On Set, On Edge: Observing Talent Management and Operational Fragility in Malaysia Film Production

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DOI: https://dx.doi.org/10.47772/IJRISS.2025.923MIC3ST25005

Received: 12 August 2025; Accepted: 20 August 2025; Published: 24 October 2025

ABSTRACT

When the COVID-19 pandemic hits Malaysia, the local film and television industry experienced significant disruption, exposing underlying vulnerabilities in its operational resilience and workforce sustainability. Although recovery efforts are ongoing and government support, particularly from FINAS and the Ministry of Communication and Multimedia has played a role, the industry still suffered a sharp downturn. The number of registered production companies dropped dramatically from 19,000 in 2019 to just 11,000 in 2020, with over 1,000 productions brought to a halt and an estimated RM1 billion in losses. This article presents findings from a 39-day qualitative observation of a Malaysian film production, capturing real-time dynamics of crew management, leadership practices, and production challenges. Several major themes have been discovered through this study such as leadership conflicts and management gaps; talent integration challenges and professionalism; operational inefficiencies: communication, time, and finance; and tensions between creative aspirations and practical execution. The study also discovers how learning on the job (on-site learning), well-formed teams, and fast, practical decision-making contribute to keeping the creative process moving while keeping the morale and spirit of those on set. The findings show that, even under significant uncertainty, production teams make strategic maneuvers to keep operations on track offering broader insights into how creative industries can stay agile and resilient in the face of disruption. This study offers a deeper look at how talent dynamics and operational resilience come together in the aftermath of a crisis, using ethnographic observations to ground the discussion in real-world practice. These insights are especially relevant for leaders managing disruptions in project-based industries, where adaptability and people management are key to recovery.

Keywords: Film Practice, Talent Sustainability, Workforce Resilience, Production Sustainability, Strategic Adaptation

INTRODUCTION

Unlike many other industries where firms can test product prototypes before market launch, the film industry lacks this advantage. Since movies **cannot be prototyped** or **pre-tested**, each release faces an either success or failure outcome. This unique scenario making the industry inherently high-risk (Manurung & Kameo, 2021). The global film industry is undergoing a profound transformation, driven largely by the rise of digital streaming platforms, or over-the-top (OTT) services, and a marked shift in the epicentre of cultural production toward Asia (Sikandar & Mohaideen, 2024, Tan, 2020). As Paksiutov (2021) notes, this evolution has seen countries such as China, South Korea, Japan, and India emerge as dominant players, reshaping global cinematic trends through both creative innovation and market influence.

Against this dynamic backdrop, the Malaysian film industry predominantly structured as a project-based organisation (PBO) **suffered a major setback during and post- COVID-19 pandemic**. Like many of its global counterparts, it now finds itself at a crossroads: still evolving and renegotiating its place within an increasingly competitive and fast-changing landscape (Margherita & Heikkilä, 2021).

ISSN: 2454-6186 | DOI: 10.47772/IJRISS | Special Issue | Volume IX Issue XXIII October 2025

Lin (2023) highlights that the distinct nature of the cultural and creative industries (CCI), such as film production, demands tailored business models that align with their unique operational characteristics and challenges. Standard corporate frameworks, Lin argues, are often ill-suited to the realities of creative sectors, which operate through project-based structures, talent-driven outputs, and volatile market conditions. Therefore, it is crucial for film companies in the creative sector to identify the element uniquely for them, so they are better equipped with the ability to navigate in this increasingly changing and competitive landscape, thereby enhancing their survivability and resilience.

Malaysia's creative sector was already facing difficulties with institutional support prior to the pandemic. On top of that, fragmented workforce development and informal recruitment practices due to it PBOs structure. When COVID-19 hits, it further intensifies these vulnerabilities, leaving organisations unable to continue normally with their business. The fragile ecosystem underpinning talent management in the sector was exposed. This situation worsens during the total lock down period forcing many PBOs such as film production companies, which operate on temporary project cycles and rely heavily on short-term contracts, to permanently close their doors. When former prime minister announced the National Recovery Plan (NRP) in June 2021, productions were able to slowly resume, however, companies were confronted not only with financial and operational ambiguities, but also profounder issues related to team cohesion, leadership dynamics, and the sustainability of their talent management practices. These realities underscore the urgent need to examine how production teams' function in high-pressure, resource-constrained environments, particularly in a post-pandemic context (Paksiutov, 2021; Nie et al., 2021).

In project-based creative environments such as film production, learning often occurs outside formal training structures. Instead, knowledge is commonly acquired through informal, on-site experiences, where crew members learn by doing, observing, and responding to real-time production challenges. This form of on-site learning is especially critical in Malaysia's film industry, where many newcomers enter through informal channels and are expected to adapt quickly without standardised onboarding. Understanding how such learning unfolds during production is essential to capturing the realities of workforce development and performance in the local creative sector.

Table 1. Data reflects box office earning reported up to 23 October 2024 - FINAS

Rank	**Film Title**	**Box Office Revenue (RM)**
1	Sheriff	59,449,159.30
2	Takluk: Lahad Datu	26,000,000.00
3	The Experts	11,160,483.91
4	All In	7,138,854.91
5	Pendekar Awang	5,863,738.72
6	Anak Perjanjian Syaitan 2	3,440,977.07
7	Zim Zim Ala Kazim	3,417,349.44
8	Baik Punya Ah Long	2,168,074.15
9	Pontianak 200KG	1,183,625.65
10	Memoir Seorang Guru	814,733.58
…	…	…
50	Tafakur	5,778.55

As shown in Table 1, *Sheriff is* leading the Malaysian box office in 2024 with an impressive revenue of over RM59 million, followed by *Takluk: Lahad Datu* and *The Expert* with RM26 million and RM11 million,

respectively. Then, we have those at the lower end of the spectrum such as *Tafakur* which collected less than RM6,000. This considerable revenue gap uncovers a deeply skewed market concentration.

