

# The class ceiling in the creative industries



FLEISHMANHILLARD

Research by Creative Access &  
FleishmanHillard UK, 2024





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# Introduction

This research sheds light on the pervasive influence of class dynamics within the creative industries. The findings investigate how soft social identifiers such as educational background, social circles, current job, and upbringing impact people's career trajectories.

Most strikingly, where current efforts to promote diversity and inclusivity exist, a persistent pay gap and discrimination based on class persists in the UK's creative sectors.

## Who did we hear from?

Our combined audience was made up of 392 professionals working or aspiring to work in the creative industries. This breaks down into two main sub-sets:

- A survey of **201** creative industries professionals in the UK (referenced in this report as 'Creative Gen Pop'). Data was collected by our partners Vitreous World in January 2024. Respondents in this sample work in: Book/Magazine Publishing, Media/Journalism, Talent Management, Music/Theatre/Dance/Visual Arts, Campaigning/Government Policy, PR/Marketing/Advertising, Film/TV/Radio/Audio Production, Museums/Galleries/Libraries. Respondents were from a diverse range of backgrounds and characteristics including age, gender, ethnicity, and socioeconomic status.
- A survey of **191** creative industries professionals in the UK who are part of the Creative Access community. Data was collected in partnership with FleishmanHillard UK in January 2024. Respondents in this sample met the same targeting criteria and were comprised of professionals from a diverse range of backgrounds and characteristics including age, gender, ethnicity, and socioeconomic indicators. Please note, in this sample the majority (**94%**) self-identify as being middle, lower-middle, or working class.



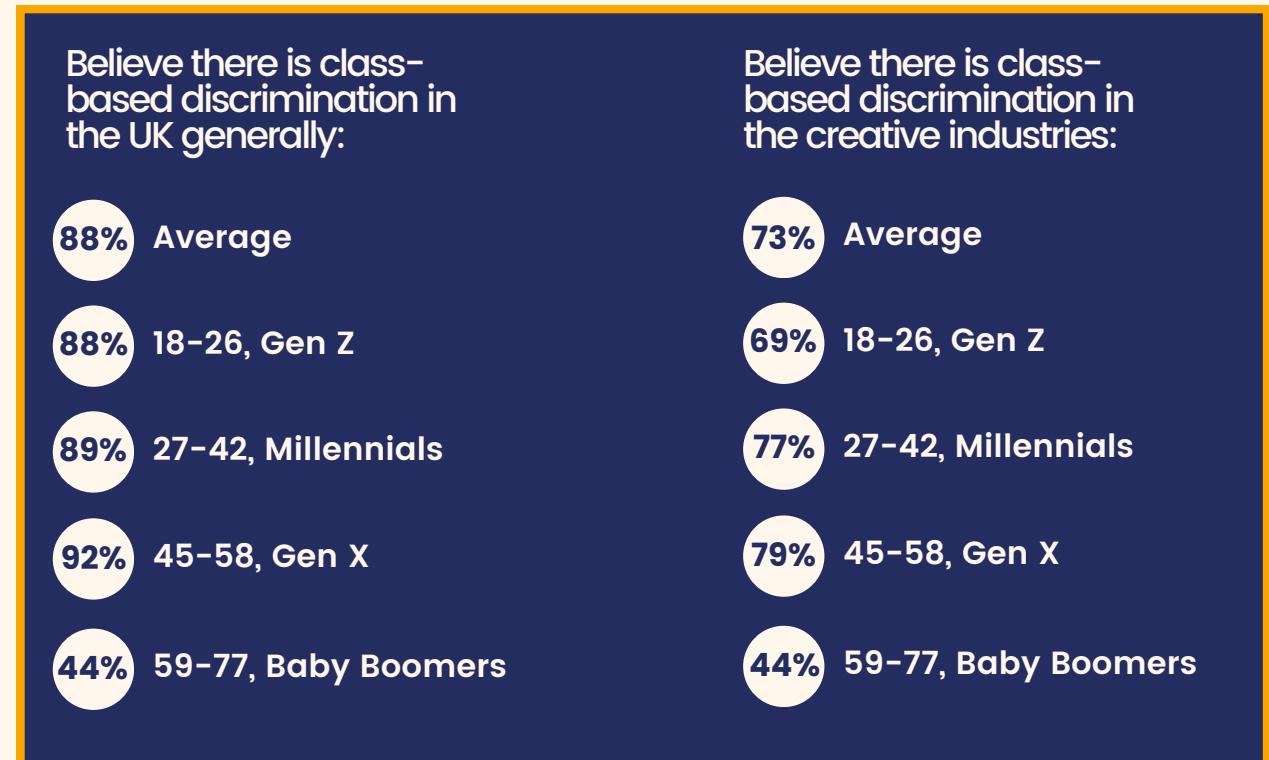


# Executive summary

Initial findings reveal a stark contrast in perceptions regarding working-class access, mobility and representation in the creative industries.

