2	0
Musical theatre project producer/choreog	3	1
Musical Theatre show producer/director	10	2
TV producer	2	0
Musical Theatre casting director	6	5
Theatrical agent	26	6
Totals	66	22

The returns give reasonable coverage of the middle-scale contemporary and culturally-diverse (subsidised) sub-sectors. Equally, the (non-subsidised) musical theatre casting agencies and theatrical agents are well-represented, offering coverage of West End Production casting, musical theatre touring, TV, commercial, music video and cruise ship employment. The obvious gaps in coverage are the large-scale classical and contemporary companies and the contemporary dance project producers. One West End /film production company returned two

questionnaires and a classical project producer and musical theatre producer each returned a questionnaire.

Questionnaire Responses

Section One – Finding Dancers

Q1 Which of the following describes how you normally seek out dancers?

	Contemp Company Director	Cult Div Company Director	Classical Project Producer	Musical Theatre Choreog	Show Producer	Casting Director	Agent
Advertisement							
Network of contacts	1			1			1
Both	2	4	1		1	5	
Other	1 (video)			1 (agents)	1 (casting directors)	1 (school shows)	5 (school shows)
Total respondents	3	4	1	1	2	5	6

Q2 Please give a brief description of how you normally seek out dancers.

	Contemp Company Director	Cult Div Company Director	Classical Project Producer	Musical Theatre Choreog	Show Producer	Casting Director	Agent
Press advert	1 (Guardian Stage)	1 (Juice)	1		1 (Stage)	1 (Stage)	
Casting websites					1	3	
Casting newsletters					1	3	
Studio/dance org poster	1	1				1	
Perf arts coll poster	1					2	
School show observation						1	6
Invite to class to observe	1	2					
Invite to audition		1					
Observe in live perf	1	3				1	1
Previously employed	1		1				
Casting director					2		
Phone/circulate agents				1	1	4	
Observe perf on video	1						
Word of mouth						1	
Relationship with school	1						

Own database						1	
Overseas audition		1					
Recommendation		1	1				
Artists approach directly							2
Total respondents	3	4	1	1	2	5	6

Different patterns emerge across the different sub-sectors. The subsidised contemporary and diverse companies and the project producer use a mixture of open advertising through publications, posters circulated to dance studios and organisations (including dance training institutions) to publicise work opportunities. Within this group, there are also indications of “head-hunting” activity: five references to observing prospective dancers in (live and video) performance, four references to “inviting” into audition classes and workshops, two references to previous employment and two more to recommendation.

In the non-subsidised (musical theatre) sub-sector there are indications of a supply chain, with producers notifying casting directors of their casting requirements and relying on them for a shortlist of potential performers from which they will make their final selection. They do however use some open advertising through the use of casting websites, press adverts and casting newsletters to reach beyond the network of casting directors. The casting directors (four out of five) in turn phone or otherwise circulate the theatrical agents with the casting requirements and expect them to propose their selection of performers for audition. However, like the producers, they do not rely entirely on the agents but advertise through a variety of channels, including press adverts, casting websites, casting newsletters, posters to dance studios, organisations and training institutions. One casting director keeps a database of performers. From which to select.

The theatrical agents make it clear that they do not advertise for dancers but are by and large approached by dancers seeking their services. The main service they offer is to keep a number of dancer/clients on their books and to propose a selection of these to casting directors/producers when notified of casting requirements. All but one of the agents attend school graduation shows to seek out new dancer/clients.

Section Two – Selecting Dancers

Q3 Which of the following describes how you normally select dancers?

	Contemp Company Director	Cult Div Company Director	Classi cal Projec t Produ cer	Musica l Theat re Chore og	Show Prod ucer	Casti ng Direc tor	Age nt
Audition	3	4	1	1	2	5	
Recommendation	2		1	1		2	3
Performance observation	2	3	1	1		3	6
Class observation	3		1	1		1	
Other	2 extende d rehears al/works hop over time						2 sch ool sho wca se
Total respondents	3	4	1	1	2	5	6

All respondents other than theatrical agents make their final selection decisions through audition. However, other processes inform that decision-making: recommendations (from other team members) and observation of the dancer in performance is used by the majority and other contexts for observation such as classes, workshops and extended rehearsals are mentioned. Agents select through direct observation of the dancer in class and school showcases and through recommendation.

Q4 Does the dancer's CV/job history influence your decision to audition/select?

