

ISE hosted a workshop to discuss all things assistant editing. The following summarises the main points discussed. Although parts are attributed to specific panelists, they're not necessarily direct quotes. They've been shortened, moved around, slightly reworked – in short, edited. However, the core points reflect what was said.

Panel:

Fiona (FS)

Siân Fever (SF)

Eoin (EMcG)

Host:

Eoin McDonagh (ISE)

THE ROLE OF AN ASSISTANT EDITOR...

The role of assistant editor can change, depending mainly on the budget of the project you've been hired for and also on the editor and team you're working with. Each project will be slightly different. You'll often have to familiarise yourself with different software for different jobs and try to foresee (and fix) problems as they arise. There are different levels of assistant editors – trainee, second and first, all working with and for the editor on the project. Most of the time, the editor will choose their assistant(s) but sometimes the post house can hire assistants for specific tasks – extra ingesting over the weekend for example.

FS - As a trainee, you're there primarily to learn. You'll sit in with the editor and the second assistant and you mostly get to observe and shadow and ask questions but you're also there to help. You might be asked to organize lunches, get coffee, organize screenings. You should come in with a general technical knowledge but you'll be taught specifics on the job.

The second assistant editor will deal primarily with rushes, getting the media in and organizing the project for the editor.

The first assistant does a bit of everything. Dailies / temp music / temp vfx / all of the organization and communication from the set to the edit suite comes through the first. Expect a lot of emails. Constantly in touch with everyone.

SF - We start with a week of prep. Set up the systems, equipment, test it all out, set up edit rooms for editors. Basically make sure everything is in order for the edit.

FS - (As first AE), you are central command. Everything comes through you. It's your job to ensure that everyone has what they should have at different stages of the project. A very important part of the job is making sure the edit gets to the audio mix, vfx and grade – ensuring they have all the info / metadata / files they need in the correct format.

In drama, audio and video come in separately so it's up to you to sync the two. Usually by timecode, sometimes by clapper board and occasionally with lipreading.

SF - Once you're through production, you're onto the assembly then fine cutting. Director comes in, refines the cut. Then goes out to different depts – vfx / audio mix / graphics / grade. Once it comes back, it's then prepped for delivery.

EMcG – As an assistant, your job often runs longer than the editor's. This means you often can't follow the editor directly on to the next job – they'll have started while you're still working on the previous one. You'll often work closely with the post supervisor at this stage.

FS - On a big project, you learning to prioritise what needs to be done quickly – which editor is under the most pressure and what jobs can be pushed slightly further down the line.

THE SKILLS NEEDED WHEN STARTING OUT...

It's worth noting that the skills you need shift in importance as your career progresses. The panel talked quite a bit about the importance of having both soft and tech skills. Everyone agreed that a basic technical foundation is really useful, but often it's an applicant's personality that'll help get them the job. A technically competent person can be taught the software(s) needed but being able to solve problems and show enthusiasm are high on the priority list when finding someone to work closely with day in, day out. Also, having a car helps.

FS - I think it's good to have a basic knowledge of different areas because you're in discussions with a lot of departments / people / facilities – you should know a little about a lot. Maybe the footage wasn't transcoded properly or a grade looks wrong. It helps to be able to understand enough to point the problem to the right person to fix it or understand where in the chain it happened. A little knowledge about a lot of areas helps.

E McG – As an editor, I expect the project to be set up the way I like it. The asst editor has to be flexible for the editor they're working with. You'll learn different things from each editor wanting things done in different ways.

Each job feels like you're a new beginning, which can be daunting. You shouldn't be scared of it though – the job tells you what to do a lot of the time.

FS - Personality is at least as important as tech skills – you need to know you can spend 10 hrs a day together. Enthusiasm / eagerness to learn are so valuable. Someone who wants to learn the job and be there.

E McG - You need a basic understanding of Avid. There's no excuse not to be familiar – you can download a free version [Avid First] or a free trial of the full software. Any asst should be familiar with the basics. Editors are willing to teach lots of the technical stuff. Enthusiasm is vital and don't be afraid to show it.

E McG - Get a car. TV Drama / locations are often in the middle of nowhere. There's often no public transport or you'll be asked to go somewhere immediately. Having a car or at least a driving license is a huge advantage.

THE IMPORTANCE OF NETWORKING...

One attendee commented that getting in to the industry when you're starting out feels like you need to 'know the secret knock'. This led on to a discussion on the oft-dreaded 'networking'. Although it's something that many people find daunting, it doesn't have to be. It's also something that doesn't really go away, but does become more organic as you naturally get to know people a bit better. At the start, you have to force it – make a concerted effort to approach people you may not know at all. Fear not – you're not alone. Editors are generally pretty open to approach – they've had to do it themselves and remember how uncomfortable it can be.

