



# Developer Satisfaction Survey 2021

## Summary Report

13 September 2021

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## Acknowledgements

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## Introduction

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The mission of the International Game Developers Association (IGDA) is to support and empower game developers around the world in their pursuit of fulfilling and sustainable careers. Part of the core set of tools that the IGDA uses to achieve this mission and to empower game developers is knowledge and information. The Developer Satisfaction Survey (DSS) conducted in partnership with Western University is a valuable source of information about the well-being and opinions of developers and of the game industry as a whole.

This report contains the results and findings of the seventh DSS, conducted in the first quarter of 2021. One consistent theme across this DSS is the increased desire for diversity and representation. We saw the highest numbers ever for respondents who felt that diversity was important, yet 74% said there is not equal treatment and opportunity for everyone within our industry.

With 30% of respondents identifying as women and more ethnic diversity than we have seen on any other DSS, we must implement policies across our industry to support this talent. Only 38% of respondents said that their company had formal complaint procedure for EDI issues, and lack of such policies only hurts our industry and those within it.

While the game industry has overall done well during the COVID-19 pandemic, we saw nearly double the number of developers reporting they had crunched recently. This sudden loss of progress compared to the past trend of crunch decreasing year over year is likely caused by inefficiencies and delays caused by work from home and mental health challenges caused by the pandemic. Just as DEI policies are necessary to protect our talent, so are anti-crunch policies, particularly when we are seeing record profits.

We must come together to improve our industry and ensure it is supportive of the wonderful creatives who fuel it. However, change from the top is necessary to implement many of these improvements.

All are welcome and encouraged to share this report and these findings with others to encourage change and long-term solutions that will improve our industry and its accessibility for all developers.

This is our call to action to push forward initiatives and changes to create a better industry for game developers around the world. Together, we can create a welcoming and supportive environment in which game developers will be able to thrive in both their careers and their lives.

If you would like to assist with translating this report into other languages or helping us reach a wider audience for our next survey in 2023, please reach out to us at [staff@igda.org](mailto:staff@igda.org).

**Renee Gittins, Executive Director, IGDA**

## Overview

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The 2021 IGDA Developer Satisfaction Survey was open for responses from February 15 to April 12, 2021. The final sample was 803 responses.

When reading this report, keep the following in mind:

- The response rate means that 803 people answered at least one section of the survey. Not every respondent was asked every question (as questions were tailored to respondent type), not every respondent answered each question presented to them, and not every respondent completed the survey entirely. The percentages in this report are based on the number of valid responses to each question and therefore the sample size changes for each question.
- The DSS is a self-report survey spread through word of mouth. The sample is not necessarily representative of the entire global population of game developers. The statistics provided are indicative of the sample of individuals who took the survey.
- Totals of statistical groupings may not sum to 100% due to rounding or because multiple response options were allowed.

The survey was targeted broadly and captured responses from people with various connections to the industry (Table 1).

- Most said that they made games in core creation or development roles.
- A smaller proportion made games as a portion of their work (i.e., academics, those in transmedia companies, students concurrently making games).
- A third group worked in game studios in supportive or ancillary roles to game creation.

These three respondent groups were asked the most survey questions and form the core of this report. Other respondents answered select question subsets (i.e., for students or the currently unemployed) and/or answered general questions about demographics and equity, diversity and inclusion (EDI).

Most answered the survey in English (90%). Other languages were represented as follows: Traditional Chinese (2.5%), Japanese (2%), Spanish (1.5%), German (1.5%), French (1.5%) and Italian (0.5%). No one answered the survey in Simplified Chinese.

A large portion of respondents were working in the United States (US) (39%) or Canada (12%). While North America plays a large role in the global video game industry, developers in this part of the world are likely overrepresented in this sample. Thirty-two additional countries were represented in small numbers. Additional details about the sample distribution are included in Table 2 and in the Demographics section below.

The first part of the report includes questions that were presented to all respondents: demographics and equity, diversity and inclusion. The second part of the report paints a general employment profile of those who are making games for pay in core development or ancillary roles. The third part of the report provides an overview of the work experiences of three types of developers - employees, freelancers, and the self-employed.