This gap reflects not only audience preferences, but a more considerable imbalance in the industry where high-budget, better-marketed films receive more visibility and broader access to distributions while smaller, or independent titles remain on the margins. It reveals deeper structural issues in Malaysia's film ecosystem around allocation of resources, marketing reach, and investment decisions; thus, also challenging a sustainable basis for differing content creation. Such features of the industry highlight the huge need for more inclusive policies for talent management; also, specific organizations to support underrepresented productions.

Table 2 (refer appendix) shows a dramatic decline in cinema admissions and box office takings, indicating to the severe financial blow of the COVID-19 pandemic on the Malaysian film industry. The film admissions plunged from 77.78 million in 2019 to 3.72 million in 2021, reflects the disruption in cinemagoers' behavior and preferences. This financial downturn underlines the struggling faced by production companies, distributors, and exhibitors in staying afloat during the pandemic.

Parallel to this, Table 3 (refer appendix) reveals the structural damage to the Malaysian film industry at the company level. The number of registered companies in the film production (FP), video production (PV), and distribution (DF) sectors declined significantly. One striking drastic drop is the registered video production companies from 940 in 2019 to only 11 in 2023, signaling the profound economic strain shown in Table 2's decline in box office revenue. Meanwhile, in film distribution sector, the numbers fell from 1,308 companies in 2019 to 833 in 2023, shows how the industry's business infrastructure was unable to keep up with the changing economic landscape.

The trend of **consumers shifting from physical cinema-going to digital content consumption also appears to be on the rise** based on the performance metrics in Table 2 and the registration data in Table 3, reflecting the necessity for the Malaysian film industry to embrace digital transformation in the post-pandemic era. Indeed, these data may offer valuable insights into the financial and infrastructural impact of the pandemic; however, the actual realities and adaptive strategies of those working behind the scenes, especially the production teams who had to navigate these transitions in real time, were unable to be captured.

Thus, this study uses qualitative observation as the primary method to capture how Malaysian film crews navigated resource constraints, informal learning environments, and shifting production dynamics. Kothari and Garg (2019) noted that observation is one of the most used methods in behavioral studies. This method allows researcher the ability to capture naturally occurring behaviors, subtle power dynamics, and unstated truths that may not be easily shown by participants themselves.

The findings presented in this article are derived exclusively from a 39-day observational fieldwork conducted during an active Malaysian film production. This study specifically addresses the research objectives by **(1) exploring how talent management practices are enacted in real-world production settings,** and **(2) examining how production teams adapt operationally to sustain creative momentum and workforce morale under post-pandemic constraints.** Through a 39-day period of observational data collected on lived experiences and day-to-day interactions among crew members, the study uncovers micro-level behaviors and team dynamics that influence the effectiveness of talent-related strategies. These insights also contribute to the broader aim of **(3) understanding how project-based creative industries, such as film, can develop sustainable and resilient operational models.** Ultimately, the findings underscore how talent sustainability and agile workflows intersect with organisational continuity and sector-wide adaptability in Malaysia's evolving creative economy.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Sustainability within cultural and creative industries, and in particular, the film and television industries, increasingly relies on the ability of organisations managing, developing, and retaining their human capital (Mohaideen & Bakar, 2018; Mohaideen, 2016). Talent management has become not just an administrative

function, but rather, a strategic concern. There is plenty of literature on talent management in corporate and industrial contexts; however, there are few empirical studies on the use of talent management in the creative industries, particularly in developing countries like Malaysia.

Furthermore, the precarious nature of the work context - such as the artistic work cultures, informal employment structures, and project-based workflow - creates dilemmas that call for a rethinking of traditional human resource (HR) practices. This literature review examines the key themes associated with talent management and sustainability in film production, focusing specifically on the post COVID-19 context and contributes a credible academic basis for this study.

The film industry is typically known as project-based organisation (PBO) and is defined by a fragile structure characterised by temporary teams working together for short periods of time (Defillippi & Arthur, 1998; Bakker, 2010). When operating in this context, formal HR systems are largely substituted with flexible, trust-based systems and, while that flexibility allows for creativity, it presents how fragile practices can become when experiencing stress.

Some researchers have considered that informal creative labour can be both a strength and a weakness of the cultural industries. Many of the roles and positions are based on networks, previous relationships, and reputation, as opposed to normalised processes (Oham & Ejike, 2024; Bérubé & Gauthier, 2021). While this accelerates team formation, it reinforces exclusivity and creates barriers to new entrants. In Malaysia, this informality is widespread and often goes undocumented (Mohaideen, 2016; Lin, 2023).

The concept of resilience in creative work has emerged more prominently since the COVID-19 pandemic. Creative teams often rely on improvisation, peer encouragement and peer-leadership to adapt (Kim et al, 2023; Omowole et al, 2024). However, this resilience tends to emerge organically, not through structured systems, rather than within formal situations and especially not formally imposed frameworks, which raises two concerning issues — **sustainability** and **continuity of knowledge** (Popescu, 2023; Veerasingam, 2023).

This study uses a grounded observational project to develop an inquiry into talent management (or lack of) from the perspective of informal learning, leadership types and operational practises throughout a Malaysian film production.