ISE - It can feel like there's a secret knock and that's because there's no straightforward way in. Each person's route into the industry is different.

SF – Treat networking as a part of your job. Think of your network as a garden. You're planting seeds and watching them grow. All of these seeds are the people you'll meet along the way.. You might work with one person you'll come across on a job eight years later. Check in and keep in touch with people. Eventually you'll grow the network until it won't feel like there's a secret knock anymore.

ISE – Social media is a good place to reach out to people. People have contacted me over SM and I've been able to say – actually, I need someone on short notice. (Again, it helps to have a car for this situation).

E McG – You should treat every job equally seriously. You never know which things will turn out to be massively important five years later. There was one job that everyone talked negatively about. I worked really hard on it and took it seriously and went on to work with the (producer) again more than once. The secret-knock feeling may never go away. Particularly if you're trying to move from one area to another and you feel like you've to start again with getting to know people. Everyone has their own bubbles of people they know.

ISE – Editors are open to people sitting in the back of the room and observing. We've all done it and know how hard it is starting out. Reach out on social media or through contacts and they might be happy even just to chat and offer advice.

SF – Offer to shadow people. Just to get into the room, you feel the vibe, see how things work. You can learn a lot just from being around and chatting to people.

E McG - I used to think if you were a pest, people would ignore you but now I feel like when people pester me, they must really want it. It shows enthusiasm and that's something people want to be around.

SHOWREELS...

Generally, it's agreed that showreels mostly show that you can put a showreel together. However, sometimes that's exactly what you need to show. When you're starting out, it can be handy to have something to send potential employers to show the standard of projects you've worked on. At some stage though, a few years in, a concise CV or just a credit list can be enough. When starting out, be honest about your level. Nobody expects massive amounts of experience but knowing which projects to show on a reel and which to leave off is a skill in itself.

SF – As a short form editor, I had everything – Showreels / websites / agencies etc.

As an asst editor, I have a really really good CV and that's it. They can see a list of what you've worked on and who you've worked with. One page. Make it readable in 10 seconds so they can just scan it and see the main things you've worked on.

FS – If I see a CV, I'll look at who they've worked with previously, call that person and ask what they're like and go from there.

ISE - Concise, to the point and accurate. Don't under or oversell yourself.

MOVING FROM AE TO EDITOR:

The goal of assistant editors is often to become an editor. There are many AE's who are happy to continue in the job of AE long term, but many see it as a step on their career path. There's a balance between showing the editor / producer / director that you're ambitious and are working toward a long term plan, and showing an impatience in your current position.

FS - There's slightly less room to work on drama in Dublin than London so you come across people who might come across as 'too ambitious' – if you're employed as an asst, you should be enthusiastic in that job. You also have to take the parts of the job that are less glamorous.

SF - Being an editor is something you should keep in your mind as a goal and use the time you have to practice. Maybe have a go at assembling a scene and show it to the editor. Take opportunities – people want gag reels or marketing content. Some editors might want you to cut the 'previously on' or promo material. Get your work done and keep one eye out for other opportunities to edit as you go along.

SF - Let people know what you want to do – but you need to fulfil your obligations to your editor. Find that balance. If you can find that, the editor will invite you to be more of a part of the process and being part of those conversations- such as problem solving within the edit – that's rewarding. It's when the job becomes less about the nuts and bolts of editing.

MISTAKES YOU'VE SEEN MADE...

E McG – Nine times out of ten, when something goes wrong, unless someone directly asks you to explain it, don't explain it. Just go fix it. You're wasting their time with explanations they may not need or understand. They just want to know you're on top of it. There are certain people you go to with a problem but I've never met a line producer who wants to hear why the rushes are out of sync.

FS – Overt cockiness. Acting like the job of a trainee is beneath you. I put a lot of time and effort into training and it's far more rewarding to be greeted with enthusiasm.

SF - Giving unsolicited opinions about the footage or the cut. Because you may be stepping in to a political situation you don't understand. Keep your opinions to yourself unless you're invited to. If you're invited to, then give it but wait for the invite. If a director asks what you think, look at the editor and see if they give the nod, and if they do, go ahead. Do have opinions, just know when to give it.

ISE – if you're logging or making notes, don't try to be funny. If you're not sure of the contributor's name in the footage, put something like 'man in blue jumper'. If you write 'the guy with the funny nose', you don't know who's going to see those notes. It might seem like a small thing but maintaining professionalism is really important.

REMOTE WORKING

2020 has seen the entire post production process moving to fully remote workflows. Assistants have been at the coalface figuring out the logistics of managing complicated projects, workflows and large amounts of media. While many of the software systems were already in existence, their limits were tested. Aside from this - and the accompanying broadband issues – editors and assistants had to learn to set boundaries when it came to working hours and expectations of availability now that

their edit suite was in their home and they could, technically, log on any time. The panel generally agreed that parts of the process work very well remotely, while finishing touches and collaboration suffer when people are physically working alone.