**Table 1: What is your connection to the game industry?**

	<b>% of respondents</b>
Makes games in a core creation or development role (incl. QA)	63
Portion of work is games-related or to make games (incl. academics who make games); or makes games for commercialization on the side	13
Supports the development of games in administrative or ancillary roles that are not game creation (e.g., admin, HR, technical support)	8
Currently unemployed	5
Academic studies/teaches about the game industry	3
Makes games as a hobbyist	2
Fine artist using games as a medium	1.5
Involved in the production of game-related events	1.5
Looking for first job in the industry	1
Game journalist or critic	1
External investor	0.5
Professional or hobbyist streamer or influencer	0.5
Professional or hobbyist eSports player	0.2
Student (of game making or game studies)	13*

Source: IGDA DSS 2021

\*Students counted separately; those making games for pay/goal of pay are included in main figures



**Table 2: Key Sample Characteristics**

	<b>% of respondents</b>
<b>Company Type</b>	
Developer who is not owned by or dependent on a single publisher and engages primarily in self-publishing	31
Developer who is fully owned by a company that publishes games for one or more platforms, but is not directly tied to a primary consumer product/game console	24
Developer who develops games under contract with one or more publishers for one or more platforms, but is not directly tied to a primary consumer product/game console	17
Developer who is fully owned by a company that manufactures a video game console	9
Company that does not exclusively make games (i.e., advertising, film/tv/web, transmedia)	4
Developer who is a subsidiary or under partial ownership of a company that publishes games for one or more platforms, but is not directly tied to a primary consumer product/game console	4
Work-for-hire game developer (i.e., branded game, training)	3
Tools or developer services (i.e., middleware, server back-end, game engines)	2
Support services (i.e., localization, QA, outsourcing)	2
Government institution/public sector (i.e., public universities and colleges, military)	2
Developer who is a separate entity from a console manufacturer but is exclusively tied to one through contract or partial ownership	1
Non-profit sector (i.e., private universities and colleges)	<1
Hardware/accessories	<1

	<b>% of respondents</b>
<b>Company Size</b>	
≤10	30
11-50	23
51-100	11
101-500	18
≥501	19
<b>Primary Role</b>	
Management (incl. producers, team leads)	33
Programming/Engineering	24
Design (incl. writing, UX/UI design)	26
Art (incl. technical artists)	7
Audio (incl. design and composition)	1
QA	3
Admin, Support, Monetization (incl. marketing, community management)	3
Other	1
<b>Employment Type</b>	
Employee (permanent full- or part-time)	67
Employee (temporary full- or part-time)	5
Self-employed	14
Freelancer	13

Source: IGDA DSS 2021

## Demographics

This data presents the prototypical game industry worker as a White man in his early thirties with a university degree who lives in North America and does not have children.

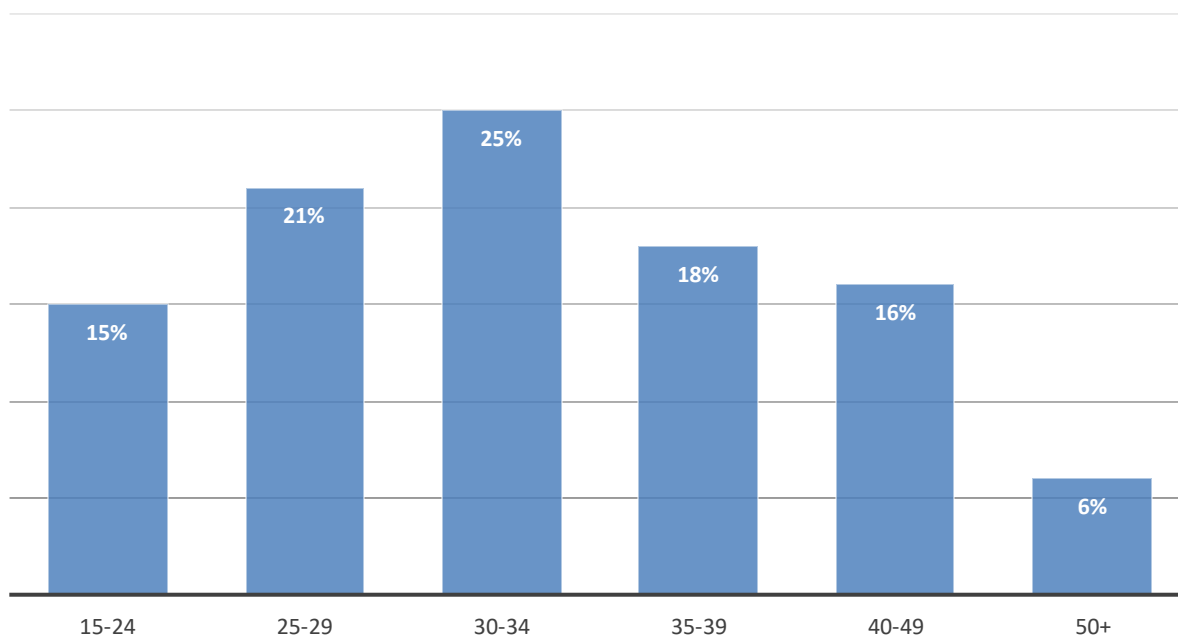
As context, we occasionally reference US population statistics because people who were born in the US or Canada (46%) or who worked in the US (39%) made up a large proportion of the DSS 2021 sample. Population distributions in other countries could differ. Additionally, many who would be identified as members of racialized groups in the North American or Western European context might not be so when working in their country of origin or ancestry.