	Contemp Company Director	Cult Div Company Director	Classical Project Producer	Musical Theatre Choreog	Show Producer	Casting Director	Agent
Yes to audition	2	4	1		2	5	2
Yes to select	1	3	1	1	1	5	6
Total respondents	3	4	1	1	2	5	6

All respondents answered yes to one of these questions and many to both, indicating that the CV/job history plays an important part in the selection process.

Q5 What do you look for in the dancer's CV?

	Contemp Company Director	Cult Div Company Director	Classical Project Producer	Musical Theatre Choreog	Show Producer	Casting Director	Agent
Journey of interest	1			1			
Length/level of training	1				2	3	2
Style of training	1	2				3	2
Choreographers worked with	2		1	1		1	4
Professional work experience (Companies &/or shows)	2	3	1		1	4	3
Teaching skills		1				1	
CV presentation			1				
Photo			1			1	
Other skills/knowledge			1				
Place of training					1	1	
Singing/acting skills					2	1	1
Prior roles					1		1
Specific (appropriate?) skills			1			2	
Height & look						1	
Diversity of skills							2
Depends on individual (?)							1
Total respondents	3	4	1	1	2	5	6

The provision of a log of professional work emerges as important. More specifically, the roles played, the productions undertaken, the companies/ and the choreographers worked with are all indicators of potential employability. All respondents referred to using the CV/job history in this way – as an indicator of professional status and acceptability. For one of the contemporary company directors and one the musical theatre project producers, the CV/job history was an important indicator of the dancer's dance interests.

There was less consensus across other areas, although the CV as an indicator of length, level and style of training was mentioned by more than half of the respondents.

Section Three – Dancer Qualities

Q6 Please describe the qualities you look for in a dancer.

The spread of the thirty-nine different qualities offered by respondents in answer to this question makes it difficult to find patterns around the desired dancer qualities. It is difficult to understand from these responses which qualities are being taken for granted for example only one respondent listed “fit and healthy”, only four listed “talent” and only four referred specifically to stage presence or performance quality as such. Moreover, it cannot be assumed that when the same qualities are listed by different respondents they actually mean the same thing. In the figure below, the qualities are grouped into categories for performance, dance working, personal/attitudinal, social/team and chance qualities.

	Contemp Company Director	Cult Div Company Director	Classical Project Producer	Musical Theatre Choreog	Show Producer	Casting Director	Agent
Performance							
Strong technique	1	2	1	1	1	4	1
Athleticism	1						
Energy					1	2	2
Articulation/fluidity	1	1					
Attention to detail/accuracy			1		1	1	
Stage presence/performance quality	1	1				2	
Skill/talent	1	1					2
Good acting skills						1	
Good vocal/singing skills						1	
Musical qualities		1					
Dance working							
Improvisation	1						
Ability to listen/take direction	1						
Multi or bi-lingual in dance forms		1					
Ability to learn quickly			1			1	
Ability to tackle material			2		1		
Understanding dance	1						
Decision-maker	1						
Ideas/creativity	1	2	1				1
Open- mindedness/adaptability	1	3					
Personal/attitudinal							
Commitment	1	1				1	1
Life experience/awareness of the world	1						
Respect for others	1						
Intelligence	1		1				2
Humour	1						

Determination/resilience	1						
Professionalism		1					3
Confidence		1				1	1
Curiosity/enquiring intellect	1	1					
Thoughtful	1						
Good attitude						2	
Enthusiasm/optimism						1	2
Ambition							1
Individuality							1
Fit & healthy							1
Social/Team							
Communication		1					1
Complements team		1					
Working in teams/social skills		2	1				
Chance							
Appropriateness for role/job				1		1	
Look right for the show				1	1	1	
Total respondents	3	4	1	1	2	5	6

It would be inappropriate to draw any conclusions from these questionnaire responses as they stand. Much more work would be needed to develop a map of dancer employability qualities if that should be required.

Q7 Do you find it difficult to recruit dancers with these qualities?

	Contemp Company Director	Cult Div Company Director	Classical Project Producer	Musical Theatre Choreog	Show Producer	Casting Director	Agent
Yes	1	1	1		2		1
No	1					2	4
Sometimes	1					2*	1*
No reply		3		1		1	1
Total respondents	3	4	1	1	2	5	6

*males

Six respondents did not answer this question but of the seventeen who did, six found it difficult to recruit dancers with the desired qualities and seven did not. Four respondents sometimes found it difficult to recruit and three of these referred specifically to the difficulties of finding male dancers. It is interesting that the Musical Theatre producers did find difficulty whereas their suppliers either did not or only did so occasionally. There appear to be no obvious patterns across the sub-sectors as regards the availability of employable dancers.

