FESTIVALS HUB
MARCHÉ DU FILM

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sane cinema

Prioritizing Well-Being at Work

JUNE 2023

The Idea

The film festival and markets industry is driven by passionate, hardworking people with high ambitions for their events and organizations. These cultural organizers often show great flexibility, be it as employees or freelancers, and they dedicate their lives to turning small resources into visionary events enabling independent cinema to meet its curious audiences.

But the dedication comes with a price. The work can feel limitless, when overtime becomes the norm, and the option to say no is not at hand. Stress, burnout, bullying, and harassment are common in the film industry, and according to surveys*, 60% of film professionals are ready to quit the industry because of the toll work takes on their mental health.

So what can be done within festivals to create a healthier work environment that promotes team cohesion and well-being, and heightens the awareness of the topic?

The Format & Inspirations

The idea for this event was born following the publication of *The Looking Glass Report by the Film & TV Charity; the 2022 Nostradamus Report, and a panel discussion on mental well-being in the film industry at Karlovy Vary IFF in 2023.

The core of the workshop was to document the experiences of all participants from festivals around the globe, and thereby base the learnings on our international colleagues and peers.

It was inspired by earlier events and naturally continued the ongoing discussion on the topic of mental health in the wider film industry. This event was however the first time it was done with film festival and market representatives solely.

The Festivals Hub, in partnership with Sane Cinema, held this closed workshop during the Marché du Film 2023 to brainstorm solutions to the underlying well-being issues within the film festival industry.

Wednesday 24 May | 10h00 - 13h00
Festivals Hub (Riviera L0), Palais des Festivals de Cannes

The Moderator

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Louise Højgaard Johansen
Founder - Denmark/Czech Republic

Louise is a Danish festival programmer and film industry consultant. She started her career at CPH PIX and went on to curate audience and industry events for more than 15 years. Her work has taken her from Denmark to Iceland and Greece, and today she has settled in Prague. After becoming a mother, she continues her work for Athens Intl. Children's FF, next to collaborating with FAMU, Cinergy Prague and Karlovy Vary IFF. Sane Cinema is her latest initiative. Louise holds a master in Film Studies from The University of Copenhagen, and is a member of the Danish and European Film Academies.

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Isam Sharqawi
Director of Service Delivery - France

Isam graduated from Lille's University with a master's degree in educational psychology and joined WPO in 2016 as an EAP counsellor. After filling a Team Lead and an Operations Manager roles successfully, Isam moved to becoming the Director of Service Delivery in France, managing both Paris and Lille service delivery departments.

The Participants

17 participants from film festivals and film commissions around the world joined us for this workshop to share their experiences and best practices, including:
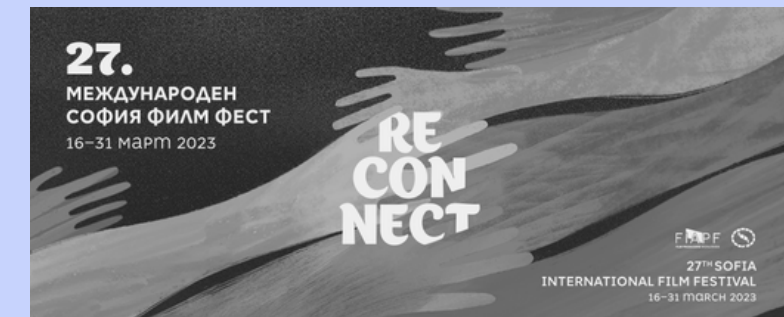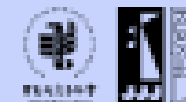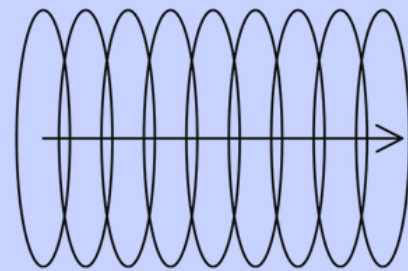
Methodology & Aims

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The aim was to pinpoint the specific challenges for people working in our part of the film industry, and to kickstart the creation of a best practice guide that can be valuable to and implemented by anyone working in our field.

Each hour of the workshop was dedicated to a specific activity, which were:

