

BGT and X Factor in runners row

21 April, 2016 | By Jake Kanter

The treatment of as many as 40 runners on The X Factor and Britain's Got Talent over the past two years has prompted complaints to Thames TV and the Health and Safety Executive (HSE), Broadcast can reveal.

- Complaints about 17-hour shifts for seven consecutive days
- No holiday pay or travel expenses for casual runners
- Thames defends record; says it nurtures and promotes runners

Runners' rights campaigner Mark Watson, who moderates 30,000-strong Facebook group People Looking For TV Work: Runners, has written to the Fremantle Media company on behalf of entry-level staff who have told him that they are overworked and underpaid.

In a separate letter to HSE, Watson claimed that runners on The X Factor are being asked to work shifts of "more than 17 hours for several days on end" without sufficient breaks. He argued that this presents a serious health and safety risk because staff are operating production equipment and driving long distances. The complaint is being assessed by HSE to determine whether it should be investigated.

Bectu also raised concerns over the treatment of runners with Thames last year.

Broadcast has spoken to a number of current and former runners who support Watson's claims about working hours on The X Factor and Britain's Got Talent, which became the highest-rated show of the year to date on Saturday.

One staff runner on the upcoming series of The X Factor revealed that they have been required to work 17-hour shifts for seven consecutive days during auditions and boot camps. Staff runners are paid a base rate of £390 a week, meaning that during these intense periods of filming they could be earning a lot less than the minimum wage.

"These working conditions affect health and wellbeing," the source said. "I love my job and the thrill and excitement I get from it. However, I feel I'm expected to give so much for so little."

Thames argued that no runner is paid below minimum wage and stressed that no one is required to work 17-hour shifts. It said staff runners are contracted for five days a week and receive time in lieu or extra money if they exceed their hours. Casual runners are paid for the hours they work.

Runners have also complained to Broadcast about other issues on the ITV shows. Those employed on a more casual basis during audition rounds have not received holiday pay, while they are also expected to meet the cost of travel and accommodation when touring with the shows to different cities.

Thames said it has now started paying casual staff for untaken holiday, and has [decided to change its policy on travel expenses after Broadcast raised the issue](#).

Thames reacts to runner woes

Watson acknowledged that Thames has a good record on issues including unpaid work experience and that runners encounter long hours across the industry, but said he had “no sense” that Thames had taken his complaint seriously.

Director of production Dean Jones has offered to meet Watson, but the latter has so far declined.

A Thames spokesman said: “We take our responsibility as an employer incredibly seriously and pride ourselves on being a company that looks after all of its employees. Runners are an important part of our production teams and we work hard to retain our staff, nurturing, training and promoting them within the company.

“We are proud that this is demonstrated by the fact that many people who have started out as runners on both The X Factor and Britain’s Got Talent have gone on to stay with the company, progressing to various roles including producers and executive producers.”

Britain’s Got Talent and The X Factor are co-produced by Syco Entertainment, but Broadcast understands that Simon Cowell was unaware of the controversial working practices and the complaints raised by Watson.

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They are the juggernauts of TV entertainment, but when it comes to working conditions, the view of many runners is: “It’s a no from me.”

Mark Watson, a director who campaigns against poor working practices in the TV industry, has thrust Britain’s Got Talent and The X Factor into the spotlight. He claims they are putting entry-level staff at risk by overworking and underpaying them.

Thames has robustly defended the shows and for many runners, they represent a golden opportunity to get into TV production and receive excellent training.

But Broadcast’s research revealed multiple claims that Thames has exploited the standing of its flagship formats, with various grievances over working hours, travel expenses and holiday pay.

Those employed on a more casual basis, known as day runners, have been invited to tour the UK during audition rounds, but told they must pay for their own travel and accommodation.

Thames said this is not policy and day runners should be recruited locally. But Broadcast has seen emails that clearly requested Britain's Got Talent day runners travel with the show.

"We are looking for people who can make ALL of the dates... you will need to arrange your own travel and accommodation for this tour," said one message.

A former The X Factor runner said: "Because you're desperate for experience, you do it. But because you're funding your own travel, you end up barely making a profit. In fact, you often make a loss." Day runners now receive the national living wage of £7.20 an hour after changes to the law this month.

Another recalled the "ridiculous" situation where around 20 runners bought flights to Northern Ireland for Britain's Got Talent. The source said the shoot lasted until 2am, and the group were then asked to book their own taxis back to their hotel.

A third added: "I knew I had been taken for a ride when I started working for other companies."

Thames has given serious consideration to the issues raised by Broadcast and has updated its procedures to ensure that when casual runners are on the road, appropriate travel and accommodation costs are now covered.

It added that locally recruited casual runners on this year's The X Factor far outnumber those that travel with the show between cities. The audition stages are currently being shot.

Another persistent complaint among casual runners is that they have not been paid the 10.8% of the day rate they are owed for untaken holiday. Each day runner is asked to complete a 'casual staff voucher', which keeps track of their hours. One version of the document seen by Broadcast states that "payment in respect of any untaken holiday... will be made to me at the end of the engagement".

But none of the runners Broadcast has spoken to received this money. It is understood that one raised the issue with Thames last year for work they did on both Britain's Got Talent and The X Factor, but was told that their claim had expired.

After challenging the company further and not receiving a reply, the individual launched small claims court proceedings. They eventually received a cheque in the post.

Watson complained to Thames about holiday pay last year and Thames has changed its policy in recent months, paying untaken leave as a matter of course.

Despite this, a number of runners who have worked for the company this year told Broadcast that they are yet to receive what they are owed.

Many claimed that conditions on shows like The Voice UK are better. It is said that Wall to Wall keeps a closer eye on working hours, while the indie pays untaken holiday and covers travel expenses if runners' tour with the show.

“The production was much kinder in terms of its HR standards,” said a source.

Bectu has made runners’ rights a priority and is in the process of launching a charter with 11 commitments over working conditions, including paying the living wage. The charter has been sent to Pact, the BBC and ITV. Bectu hopes all three will sign up to the commitments.

“Runners are some of the most vulnerable people in the industry,” said assistant general secretary Spencer MacDonald.