The During and After of Pandemic Challenges in the Malaysian Film Sector

When the pandemic struck, it didn't just disrupt industries, instead it transformed business practices across all sectors worldwide. Jones (2022) reveals that artist and creative professionals in the creative industry were not only severely impacted, but some also even forced to close their business due to its inherent reliance on human interaction. During this period, most of the industry became much more agile and actively pursued more innovative methods to sustain their operations.

The COVID-19 pandemic significantly reduced the operational scale of the creative and media industries, particularly those reliant on physical content distribution. The local film industry suffered substantial losses due to its heavy reliance on box office ticket sales, which came to a halt during the Movement Control Order (MCO) period (referring to appendix table 2). According to FINAS (2021), over 1,000 domestic film projects were suspended or cancelled during the pandemic, resulting in an estimated RM1 billion losses. MCO redirected most leisure activities into the domestic sphere. For example, performing arts sectors including music and theatre adapted by transitioning to virtual platforms to sustain audience engagement and contribute to the growing ecosystem of online entertainment, both locally and globally (Tan, 2020).

Leading production companies such as Astro Shaw and Skop Productions responded by shifting towards Over-the-Top (OTT) services, including platforms like Astro Go, to release and distribute their films and generate alternative revenue streams. Mael Totey was the only independent film produced during the pandemic by a YouTube-based production team, earning RM2.5 million from its release on AstroFirst (Ariffin, 2020). Additionally, many companies had to scale down their operations to manage sustainability costs, while others

were compelled to shut down entirely due to the absence of cash flow (Raji et al., 2022). These disruptions exacerbated existing weaknesses in the industry's talent pipeline and financial management systems.

Indeed, that the pandemic accelerated the need for digitalisation and new modes of content delivery, yet many Malaysian production companies were ill-equipped for such rapid transformation. A lack of structured training programmes, informal job roles, and minimal governmental enforcement of HR practices further hampered recovery efforts. The intersection of these issues underscores the importance of sustainable TM strategies as a stabilising force during crisis recovery and beyond.

In early May 2023, business began to restart their activities when the World Health Organization (WHO) announced that the pandemic is no longer a global threat. The film sector in particularly, finally able to resume back their core functions. However, the return to production has highlighted the urgent need for more resilient talent structures that can withstand future disruptions.

Talent Management in the Creative Industries

Talent management (TM) refers to a set of integrated human resource processes aimed at attracting, developing, motivating, and retaining productive and engaged employees (Dagogo & Ogechi, 2020). In the creative industries, particularly the feature film sector, TM is uniquely shaped by the prevalence of project-based organisations (PBOs), where work is temporary, and team structures are reassembled per project (Defillippi, 2015). While TM functions such as **recruitment**, **development**, and **retention** are critical, their application in creative sectors is often inconsistent due to the momentary and PBO nature of film production (Bérubé & Gauthier, 2021). PBOs in this context rely heavily on predefined, craft-based roles that remain stable across productions, enabling professionals to move fluidly between projects while retaining their specialised expertise. Moreover, as Popescu (2023) suggests, creative labour in film is motivated not solely by economic incentives but also by artistic fulfillment and the pursuit of professional identity. This underscores **the need for a hybrid TM model** that is more sustainable and balances intrinsic motivators such as creativity and meaning with extrinsic factors like financial stability and career progression.

Despite the growing emphasis on talent management (TM) strategies within corporate sectors, their direct application to the creative industries particularly film, remains challenging. Studies by Oham and Ejike (2024) showed that the project-based nature of creative work environments contributes to employment precarity, informal recruitment mechanisms, and a heavy reliance on personal and professional networks. These "structural characteristics" cause the implementation of standardised TM frameworks and hinder long-term workforce planning. The job function of the industry practitioner within the film sector often must rely on the production scale, budget constraints, creative direction from the production and genre of the content which rendered the conventional TM model irrelevant.

In project-based environments such as film production, the absence of formalised training often gives rise to informal or on-site learning mechanisms. Crew members frequently develop technical and collaborative competencies through direct experience, trial and error, and observation (Bérubé & Gauthier, 2021; Popescu, 2023). This experiential learning process is not formally structured but plays a significant role in knowledge transfer, particularly for entry-level roles like production assistants. As such, the study of informal learning practices becomes central to understanding talent development in Malaysia's film production landscape.

Ubisoft, a globally acclaimed leader in the video game industry, exemplifies how creative companies can implement adaptable and adoptable talent development practices to boost innovation and sustain a competitive advantage. Like many firms in the video game sector, which are fundamentally project-based organisations (PBOs), Ubisoft is required to continually form, dissolve, and reorganise teams to address the specific needs of each game development phase. The company adopts a more efficient way of assessing talent without compromising the strategic direction of the company. They opted for a more responsive and adaptive approach of blending the right expertise and experience in every project. Such approach provides a long-term competitiveness and sustainability (Łabędzki, 2022; Lewaherilla et al., 2024). This is the strong reason why

PBOs is in dire need for an adaptive/adoptive, content-specific approaches to TM that will be better suited for its operating nature.

Workforce Motivation and Leadership in Film Production

Zaeni et al. (2024) emphasised that autonomy, creative control, and recognition are key drivers of motivation and performance within the creative workforce, a view supported earlier by Prati et al. (2003). The creative industry particularly the film sector, known for its intense deadlines and highly collaborative nature requires leadership styles that promote both creativity and cohesion (Nasta et al., 2016). In this context, Amabile and Pratt (2016) highlight the value of transformational leadership, noting that leaders who offer intellectual stimulation, emotional support (Slater, 2005; Ashkanasy & Dorris, 2017), and a compelling vision are more likely to retain and inspire creative talent.