- Definitions or signifiers of class vary significantly depending on respondents' backgrounds, with working-class individuals emphasising traditional signifiers like schooling (**69%**) and holidays (**52%**), while upper/upper-middle-class respondents prioritise attributes such as confidence and presentation (**38%**).
- While **44%** of respondents who identify as upper/upper-middle class believe changing social class in the UK is easier than ever, only **16%** of working-class respondents share this view.
- **64%** of respondents agree that people from working-class backgrounds are under-represented in their industry. When asked about senior working-class representation, **46%** of upper/upper-middle class respondents and **73%** of working-class respondents expressed concern. Various ethnic groups responded differently: Asian (**80%**), Black (**82%**), Mixed and multiple ethnic groups (**78%**), and white (**69%**).
- Amongst working-class respondents, there is the perception that there are fewer opportunities for social mobility with only **14%** stating opportunities are equally available, versus middle/upper-class counterparts (**54%**), indicating a persistent belief in barriers to upward mobility.
- While all sectors acknowledged working class representation as an issue, publishing stood out with **81%** of respondents, nearly **20%** above the average (**64%**).

- Sadly, **67%** affirmed unpaid internships were still common in their industry, and agreed this arrangement benefits upper/upper-middle class individuals most (**67%**).
- When examining whether discrimination based on class is felt within the UK generally, responses varied significantly between generational groups:





When drilling down into views across genders, discrimination towards working class individuals is reported more acutely by female respondents:

Discrimination felt among working class	Average	Male	Female
UK generally	88%	78%	91%
Creative industries	73%	64%	75%
My sector	64%	55%	83%

This discrepancy highlights the complex nature of socio-economic mobility and the disparity in lived experiences across different socioeconomic groups and generations.

### The sector view on the class ceiling

- Class barriers is particularly pronounced in publishing (**72%**) and government & policy (**85%**) compared to the average **66%**.
- While all sectors acknowledged working class representation as an issue, publishing stood out with **81%** of respondents, nearly **20%** above the average (**64%**).
- Working class under-representation at a senior level was felt most acutely in publishing (**87%**) and in museums & galleries (**87%**) versus the average **75%**.
- In response to the statement: ‘Jobs in the creative industries are middle- and upper-class jobs’, on average **53%** agreed. Film/TV/radio skewed significantly higher (**65%**), as did museums & galleries (**63%**) and publishing (**60%**).
- Regarding the extent of disadvantage felt by working class individuals in the creative industries, **73%** agreed or strongly agreed. This sentiment was felt most strongly in music/theatre/dance (**80%**) and museums & galleries (**88%**). Publishing respondents and government/campaigning policy also agreed at **77%**.
- On how hard it is for working class professionals to land a job in the creative industries: the museums & galleries sector felt this most strongly (**92%**) seconded by the publishing industry (**83%**), versus the average **74%**.

# Foreword



The unsettling truth is that social class barriers and biases are pervasive throughout the creative industries. Talented journalists, artists and actors from 'lower' socioeconomic backgrounds face a grotesquely unlevel playing field, characterised by a series of material and **cultural hurdles** that impede their progress. If you don't benefit from a financial safety net during the precarious early career years, or the know-how of navigating the **middle class workplace norms**, then you're significantly less likely to make it.

A big concern from this survey is that those from higher social classes are far less likely than their working class colleagues to express acute concern about the lack of working-class representation at senior levels. At the same time, Asian, Black and Mixed or multiple ethnic groups respondents were significantly more likely to express this concern compared with white respondents. This suggests we need to do more to challenge those in powerful positions to recognise this **missing dimension of diversity**. Class discrimination, meanwhile, is a struggle that impacts a richly diverse set of people.

