

## It's up to media freelancers to take the next big step

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SINGAPORE — The Media Development Authority (MDA) has given its backing to freelancers in the media industry to form a support group to champion their rights.

Such a grouping — be it a trade union, society or association — would represent a first of sorts within the creative industry, an emerging sector that lacks the tradition of organised professional and labour entities

The onus is now on the freelancers, who have previously raised concerns about poor welfare and have taken recent steps to address the issue of tardy payments.

The structure of the grouping would depend on the freelancers themselves, said media expert Tan Tarn How.

But Nominated Member of Parliament Audrey Wong, who pointed out that freelancers are “individualistic” types, wonders if they can take that next big step and form a cohesive association in the near future.

Even if one materialises, media houses and the authorities would also need to change their mindset for the grouping to be successful, she said.

The proposal emerged at a closed-door meeting on Aug 17 at the Institute of Policy Studies, where the MDA also committed to provide the seed support for such a grouping.

MDA programme director Teo Thiam Chye said the grouping needed to also address other issues, though, such as professional upgrading, training, business and welfare issues.

There are between 50 and 80 production firms in Singapore. One reason behind tardy payments is that some of them do face cash flow problems.

MediaCorp understands that commissioning bodies like broadcasters pay production houses 20 per cent up-front and the remainder in stages. However, for some genres like lifestyle programmes, 80 per cent is paid on completion of the project, which could be six months later.

There have been suggestions from the community that commissioning bodies pay 50 per cent upfront, with which production companies pay freelancers.

The meeting comes 11 weeks after the first closed-door session at Emily Hill on June 8.

Mr Shawn Fonseka, 34, who has been freelancing as a cameraman for 10 years, said: “This is a step in the right direction as freelancers have had nowhere to turn to.”

A film director, who declined to be named, said: “The problem was everyone was waiting for someone else to take the lead. The task is huge because the problems are myriad — each

group, for instance, the film editors, the cameramen, have their own set of issues — and nobody wanted to take on all these problems on their own.”