Contrary to the ideal of open and collaborative leadership in creative settings, the Malaysian film industry is often shaped by hierarchical structures, which can lead to communication breakdowns and limited transparency (Arham et al., 2023). Amah and Ogah (2023) argue that such hierarchical practices can hinder innovation and employee engagement, and cause subordinates to feel hesitant to voice their opinions or challenge established norms - an issue that became particularly evident in the post-COVID recovery period.

Differences in expectations between seasoned professionals and newcomers have become increasingly visible in the post-pandemic production landscape. These generational and experiential gaps often lead to friction, which can strain communication and complicate decision-making processes on set. While transformational leadership is often celebrated for its ability to inspire creativity and foster collaboration, rigid hierarchies and entrenched mindsets can limit its actual impact in practice.

Gyensare (2016) notes that inclusive leaders with emotional intelligence are better equipped to manage institutional generational differences in relation to work related tension, while Salvetti and Bertagni (2024) found that encouraging respectful, empathetic team bonds can reduce interpersonal team stress to build a sense of shared team cohesion with those involved in a project to retain talented people and get projects completed.

In project-based industries such as the film production, transformational as well as hierarchical style leadership and motivation has fluctuation influence on business dealings, and includes creativity, employee collaboration, and engagement. As the Malaysian film industry rebuilds post-pandemic, the future leader should be emotionally aware and adaptable, embrace inclusive styles to motivate and engage with different team members, and should have the ability to maintain perseverance to keep the team connected in pursuing clear long-term outcomes for the production to stay competitive and drive industry resilience.

Operational Resilience and Organisational Adaptability

Kim et al. (2023) highlights the importance of operational resilience which refers to the capacity of an organisation to continue critical functions and adapt during disruption. In film production, operational resilience involves not just logistical continuity but also the organisation's capacity to reorganise teams, communicate under pressure, and keep an appropriate standard of creative work when constraints arise. This links to the discussion by Omowole et al. (2024) who cite responsiveness, adaptability and innovation as essential elements of organisational survival under volatile conditions.

The research by Amankwah-Amoah et al. (2021), concluded that organisations in the service industry and in various supply chains that survived the pandemic, relied on the use of reactive strategies for the most part by downsizing non-essential staff, leveraging digital technologies, and renegotiating contracts in order to maintain financial risk. While these were reasonable strategies to manage disruption at a superficial level, these actions exposed deeper structural vulnerabilities especially in their workforce development and the continuity of talent in the long run.

Furthermore, while examining the service-related sectors in Malaysia, Veerasingam (2023) found that organisations who presented more resiliently employed proactive and systemic strategies - like decentralisation

of decision making, nurturing adaptive workplace cultures, and prioritising being digitally ready. This clear difference between adopting a reactive or proactive provides a useful lense in analysing the Malaysian film industry, which predominantly employs a project-based organisational (PBO) model whereby teams are formed and dissolved based on project cycles which makes sustainable talent management a challenge.

The pandemic not only exposed financial and logistical challenges but also the absence of institutionalised HR strategies, a problem echoed in the creative and service sectors. This study has drawn on these cross-sector perspectives to offer an organisational resilience framing to understand how Malaysian film production teams coped with crisis, adapted to working informally and in fragmented arrangements, and continued their creative outputs under constraint.

To build resilience in the film industry means adapting to financial loss, managing logistical issues, and navigating succession as talent wanes - all while maintaining production quality and creative standards. To begin addressing this structural gap, policymakers and industry stakeholders need to consider how resilience frameworks can be tailored to reflect the nuances of creative sectors. This could take the form of contingency funding for productions, and/or structured skills development supports to enable workforce adaptability on the basis of changing industry expectations and technological advances.

Collectively, these frameworks demonstrate that sustaining creative production during volatile times is about more than technical skill, it encompasses resilient leadership, fluid team configurations, and habitual practices of informal learning. This study extends these ideas by understanding these dimensions in the context of a film production in Malaysia, providing new empirical contributions to understanding how project-based creative teams maintain talent engagement and operational continuity during and after crisis periods.

METHODOLOGY

This study adopts a qualitative research approach grounded in the interpretivist paradigm to examine talent management practices and operational dynamics within Malaysian film production. This approach is appropriate for understanding the lived experiences, behavioural patterns, and organisational culture of creative teams, especially within a project-based production environment. The overall process of data collection and analysis is summarised in Fig. 1, which outlines the key stages of the methodological flow adopted in this study.

The data presented in this paper is drawn from the observational component of the author's ongoing Doctorate in Business Administration (DBA) research, which more broadly investigates talent management practices in the Malaysian film industry. While this article focuses exclusively on field observation, the complete doctoral study includes additional interview and document analysis components that will be published separately.

The primary data was collected through a direct and immersive observation conducted over 39 consecutive days, from 2 September 2025 to 10 October 2025, at an active film production site in Malaysia. The selected production was a large-scale local feature film with a projected budget of RM2.2 million. This setting was chosen because it provided a comprehensive environment to observe the interaction between creative processes, leadership behaviour, and production challenges in real time. The production team comprised experienced professionals as well as new entrants, offering a natural setting for observing intergenerational dynamics and informal learning structures. Access to the site was granted with prior consent from the production house and relevant stakeholders.

The observation was conducted in a natural setting without researcher interference. Both above-the-line personnel (including directors, producers, and actors) and below-the-line crew (such as assistant directors, production assistants, and technical teams) were included in the observation. Daily field notes were recorded using a digital application (Apple Notes) to capture workflow patterns, informal learning interactions, emotional undercurrents, leadership responses, and team coordination under constraints.