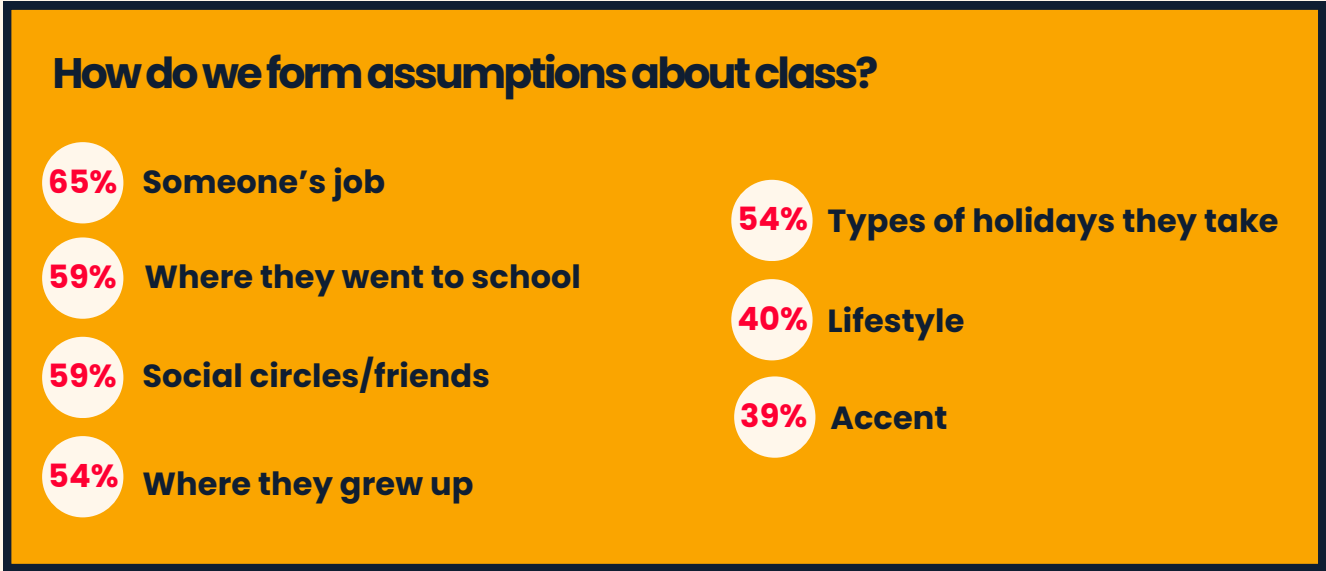
These findings add to growing evidence pointing to the need for urgent radical reform in the creative industries: adopting socio-economic background as a diversity measure for a start and setting targets for socio-economic diversity. We must also challenge deficit approaches that implicitly frame people from working-class backgrounds as inferior. Failure to act will not only mean generations of wasted talent but an increasingly unrepresentative creative elite, disconnected from the people it is meant to serve.

**Lee Elliot Major OBE FAcSS**  
**Professor of Social Mobility, University of Exeter**

# ‘In terms of connections, I really had none’: Barriers to entry in the creative industries

The breakdown of responses to the statement "Changing your social class in the UK is easier than it has ever been" reveals notable differences based on socioeconomic background. Working-class respondents are less likely to agree with this statement **(16%)** compared to their upper/upper-middle-class counterparts **(44%)**, indicating polarised perceptions of social mobility.

Assumptions about class also often precede facts, leading to a reliance on ‘soft’ social identifiers. Our research reveals how job titles, education, social circles, upbringing, holiday choices, lifestyle and accents shape preconceptions about individuals’ social class.



Definitions of class vary significantly depending on respondents' backgrounds, with working-class individuals emphasising traditional signifiers like **schooling** while upper/upper-middle-class respondents prioritise attributes such as **confidence** and **presentation**.

Respondents across various sectors (**on average 66%**) acknowledge barriers to entry based on class. This is heightened for those in publishing (**72%**) and government (**85%**) sectors. Moreover, people from under-represented ethnic backgrounds in the creative industries, including Black (**75%**), Mixed and multiple ethnic groups (**78%**), and Asian (**64%**) respondents, are notably more inclined to observe class disparities in industry access compared to white respondents (**61%**).

“ I have personally experienced being shushed in meetings for being ‘too loud/excitable/exuberant’. I have been at lunches with colleagues where my pronunciation of ‘tuna niçoise’ was mocked because I got it wrong. I’ve been asked by an agent “what school did you go to?” only to respond with, what can only be described as horror, when I said that I went to my local comprehensive. And, when I have told colleagues that my father was a bin man... well, you can imagine the faces.