1. Speakers give an overview of well-being issues in the film festival industry
2. Participants work in small groups to brainstorm challenges and their solutions
3. Participants share their results in plenum and discuss further actions
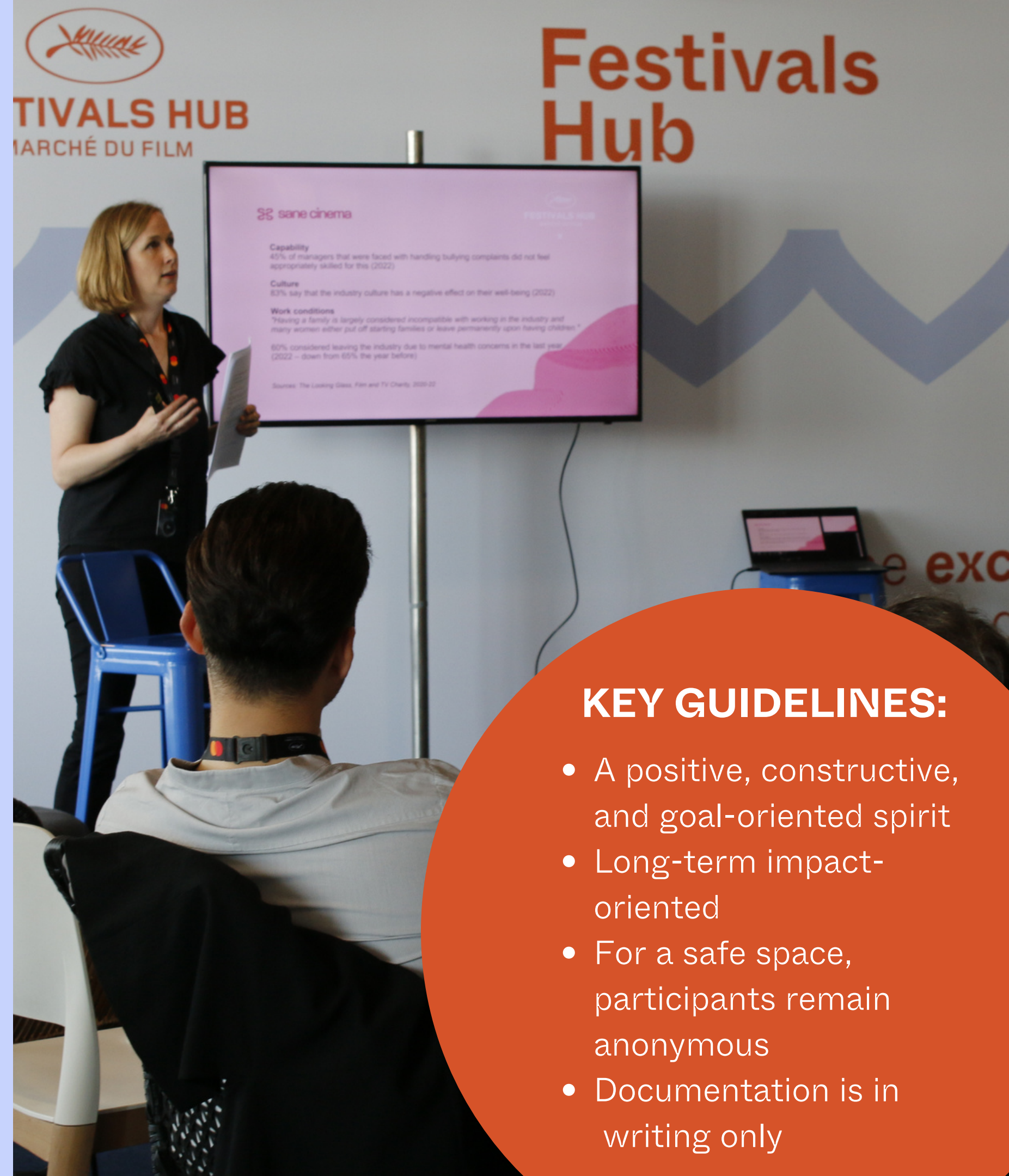
KEY GUIDELINES:

- A positive, constructive, and goal-oriented spirit
- Long-term impact-oriented
- For a safe space, participants remain anonymous
- Documentation is in writing only

1.

The Culture at the Workplace

The Problem

Key question

In our passion-driven, hardworking sector, unhealthy work conditions and work ethics are common.

How do we better align our expectations towards each other, detect potential bullying, harassment or toxicity, and create an environment where it feels safe to express ourselves?

Key issues identified during the group discussions:

- Unhealthy working conditions and work ethics
- Power dynamics and hierarchies
- Discrepancies between seasonal and year-round staff
- Job security as a taboo topic
- Lack of a centralized staff CV repository between festivals
- Competition between festivals and confidentiality

The Solutions

The participants identified a series of possible solutions that they have in some cases already experimented with, including but not limited to:

- Rotating on-call responsibilities
- Flexibility for employees with multiple jobs
- Sustainable travel and collective discussions
- Hybrid work models
- Collaborative hiring efforts among festivals
- Systematizing contract renewal in advance
- Family support and childcare during festivals
- Resting spaces for staff and guests during festivals
- Organized international network for support
- Code of conduct at workplaces

The Solutions

Rotating on-call responsibilities

Having team members take turns being on-call during evenings can distribute the workload and ensure that no one is burdened with continuous availability.

Flexibility for employees with multiple jobs

Festivals should provide flexibility for workers with multiple jobs, in terms of scheduling and availability during regular working hours, to retain valuable talent.

International support network

Creating an international peer-to-peer network amongst festival staff members so that they can build links with and find support amongst their international peers.

Family support and childcare

Providing on-site childcare facilities during festival productions help to reduce division between personal and professional lives. (See for example The Red Balloon initiative.)