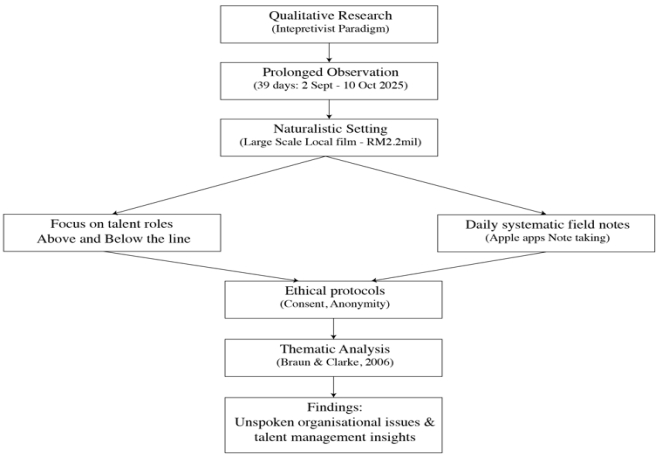

Fig. 1 Flowchart of the research methodology outlining the qualitative, observational process employed in the Malaysian film production context

These notes were later expanded into full descriptive entries and analysed thematically using Atlas.ti. The analysis followed Braun and Clarke's six-phase framework, beginning with data familiarisation, followed by inductive coding, theme identification, and theme refinement. The codes were developed iteratively and compared across days to identify consistent behavioural patterns and critical incidents. Memos were written throughout the process to support analytical depth, while the researcher engaged in reflexive journaling to acknowledge positionality and minimise bias.

Particular attention was given to capturing subtle observations such as on-the-job learning, fast decision making, and team adaptability under pressure. These elements were not predefined but emerged strongly through the coding process. As the observation progressed, themes began to cluster around issues of leadership behaviour, communication gaps, informal learning, talent integration, and the friction between artistic intent and practical constraints.

Ethical considerations were rigorously observed throughout the study. No personal identifiers are included in the findings, and the name of the production is withheld to protect confidentiality. Although no interviews were conducted, verbal assent was obtained from key individuals aware of the researcher's role as an observer. The trust-based access allowed the researcher to witness organisational tensions, informal hierarchies, and improvised solutions that are often overlooked in structured interviews or surveys.

This methodology, rooted in real-time observation of lived experience, provides a valuable lens to examine how Malaysian film productions manage talent, adapt to operational challenges, and maintain creative output in constrained environments.

FINDING & DISCUSSION

This section presents a synthesis of the critical issues identified during the 39-day film production observation, analysed through the lens of talent management and sustainability frameworks. Drawing from grounded field observations and supported by relevant academic literature, the thematic analysis highlights five key areas: **(1) leadership conflicts and management gaps, (2) talent integration challenges and professionalism, (3) operational inefficiencies related to communication, time, and finance, (4) tensions between creative aspirations and practical execution, and (5) emergent adaptive strategies such as informal learning, fast decision making, and team cohesion**. These themes collectively reveal persistent challenges as well as practical responses that influence sustainable talent management practices within the Malaysian film industry.

Leadership Conflicts and Management Gaps

During the time of the observation, there was a consistent struggle in the senior level management group (above-the-line). The first assistant director (AD), a well-seasoned professional with over 20 film credits to his

resume, used to say a lot, "*I've been at this for a long time, and I know where this should go*." Similarly, the second AD who was also a senior manager in this production has had extensive experience and expertise with multiple jobs in the creative sector as a production manager and line producer on various projects both locally and abroad, but was sitting in the assistant director role for the first time. He suggested ideas on occasion with some notable constructive points, however, his suggestions, though constructive and well-reasoned, were often disregarded.

This dynamic led to increasing friction. For instance, during high-pressure moments - particularly when faced with logistical stressors such as the challenging geography of the filming location, scheduling conflicts with artists, and inefficiencies among production assistants where the first AD displayed visible frustration, at one point throwing a tantrum publicly that momentarily halted production. These outbursts not only delayed decision-making but also generated ambiguity in task delegation and contributed to a tense on-set atmosphere. Such leadership conflicts disrupted workflow and dampened morale across departments.

These situations occurs commonly in project-based organisations (PBOs), particularly in film production, where leadership structures are often informal, flexible, and driven by reputation and relationships built on previous roles (Defillippi & Arthur, 1998; Bakker, 2010). Without a clear sense of authority, confusion in roles can create a scenario of "floating accountability," meaning that decisions are subject to different interpretations or simply challenged outright. While trust-based collaboration is valued in creative sectors, this case demonstrates the risks when interpersonal dynamics are not supported by structured onboarding or leadership development.

This observation reinforces Prati et al., (2003); Slater, (2005); Ashkanasy and Dorris, (2017); Amabile and Pratt (2016) and Salvetti & Bertahni, (2024) assertion that effective leadership in collaborative settings requires not just technical expertise, but also is contingent on the values of emotional self-regulation and recognition of shared goals of mutual respect and commitment to team unity, and that creative productivity could never take place without the very desires of colleagues to cooperate as a team, particularly in film production and project-based high-stake environments.

This theme also raises questions about how informal leadership norms interact with high-pressure operational demands, a pattern that recurs in subsequent themes.