**Dawn, senior-level publishing**

“

**Not feeling good enough because you come from that kind of background stays with you. You're always in this weird place where you are regularly underestimated...**

**It all feeds into a feeling that those kinds of jobs are not for you.**

**Mags, mid-senior level,  
charity & campaigning**

“

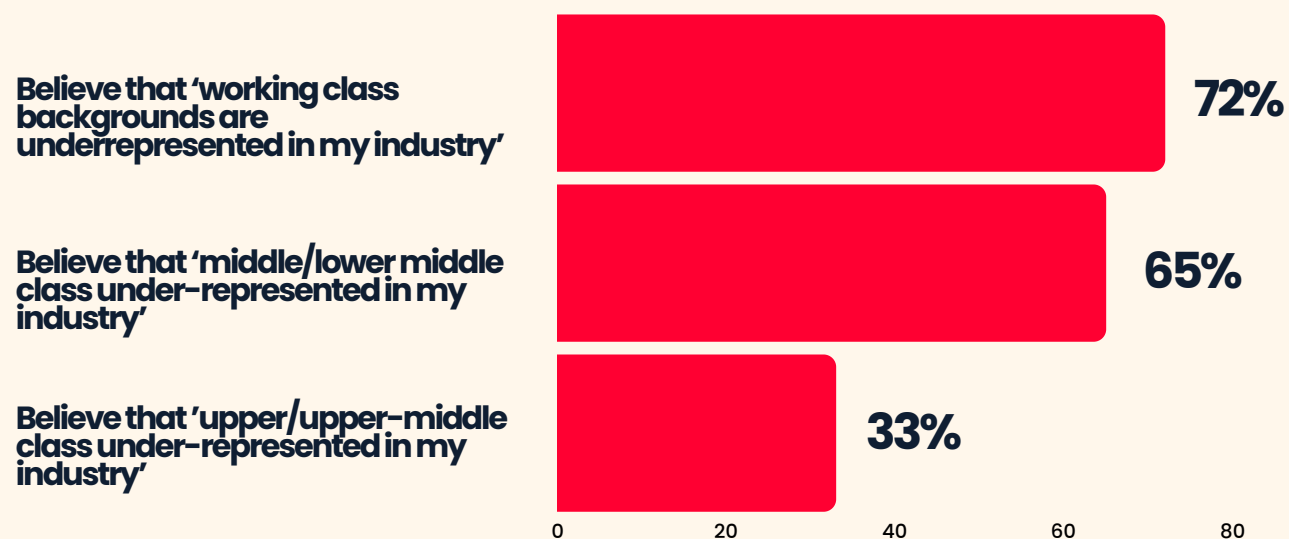
In previous creative companies, I did feel the need to change aspects of my identity – specifically my accent. I grew up in a predominately Black working class area where we use slang, drop our word endings and speak in a distinctly different way. To be taken seriously, I have often felt a need to abandon my accent and favour more eloquent language. Sometimes my accent is seen as trendy and a fun part of Black culture to be imitated when it is just who I am.

**Joy, junior-level, media**

# Thriving or surviving? Working-class talent in the creative sector

As organisations strive to advance diversity, equity, and inclusion (DE&I) initiatives, it is imperative to consider the intersectionality of class dynamics. Recognising and addressing the challenges faced by individuals from lower socioeconomic backgrounds such as the class pay gap, discrimination, and material inequities, such as needing to relocate for a role, are essential to foster an inclusive creative landscape. Without it, the creative industries risk losing the diverse perspectives and stories that working-class individuals bring.

## Class representation in my industry\*



\*Among working class, middle/lower middle class, upper/upper-middle class

## Perceptions on equity within the creative industries:

- The data highlights a notable variation in perceptions regarding equal reward for working-class individuals. While **67%** of upper-class respondents agree there is equal reward, only **33%** of working-class respondents share this view.
- Similarly, there is a difference of opinion between disabled and non-disabled individuals. Non-disabled individuals are more likely to believe there's equal reward (**45%**) in the creative industries than disabled (**31%**), we can observe that those who are privileged are less likely to perceive inequity than those who are from underrepresented backgrounds. For working-class disabled people specifically, this drops to only **24%** who agree.

“My dyslexia adds an extra layer of complexity to my experience. When things become overwhelming, it feels like there's little room to breathe. It's not just about meeting deadlines or completing tasks; it's about fighting against the barriers that dyslexia presents in a world built for those without it.

Rhianne\*, mid-level, media



**Katie, who works in a junior broadcast journalism role, explains:**

"Senior positions are dominated by those who are 'upper' class or from a more affluent background. Junior positions do tend to be more varied. Salary does not help with this. I am on, for London, a pretty small salary. I do not have any parental help with this – I am entirely self-sufficient which is tough. A lot of people in the industry have grown up in London, and still live at home, which therefore removes this barrier. Not being from London, then, and not having an affluent background, makes this difficult. This is my choice, and I am proud of it, but it doesn't make things easy."