The Solutions

Sustainable travel and collective awareness

Collective discussions on travel arrangements can minimize environmental impact and optimize resource allocation for the team.

Leading by example

Implementing limitations on working hours, creating quiet workspaces, and explicitly stating the right to disconnect from work responsibilities outside of working hours.

Collaborative hiring efforts among festivals

Festivals could collaborate to ensure year-round employment opportunities for their staff. This would provide job security and facilitate collaboration between festivals.

Systematizing contract renewal in advance

Providing next year's contracts to employees when they leave their positions or go on breaks at the end of the festival edition can enhance job security.

2.

Capability & Competences

The Problem

Key question

We often grow into the position as leader of an organisation or department, learning-by-doing. Does our sector lack training opportunities for managers and leaders?

How are we better leaders for our team which consists of both employees and freelancers, and how do we protect our own mental health in the process?

Key issues identified during the group discussions:

- Lack of training opportunities for leaders
- Pressure to do more and perform better each year with limited resources
- Unrealistic expectations and the allure of the industry - "selling a dream that we cannot afford"
- Glorification of the hard workers

The Solutions

The participants identified a series of possible solutions that they have in some cases already experimented with, including but not limited to:

- Balancing leadership for a diverse team
- Offering team members after-education and training for better management skills
- Mental health support and stakeholder involvement
- Creating a motivating work environment
- Fostering healthy relation dynamics
- Pillars of workplace culture

The Solutions

Offering team members training for management skills

Equiping leaders with the necessary skills that enables them to detect signs of mental health issues at the workplace; and to ensure a safe work environment.

Balancing leadership for a diverse team

Leading a team that consists of both employees and freelancers, who bring along diverse competences, requires identifying and leverging the strengths of each team member.

Creating a motivating work environment

Building bonds and motivating teams through team-building activities is essential for fostering a joyous and energized atmosphere year-round, as well as ensuring the team is offered downtime after a festival production.

Pillars of workplace culture

Emphasizing pillars such as resourcefulness, trust, playfulness, and other essential qualities contributes to a strong and positive workplace culture.

3.

In Case of Emergency

The Problem

Key question

Mental health and a safe work environment can be approached both preventively and as crisis handling. What do we do when there is an actual mental health problem at the workplace? Do we have the right support and safety net in place? Is our organisation a safe environment to speak out, and what can we do individually and systemically?

Key issues identified during the group discussions:

- Lack of mental health support and a safe environment to speak out
- Lack of transparency in organisational structures and the support system
- Lack of reporting mechanisms for discrimination or problems

The Solutions

The participants identified a series of possible solutions that they have in some cases already experimented with, including but not limited to:

- Mental health support and safe work environment
- Transparency and support systems
- Appointing a designated person or external support that is trained in handling emergencies
- Self-care and clear boundaries
- Exit interviews and reporting mechanisms
- Psychological first aid and education for leaders
- Proactive approach and recognition of toxic behavior

The Solutions

Mental health support and safe work environment

Ensure appropriate support and safety nets for mental health issues. Organisations should foster a safe environment for employees to speak out.

Transparency and support systems

Establish clear organizational structures, support systems independent of direct managers, and legal consciousness of rights and recourse options.

Designated person or external support

Assigning a designated go-to person among staff (or externally), who is trained to deal with emergencies. This can provide a safe avenue for reporting problems and seeking assistance.

Self-care and clear boundaries

Promoting self-care practices and maintaining clear boundaries in the workplace

The Solutions

Exit interviews and reporting mechanisms

Conducting exit interviews for staff is crucial for understanding and addressing any issues. Establishing reporting mechanisms, such as a phone number or email address, for reporting discrimination or problems occurring at the festival or within the team can encourage a safe and supportive environment.

Psychological first aid and education for leaders

Being proactive rather than reactive enables better crisis response. Training staff to recognize toxic behavior, understand its signals, and providing a code of conduct or best practices can help teams identify and address toxic situations.

Proactive approach and recognition of toxic behavior

Training team members in psychological first aid to identify early signs of stress or burnout and providing education for leaders on crisis management and prevention are valuable initiatives.

Conclusions

The urgency of this topic was clear from the beginning of the workshop, which highlighted key areas for prioritizing well-being in the film festival industry. This includes fostering a positive workplace culture, providing training for managers and teams, addressing mental health issues, and establishing support systems. Creating safe environments, setting realistic expectations, and recognizing toxic behavior is essential. These actions can be taken by anyone working in our sector.

All stakeholders should recognize the urgency to avoid the loss of qualified staff, and implement a multi-step approach, ensuring time and resources, to dealing with the mental health issues in our industry.

Thank you to all participants who gave their time and shared their priceless experiences, and thank you to all partners.

End Note

This document is public and can be used as inspiration or as a reference point for anyone working in the film festival and markets industry.

The workshop was the first step in what could become a larger series of events that further develops actions towards a healthier film festival industry. If your organisation is interested in building on top of these learnings and take the next step, we are happy to hear from you.

Get in touch with us!

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