Talent Integration Challenges and Professionalism

The tension between veteran actors versus new actors, as well as among the production teams was one of the major "challenges" of the production. These intergenerational tensions, usually resulting from different work ethics and expectations, caused interruptions to the flow of work and demanded intervention from production leads. Mabaso & Mathebula (2025) argue that generational divides can contribute to a disruption in co-operative performance, especially in cases where there are absent institutional mechanisms for knowledge sharing/exchange.

Throughout the observation period, clear social segmentation was evident. The seasoned and experienced actors tended to form tight-knit circles and felt comfortable engaging only within their circles. The newer actors appeared to be isolated, having almost constant conversations with mainly with their peer group, or with their gadgets. Extras, even though they were technically part of the broader cast ensemble, were not able to interact with either group and thus, kept their distance. All cast members were equally important to the project, regardless of their tiered status, however, informal hierarchies persisted and subtly informed the level of collaboration exchange of information the cast provided for one another.

The production crew exhibited the same phenomena. The crew mostly had existing relationships guiding their interactions, whereby experienced personnel tended to communicate more freely with the people they knew well. In contrast, newer crew members (particularly the production assistants) often faced barriers into in-group communication. As a result, production assistants often found themselves sitting on the outer margin of key talking points and receiving increasingly little formal communication from their more experienced

colleagues. Also, the way seasoned crew members spoke to fellow experienced crew, differentiated sharply from their interactions with newer crew members, with some exhibiting a form of subtle vertical stratification which shaped the environment overall. Further, the production assistant often did not have the requisite training to fulfil the requirements of their positions. Their inexperience meant that (at times) the workflow broke down and the more experienced crew were placed in the position of having to pick up the slack for the less experienced personnel.

These dynamics reflect a typical pattern in PBOs, where temporary teams often form quickly with limited time for formal integration. Implementing informal norms is often too rapid for the project team, which is efficient for experienced collaborators and to the detriment of new members, intensifying power imbalances and inhibiting learning (Bérubé & Gauthier, 2021; Bakker, 2010). Roles remain ambiguous without clear HR pathways or professional development structures, indicating several degrees of professionalism.

Such pattern aligns with Piwowar-Sulej et al. (2025) who emphasis that the absence of structured HR development and training pathways in creative sectors leads to inconsistent performance outcomes and diminished workforce capability. In the Malaysian film industry, these observations reveal a systemic weakness in onboarding and integration processes that risks perpetuating exclusionary norms and reinforcing inequality among creative professionals. These integration gaps have broader implications not only for team productivity but also for talent retention and career sustainability—especially among junior crew.

Operational Inefficiencies: Communication, Time, and Finance

Operational inefficiencies were persistent and multifaceted during the observation period, encompassing communication breakdowns, logistical mismanagement, and financial disorganisation. All of these dynamics played into crew morale, as well as efficiencies in production time; this was most notable in shoestring budget, high stakes, and time sensitive productions that required extensive planning on a location or with multiple parties and people involved.

The first operational problems seen were clearly associated with communication failures. It was somewhat comical that most crew personnel were unable to locate film sites, for the crew had little geographical detail, and did not provide clear 'pin-drop' GPS, particularly when shooting on remote islands. Although these spatial errors were often minor in distance, they compounded travel times and caused cascading delays in setup. More critically, the absence of production management team during early site preparations left director and camera teams without site briefings, resulting in confusion, redundant unloading efforts, and improvisational decision-making.

Another example was during sea-based locations, smaller boats were used due to budgetary constraints, necessitating multiple trips and causing further delays, especially when fluctuating sea levels were not factored into planning, reflecting a lack of foresight in contingency planning. Poor traffic estimation on land-based travel routes added additional delays, highlighting an overall fragility in operational coordination.

The financial disorganisation was equally disruptive and impacted morale. Unclear reimbursement processes led to supplier disruptions, notably in the food and beverage department where supplier changes were necessitated mid-production due to delayed payments and delayed food deliveries. Such situation often causes crews had to work through physically demanding schedules without timely meals.

These findings reflect a broader pattern in freelance-based and project-driven creative industries, where operational fragility is often normalised. As Yakubovska et al. (2024) suggest that trust in financial systems is critical for sustaining commitment in freelance-driven industries like film production; when compensation is delayed or processes are unclear, it erodes trust and weakens workforce morale. While the use of freelancers allows employers to manage labour costs more flexibly and adapt quickly to market demands without the long-term financial obligations associated with permanent hires, this very flexibility requires a foundation of reliable financial practices. Without it, the advantages of agile workforce structures risk being undermined by declining employee engagement and operational inefficiencies.

In short, the Malaysian film production observed here illustrates how decentralised labour structures, when paired with unstructured logistical and financial systems, create vulnerability rather than resilience. Without stronger operational planning and fiscal accountability, the benefits of agile workforce models risk being eclipsed by systemic inefficiencies.

Tensions between Creative Aspirations and Practical Execution

There was a recurring tension in during the production with the friction between artistic aspiration ("*nak berkarya/demi seni*") and practical realisation on the ground. While creativity is the root of filmmaking, artistic experimentation interrupted the production process in a few instances. These tensions exemplify what Wijngaarden et al. (2016) describe as the creative industry's "performance paradox," where the drive for innovation often disrupts operational continuity.

For example, the director of photography (DOP) sometimes demanded specific camera set ups or lens swaps for a particular aesthetic, even though certain environmental factors such as tide changes made executing this impractical. The production crew and cast were often already ready for the scenes, however, last-minute decisions about technical details created delays, particularly given the logistical challenges posed by remote, water-based locations.