However, there are ways that organisations can actively minimise this lack of access through not only rewarding employees fairly, but by making sure additional costs are covered.

**For example, Abdul, who works on the technical side of the TV industry in a senior role, says he didn't feel that financial barriers impacted his career because:**

"Companies I have worked for have been able to provide relevant training and resources, as well as appropriate work wear for certain working environments."



**I don't know if it's just me or people from Gen Z, but I have an unwavering pride in my roots. I feel I don't need to, or certainly don't want to change myself, or my background. Whereas others felt they might have had to in the past because of classism.**

Mitch, mid-level, publishing

## Impact & influence: Power dynamics & senior representation in the creative landscape

The absence of working-class representation at senior levels in the creative industries is a prominent concern, particularly among professionals from working-class and middle/lower-middle-class backgrounds. This highlights the entrenched nature of class-based disparities in organisational hierarchies and calls for clear-cut efforts to promote representation in leadership positions.

### Lack of senior working-class representation:

- **64%** of respondents agree that people from working-class backgrounds are under-represented in their industry. **72%** of working-class respondents cite this, compared to **33%** of upper/upper-middle-class individuals. Among these respondents, **73%** of working-class respondents cite a lack of senior representation compared to **46%** of upper/upper-middle class respondents.
- The publishing (**87%**) and museum & gallery (**87%**) sectors expressed the most concern around working-class senior under-representation.
- The data also reveals a difference in perceptions of senior representation within ethnic groups, with Asian (**80%**), Black (**82%**), and Mixed or multiple ethnic groups (**78%**) respondents expressing serious concern about the lack of working-class representation at senior levels. While white respondents also express significant concern (**69%**), the extent of concern is notably higher among Black, Asian and ethnically diverse groups.



Imagine a brainstorming session where diverse voices, including those from working-class backgrounds, are absent—it's like a puzzle missing crucial pieces.

Faye, senior-level, design



“

It's a shame that as soon as a company approaches the conversation of diversity, they find themselves making loads of diverse and working-class hires at the junior level – which is a good place to start. However, there's a coded racial and classist dynamic between being a Black, working-class individual talking to and looking up to white upper-class senior team members. It is one thing to encourage diversity within the workplace, but another discussion entirely on how to sustain their presence and allow them to feel like they can do their best work and perform well.

**Rhianne\*, mid-level, media**

**Despite the lack of senior representation, working-class people we spoke to at senior level said they've felt an increased sense of confidence in their identity which they've gained throughout their careers. Lee, who is a publisher, noted:**

“I'm not sure if that's a feature of my age, a post-pandemic world, changes in the industry or all three, but I'd like to help build a publishing community where people feel comfortable being themselves long before the age of 40!”

**Meanwhile, Jaber, a director of communications, advised employers:**

“The best thing organisations can do to increase senior representation of people from working-class backgrounds is to offer them tailored mentoring and coaching. I feel very lucky that through Creative Access I have found great mentors who have encouraged and supported me throughout my career.”

“

**You need good people  
around you to help you**

**navigate your  
way to the top.**

**Jaber, senior-level,  
PR & communications**



# What comes next?



As organisations strive to advance diversity, equity, and inclusion (DE&I) initiatives, it is imperative to consider the intersectionality of class dynamics. Recognising and addressing the challenges faced by individuals from lower socioeconomic backgrounds such as the class pay gap, discrimination, and imposter syndrome, are essential to foster an inclusive creative landscape. Without it, the creative industries risk losing the diverse perspectives and stories that working-class individuals bring.

## What can employers do?

“ To ensure accessibility and representation, media and design organisations must prioritise inclusive recruitment practices such as establishing **criteria for CV screenings, diverse interview panels, and unconscious bias training for interviewers.**

**Faye, senior-level, design**

“ Advertise all roles externally and actively **avoid the temptation to recruit via people you know/personal networks.** Recruitment process can and should also focus on skills and potential, not just traditional markers like university degrees. Organisations could also **offer financial aid** to people from working-class backgrounds to enable them to take on internships/entry roles in the industry.

**Jaber, senior-level, PR & communications**



# “ Kickstart conversation & action on class...



Class is the one area where we really aren't making progress in the creative industries. The research proves that access to this space is largely still based on contacts and networks, which tend to be in closer reach for the privileged.