The question was asked – is remote working going to change the assistant editor's role?

E McG – Yes, but it's something that's been coming for a long time. When everything was physical, you needed people to bring tapes etc. For me, I still haven't mastered not being in the room with someone. I don't think it'll fully go back to the way it was now that production has seen how it works.

ES – My first fully remote job was on an edit that was shot remotely in lockdown on zoom. It was a whole new experience. Just figuring out how to construct the whole thing – how to sync / how to make sure people were shooting in the same frame rate / try to achieve decent audio without an echo. It was really interesting and a case of uploading rushes and everyone downloading them and figuring out a workflow.

E McG - Working remotely probably won't allow the same scope to learn directly from editors. When you see a very experienced editors in sticky situations – you see how they handle things. That's a lot of what you learn from being in the room and learning the politics. As an AE, you have many different bosses and the politics of that can be very tricky and remote working may make that very difficult to learn those things. Not having someone to just say 'mistakes happen' – which can be very valuable – is something that may be lost.

ES - I think remote assisting and editing will become more of a thing. During the assembly stage, it works really well remotely. However, onlining remotely, in my opinion, would be very detrimental – not good for anyone in the workflow.

Advice for remote working – It's hard to manage your boundaries. Suss out communication and set limits. Just because your Avid is in your sitting room doesn't mean you're always available. It's something that takes some time but we all have to look after ourselves.

SF – Remote working is another tool in the box. I don't see everyone working from home all the time – it'll be a hybrid where during assembly would be useful – being able to log into other people's computers etc. Hopefully it'll provide more flexibility in the longer term.

ADVICE FOR PEOPLE STARTING OUT:

E McG – I think saying yes to short films. People are always looking for people to cut shorts and they generally have no money. The ways in which they don't work teach you a lot and the ways they're badly shot teach you too. Even within freebies, you can start to learn which ones are likely to win awards. If you don't think it's worth it, be nice to those you're turning down. You can start very quickly to learn which ones are worth your time. If you understand scripts, that'll stand to you. Read scripts generally if you want to work in drama and see how a script translates into a cut.

ES – Say yes to things. The reason I'm doing drama now is because I said I'd work a Saturday. You never know what job is going to open a door / introduce you to someone who'll help in your career or be a friend in the industry.

E McG - Nobody knows everything – the process of filming and editing changes all the time so we can't be scared of it and we can't pretend we know things we don't. If you're bluffing and make

mistakes that could have been avoidable, people will lose trust in you. Be upfront. If something goes wrong and the assistant says they don't know, I know that they'll either find someone to help them or figure it out before long. Particularly starting out, as an approach, that's the right one.

FS - Know Avid. Be willing to learn and be honest about your experience. There's a huge shortage of assistants at the moment. People are progressing through the ranks faster now than they have in the past because of the demand. Make contact with people and be really honest about what you can do.

ISE - You can gain a lot doing more than one skill (cameras / editing / gfx) but ultimately you have to choose. Otherwise, you may get 15 years in and realise you're not where you could be in either area.

GENERAL WORDS OF WISDOM

E McG – Working long hours does not equal good work. I've seen editors who work day and night and miss deadlines. There are pinch-points where you have to get things done and long hours are necessary. But on a daily basis, you should be able to manage your time. Nobody will tell you not to stay 'til 11pm. It's a trap you can fall into when you're young when you're trying to impress.

Be structured in your work. Being organized and recognizing if there are issues in the workflow is more valuable than working long hours in a disorganised manner.

E McG – Knowing how to manage time and set boundaries is something that takes time to learn. Working crazy hours and taking calls at all hours is not sustainable.

FS – Editors generally hire assistants. Very rare it'd be a post house. Sometimes it's a post supervisor. If they're happy with your work, they'll recommend you.

ISE – It can be a tough industry and there's a lot of pressure. A real skill is being a positive presence in the room. You might be under massive pressure with a lot of demands and finding an assistant who will read all that and maintain a positive presence is a real asset.

FS – It does become like a marriage with your editor so you need to get on as humans. Definitely personal skills involved. If I meet someone for a coffee and feel like I don't get on with them, I just won't hire them.

SF - Make sure you manage your finances. You want to be able to choose your next job – You want to be able to choose the job that's maybe starting in 3 months instead of 2 weeks. Then fill the gaps.

E McG - TV Drama in Ireland is booming. Now is a good time – try to contact people straight away. It's a good time to be looking to get a start. There's a shortage of assistants in Ireland at the moment so there's plenty of opportunity out there.