Similarly, during the planning of a major fight scene, the stunt director prioritised ideal lighting conditions and complex choreography over time constraints. He hesitated to proceed with filming under bright sunlight due to concerns about visual quality ("film burn"), yet alternative solutions such as camera adjustments or creative shooting techniques were not immediately explored with the DOP. As a result, shooting schedules were further strained, and production momentum was affected.

These cases expose a critical vulnerability in project-based creative teams: the absence of adaptive management practices that can reconcile artistic goals with operational pragmatism. As Wohl (2021) and Pathma Devi (2023) argue, creative resilience is dependent on not only decentralised decision-making, but also a culture that promotes creativity, quick decision-making, and compromising. Without the components to do so, productions default to uncoordinated opinions of individual artistic preference rather than relying on some form of planned workflow systems.

This theme also presents another boundary risk which is the blurred lines in leadership. For example, a team can be so decentralised and rely on uncollegial artistic decisions - especially when there are deadlines - unregulated creative authority can develop bottlenecks that affect other work groups. A more structured yet flexible system, where artistic experimentation is negotiated with conversations across departments (i.e. not silo'ed), could at least alleviate some of this dysfunction and act more efficiently.

The findings underline the critical need for production teams to develop structured yet flexible frameworks that honour creative intent while safeguarding project schedules and resource management. Without such systems, even well-intentioned creative pursuits can unintentionally compromise production efficiency, teamwork, and morale.

As the next section shows, some production teams began developing informal workarounds and on-site learning mechanisms to adapt in real time — pointing to emergent strategies worth recognising.

Emergent Strategies: On-Site Learning and Practical Adaptability

Beyond the structural challenges observed, the production also demonstrated a series of emergent strategies that helped maintain workflow continuity. One such strategy was the reliance **on informal, on-site learning** as a core method of talent development. Production assistants, in particular, acquired technical know-how and workflow familiarity through real-time observation and task repetition rather than structured training. Senior crew members occasionally offered impromptu guidance or demonstrations, fostering a form of mentorship that, while unplanned, proved essential in bridging skill gaps.

Such tacit knowledge transfer—learning that is embedded in social interaction and embodied practice—is common in creative fields, especially in project-based contexts where there are limited formal HR structures (Bérubé & Gauthier, 2021; Lin, 2023). Though unstructured, these mentoring moments acted as an alternative to organisational onboarding, revealing for junior crew members valuable knowledge of both expectations related to their technical duties and behavioural expectations.

Another factor of resilience observed related to established working relationships within departments where the teams that had previously worked together showed heightened trust, faster coordination, and more immediate responses to unknown complications. When the lighting shifted or works had challenging sequences that incurred scheduling bottlenecks, they could improvise immediately, changing blocking, and the sequence of takes, or adjusting the roles of crew with minimal disturbance. As Kim et al. (2023) might describe, these instances demonstrate the micro-resilient strategies employed by project teams; while project constraints are fluid, the actors showed the familiarity in terms of interpersonal relationships to maintain forward momentum.

While these adaptive practices may have been born out of necessity rather than design, it does suggest a very important insight: without established formal systems in place, resilience can rely heavily on informal systems, like mentoring, shared experience, and tacit ways of collaborating. This reflects on organisational improvisation in creative sectors where learning and problem-solving often occur in the flow of work rather than in structured settings.

These findings suggest that while informal learning and familiarity as a team may mitigate some pressure of resource-constrained production, they are not substitutes for solid talent development systems. They do, however showcase both the creativity and limitations of current practice in the Malaysian film production sector, where adaptability remains the solution to ongoing structural issues.

Collectively, these five themes illustrates the conflicted, complex realities of talent management and production sustainability in Malaysian film contexts. Leadership issues and fractured professionalism, logistical inefficiencies and a lack of cooperation, creative-practical tensions and fear of doing the wrong thing all highlight issues within a systemic context, revealing a vulnerability in the industry that continues to fight for operational stability. However, on-the-job learning and informal premeditated adaptation also demonstrate the innate resilience of those working within the sector. These dynamics reflect both the strengths and limitations of creative work that is project-based, and evidence the need for structured systems that create organisational clarity while supporting creative freedom. As will be discussed in the next section, these observations have implications for how talent ecosystems within the creative economy can change in a usable way that supports a healthy development for sustainability during difficult times.

CONCLUSION AND IMPLICATIONS

Drawing upon 39 days of immersive observation of a Malaysian film production, this research reveals critical insights regarding the challenges and inadequacies in talent management practices in the Malaysian creative industry. While the production milieu afforded a distinctive opportunity to express creativity, it also illuminated the inefficiencies in the operation, human relations, and structural design that would compromise workforce morale and sustainability. The emergent informal practices such as decisive, on-the-spot decisions, on-site learning, and peer mentoring are agile adaptations that also build operational resilience in the high-pressure and demanding nature of film environment.

These findings highlight the necessity for Malaysian film production companies to adopt a more systematic, perhaps a strategic approach to talent management, rather than the current hiring practices, episodic reactive problem solving. As evidenced by the communication breakdowns, favoritism, and inconsistent leadership dynamics, talent alone is not sufficient to ensure project success. Rather, it must be nurtured within an environment of clarity, inclusivity, and organizational discipline.

Furthermore, the mismatch between creative ambition and operational practicality exemplified in the frequent delays due to perfectionism ("*nak berkarya / demi seni*") points to a need for integrated leadership models that can balance artistic integrity with project delivery constraints. These observations resonate with broader scholarly discussions on the evolving nature of creative work, where adaptability, soft skills, and emotional intelligence are increasingly valued alongside technical expertise (Piwowar-Sulej et al., 2025).