Official figures show that the proportion of working-class actors, musicians and writers has halved since the 1970s to 2022 ([Sage Journals](#)), this is despite 48% of the UK identifying as working class the year prior in 2021 ([Gov.uk](#)).

Diverse storytelling amplifies historically marginalised voices and enriches creative output to resonate across all socio-economic backgrounds. Michaela Coel's "I May Destroy You", masterpiece 'I, Daniel Blake' by director Ken Loach and actress Samantha Morton, who advocates for children growing up in care, are all examples of how creative output can be used for social commentary.

Our research with FleishmanHillard UK, shines a light on these inequities and will hopefully kickstart conversation and action around the stark lack of working-class representation in senior positions. It's worrying that soft social identifiers are still influencing class prejudice and biases. But as the creative world evolves, we're urging employers to commit to breaking down these barriers, whether it be by levelling up their inclusive hiring or supporting working class staff with access to career support and mentors.

**Bibi Hilton**  
**CEO, Creative Access**



**Employer**

# recommendations

1.

## **Implement early career development programmes**

Establish structured career development initiatives aimed at providing equal opportunities for employees from all socio-economic backgrounds, including mentorship schemes, skills training, and leadership programmes.

**Consider looking at our *Springboard entry-level career development programme, with a proven track-record in inspiring talent right from the start***

2.

## **Address senior-level representation**

Prioritise efforts to retain and support entry & mid-level working-class talent. 89% of individuals say our support has increased their optimism about their career progression, and 90% say our support has had a significant impact on their career through tailored support and career development programmes that inspire belonging, skills growth and leadership potential. We'd also recommend considering flexible working arrangements and showcasing clear pathways for advancement to address the clear lack of senior working-class representation.

**Consider looking at our *Thrive mid-level career development programme, with a proven track-record in empowering the creative industries' future leaders***

# Employer

# recommendations

3.

## **Bias awareness training**

Provide comprehensive training for the entire workforce to recognise and mitigate unconscious biases and foster an inclusive and supportive work environment. Encourage open dialogue and facilitate discussions which challenge preconceptions and promote understanding across all levels. We cannot achieve our goals without viewing the intersectionality of class, race and gender, with a holistic approach to start to uncover biases and tackle them more directly.

**Looking for bespoke inclusive training? Get in touch for a free, no obligation conversation**

4.

## **What is your approach to recruitment?**

Implement transparent recruitment processes which are proven to reach wide pools of talent, ensuring fair and equitable opportunities for all employees. Establish accountability mechanisms to monitor diversity and inclusion metrics, regularly review progress, and address any disparities promptly to create a more equitable workforce for all classes.

**Whether you need help with job ads, recruitment, shortlisting, candidate prep or overall reporting, Creative Access can support each step of the journey.**

**Employer**

**recommendations**

**5.**

### **Address the material realities**

Levelling the playing field for staff without financial safety nets requires concrete actions to address material inequities. Here's how you can identify and tackle these disparities in your new hires and existing team:

- Cover travel or lunch expenses surplus to requirements, crucial amidst the cost-of-living crisis.
- Ensure fair and timely compensation for freelancers & equitable access to benefits.
- Expand remote & hybrid work options for broader accessibility.
- Embrace salary transparency to encourage applications from under-represented groups. Our research shows it will increase your applications by 40%.
- Consider covering relocation costs to mitigate financial burdens. As we all know, accommodation deposits and transportation expenses can become barriers for those hoping to relocate to cities for work, especially for candidates from low-income backgrounds.

# Individual

# recommendations

## Identify as a working-class professional in the creative industries?

Creative Access has plenty of resources aimed at people from under-represented groups in the creative industries, no matter what stage in their career. By registering with us, you can access paid internships, roles, mentoring opportunities and free networking events.

You should also check out these other brilliant organisations doing significant work to create peer networks & empower working-class talent in the creative economy:

- [The Working Class Creative Database](#)
- [Museum as Muck](#)
- [Common People](#)
- [People Like Us](#)
- [Creative Lives In Progress](#)
- [I Like Networking](#)



# The class ceiling and the creative industries: Research by Creative Access & FleishmanHillardUK

Special thanks go to individuals involved in the conception and creation of this research report into the class ceiling in the creative industries, including but not limited to: Elonka Soros, Ben Levine, Ella Darlington, Rochelle Chinn, Poppy Prescott, Antoinette Willcocks, Diana Kurteva and Becky Smith.

Special thanks also to Vitreous World.

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