Section Four – Advice for Dance Training

Q8 Do you have any advice to give us about how dance training could be developed?

	Contemp Company Director	Cult Div Company Director	Classical Project Producer	Musical Theatre Choreog	Show Producer	Casting Director	Agent
Yes	3	4	1	1	1	4	3
No					1	1	3
No reply							1
Total respondents	3	4	1	1	2	5	6

Seventeen of the twenty-three respondents chose to offer advice for the development of training. Their replies can be categorised as relating to “dancer care”, “creative use of the body”, “broader curriculum”, “professional life” and “widening participation”

Q9 Please give details

	Contemp Company Director	Cult Div Company Director	Classical Project Producer	Musical Theatre Choreog	Show Producer	Casting Director	Agent
Dancer care							
More work in gym on strength & core stability	1						
Sensible nutrition	1						
Understanding of warm-up & cool down	1						
Recovery from hard work & injury	1						
Know body rather than technique	1						
Good balance of personal & technical development		1					
Continue technical training once working						1	
Creative Development							
Time to play in the body& turn to clear understanding	1						

Rich mind informing understood body	1						
Equal emphasis on creativity & technique	1						
Broader curriculum							
Broader scope of what is seen as dance	1						
Move away from clichéd movement vocabulary	1						
More open to non-western dance cultures		1					
More dancers who can act & sing				1		2	1
Professional life							
More emphasis on competition for jobs & importance of second job							1
More relevant to broader marketplace not flagship cos		1					
Widening participation							
Mainstream African & Caribbean dance training		1					
Open up to disabled students		1					
More flexible & inclusive attitudes to permeate dance culture		1					

Still talent wasted because they cannot afford to train				1			
More dancers from different ethnic backgrounds				1			
Make more interesting for boys to train						1	
Other							
Make girls work to higher standard						1	
Start training earlier to develop technique						1	
All round training but focusing on students strengths						1	
Joint school's showcase							1
Total respondents	3	4	1	1	2	5	6

The advice offered was clearly specific to the particular needs of the employer sub-sector. The contemporary dance company directors focused on the need for more emphasis in training on the care and creative development of the dancer. Seven of the respondents sought a broader curriculum but in very specific ways: two of the contemporary directors sought the incorporation of more choreographic (rather than technical) understanding. Four of the musical theatre respondents wanted to see more emphasis on acting and singing. Only two respondents requested more emphasis on more industry understanding. Not unexpectedly, the culturally diverse company directors sought more flexible curriculum which could incorporate the needs of their specific communities.

Numbers prepared to participate in further consultation

	Contemp Company Director	Cult Div Company Director	Classical Project Producer	Musical Theatre Choreog	Show Producer	Casting Director	Agent
	1	3	0	1	1	4	3
Total respondents	3	4	1	1	2	5	6

Conclusions

This study has enabled the first attempts at:

- Constructing an employer database with potential to cover all sub-sectors of dancer employment.
- Generating some understanding of the musical theatre/commercial dance supply chain through agents, casting directors and producers.
- Differentiating the recruitment methods used within the sub-sectors.
- Confirming the importance of the CV/job history as an indicator of employability to the employer.

It has been less successful as a tool for beginning a map of employability qualities or finding consensual employer advice for improving training.

Perhaps the most important conclusion to draw from this study is the surprising lack of publicly-available information about employment in the sector. There is no doubt that within the sub-sectors, informal and semi-formalised networks enable the passing on of information about work opportunities but it is difficult to gain an understanding of how widely this information is distributed and how far all interested parties are able to access it. Among interested parties we might include the full range of potential employees, all agents and casting directors and of course all those involved in training the next generation of dancers. The latter in particular need up to date knowledge about the industry and its changing needs and at this moment it is difficult to know how they access this beyond a fairly narrow range of immediate contacts.

There is a great deal of work to do to map the dance employment landscape and to create structures by which employment market information can be shared across all interested parties, including policy-makers. This work is clearly far beyond the scope of the DADA project and the Warwick Evaluation team – it is more properly the remit of an industry lead body and Sector Skills Council.

Recommendation

That those involved in the setting up of the new Sector Skills Council are urged to work with relevant industry bodies ie the Council for Dance Education and Training in partnership with the National Council for Drama Training (for Musical Theatre), to begin the mapping work.