At a policy level, the absence of standardised training pathways and inconsistent HR practices calls for institutional reforms. FINAS and related agencies may consider leveraging frameworks such as Sustainable HRM (R. Chavan & Dhawale, 2024) to establish clear expectations for crew development, knowledge transfer, and ethical workplace practices. These reforms are especially crucial given the reliance of the industry on project-based employment and the fluid nature of production teams.

This paper draws upon partial data from the author's ongoing Doctorate in Business Administration (DBA) study. While it focuses solely on the observational component, the larger research includes additional qualitative data that will be analysed in future publications.

While this study offers valuable empirical insight, it is limited by its single-case, observation-only design. The absence of interview data or cross-case comparisons means that generalisations must be made cautiously. Future research should triangulate observational findings with interviews or documentary evidence and explore comparative studies across multiple production houses to further contextualise the challenges and enablers of sustainable talent management.

In sum, sustaining creative production in Malaysia requires more than technical excellence—it demands leadership agility, structural clarity, and a strategic reimagining of how creative labour is developed, supported, and retained.

Practical Implications

The findings of this study offer several practical implications for stakeholders within the Malaysian film industry, particularly in the context of talent management, operational efficiency, and production sustainability.

First, there is evidence that structured training and development programs for crew's entry level positions like production assistants would be beneficial. Companies were constantly interrupted by inexperienced crew, revealing that informal, or performative learning is not effective. Production companies and those that govern the film industry - for example FINAS - should institutionalise and provide new crew members with orientation and short-term certification courses, so they have some procedural and technical instructions before they step on set. This will make a coherent process protocol, improve productivity, and minimise human error.

Second, ineffective communication, lack of understanding, and personality clashes point to the need for skills development in team production focusing on interpersonal skills. Development in soft skills, in the form of time-management training or conflict management and team communication sessions, could provide areas of improvement in relationships among people both above the line and below. Furthermore, leadership within production houses should prioritise open channels of communication and develop standard operating procedures (SOPs) for conflict mediation and crew coordination.

Finally, the study reveals the tension between artistic vision and operational practicality, particularly when flow is affected on set. Creativity is important in the film industry, but production teams have to find the balance of the art they nurture, with the limits or constraints of the particular context in which they operate in. Executive producers and directors should facilitate a culture of creative pragmatism, where innovation is encouraged but not at the expense of operational timelines and budgetary control.

These practical implications are not only relevant for film producers and production managers but relevant for policy makers, educators, and curriculum makers, when designing educational programs for film and creative industry management. In order to continue to build a talent pool and sustainable film industry, there needs to

be a more integrated understanding of technical abilities, emotional intelligence, and improvisation as professional learning for the future of the Malaysian film industry.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

This research is supported by Doctorate Research Grant (DRG) from Arshad Ayub Graduate Business School (AAGBS), Universiti Teknologi MARA (UiTM). The researcher expresses special acknowledgement and heartfelt appreciation to the practitioners and professionals in the Malaysian film industry for their contribution in sharing their valuable insights which enriched the study immensely. Also, to the production house that allowed the researcher to join them during the period of the filming and shooting which enabled the researcher to observe and obtain first-hand information.

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ISSN: 2454-6186 | DOI: 10.47772/IJRISS | Special Issue | Volume IX Issue XXIII October 2025

APPENDIX

Table 1 FINAS published film data 2017 - 2023

Malaysia Film Data: Collection and Admission for local and foreign films in cinema: 2017 - 2023							
Total / Year	2017	2018	2019	2020	2021	2022	2023
Admissions (mil)	72.84	77.31	77.78	77.78	3.72	27.33	34.87
Gross Takings (mil)	RM 983.64	RM 1.04bil	RM 1.08bil	RM 123.95	RM 22.0	MR 474.08	RM 621.72
No. of Cinemas	151	156	162	166	162	165	164
No. of screens	1,094	1,094	1,183	1,216	1,185	1,232	
Total Seats	185,997	186,911	193,333	196,599	191,338	197,337	188,843
Local Feature Films Data 2017 - 2023							
Total / Year	2017	2018	2019	2020	2021	2022	2023
No. of Films	59	54	47	23	3	48	63
Gross Taking (mil)	RM 57.57	RM 170.40	RM 144.71	RM 11.62	RM 187.715	RM 142.36	
Admission (mil)	4.52	13.21	11.61	0.50	0.015	7.83	5.8
Average Viewership (mil)	0.077	0.245	0.242	0.021	0.015	0.081	0.092
Average Ticket Price	RM 12.74	RM 12.90	RM 12.46	RM 23.24	RM 0.30	RM 23.97	RM 24.54
Average Ticket Collection (mil)	RM 0.98	RM 3.15	RM 3.01	RM 0.50	RM 0.04	RM 2.26	

Table 2 FINAS Licenses 2017 - 2023

FINAS License Registration Approval							
Year / Category	2017	2018	2019	2020	2021	2022	2023
Film Production (PF)	1,221	1,116	1,214	1,333	1,234	1,636	999
Video Production (PV)	1,418	1,107	940	586	357	13	11
Film Distribution (DF)	1,249	1,204	1,308	1,047	1,045	1,389	833
Video Distribution (DV)	1,661	1,649	1,840	1,075	568	261	122

ISSN: 2454-6186 | DOI: 10.47772/IJRISS | Special Issue | Volume IX Issue XXIII October 2025

Film Exhibition (EF)	1,501	1,410	1,502	1,611	1,747	1,177	746
Video Exhibition (EV)	39	30	28	20	12	678	470
Total	7,089	6,516	6,832	5,183	4,694	5,154	3,181