One in five respondents identified as an immigrant.

### Snapshot: Age

Respondents ranged in age from 15 to 70 years old (Figure 1; incl. students). Relative to the 2019 DSS, the 2021 respondents were slightly younger.

**Figure 1: Age of Respondents**



Source: IGDA DSS 2021

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## Snapshot: Gender and Sexual Orientation

Respondents predominantly identified as men (61%), though this percentage was lower compared to the 2019 DSS (71%). Almost one-third identified as women (30%), and another 8% identified as gender non-binary, gender fluid, genderqueer or two-spirited. In a separate question, 7% of respondents identified as transgender.

Two-thirds (68%) of respondents identified as straight, 6% as gay or lesbian, 21% as bisexual, pansexual or demisexual, 3% as asexual, and 2% as queer.

It is challenging to locate comparator data that does not conflate sex, gender and sexual orientation and the following statistics are presented as non-definitive. The [US Census](#) only reports on biological sex and in 2019 indicated 58% female persons in the civilian labour force. A [2018](#) report from the Centre for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) estimated that 1.6% of adults in the US identified as gay or lesbian and 1.3% identified as bisexual. A [2020 Gallup poll](#) of US adults found that 1.4% identified as gay, 0.7% as lesbian, 3.1% as bisexual, and 0.6% as transgender.

Relative to these estimates, women were highly underrepresented in the DSS 2021 sample and those identifying as gender non-binary were overrepresented. Those identifying as gay, lesbian or bisexual were overrepresented.

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## Snapshot: Race/Ethnicity/Ancestry

Three-quarters of respondents identified as White, Caucasian or European (compared to 81% in 2019). Respondents were able to select up to three options for this question. When respondents who *only* selected the 'White, Caucasian or European' option were included, this statistic dropped to 67%.

The next most frequently selected categories were:

- 10% - Hispanic or Latino/Latina/Latinx
- 7% - East Asian (incl. Chinese, Japanese, and Korean)
- 4% - Black, African American, African or Afro-Caribbean
- 4% - Aboriginal or Indigenous

Other respondents identified as South-East Asian (3%), South Asian (2%), and West Asian (2%). Finally, 5% self-reported a preferred identification including 1% who listed Jewish.

The [2019 US Census](#) data reported that 60% of the US population identified as 'white only, non-Hispanic' (this definition includes those from the Middle East and North Africa which roughly corresponds to the DSS category of West Asian). The Census also reported that 19% identified as Hispanic or Latino/Latina/Latinx (of any race), 13% identified as Black, 6% as Asian and 1.5% as Indigenous.

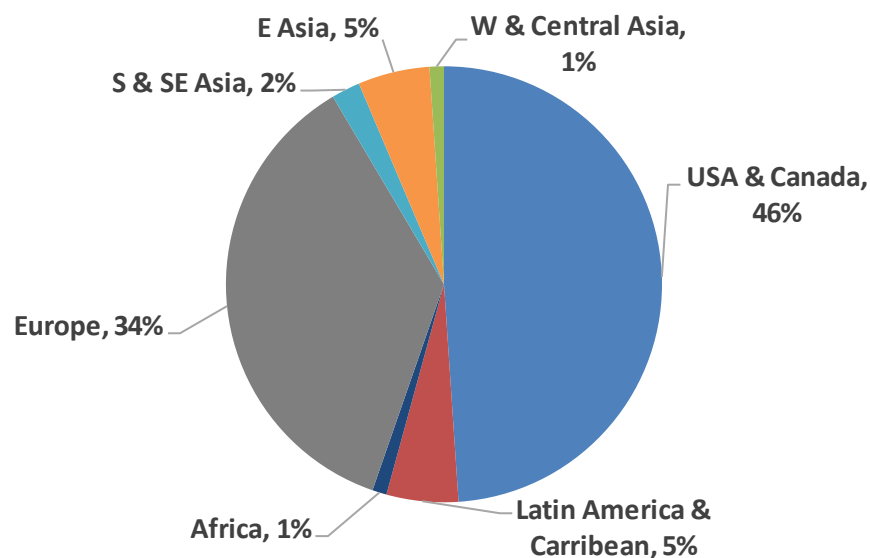
Relative to these estimates, people identifying as White were highly overrepresented in the DSS 2021 sample and people identifying as Asian and as Indigenous were slightly overrepresented. There was an underrepresentation of those identifying as Black and those of Hispanic or Latino/Latina/Latinx origins.

### Snapshot: Country of Origin & Country of Work

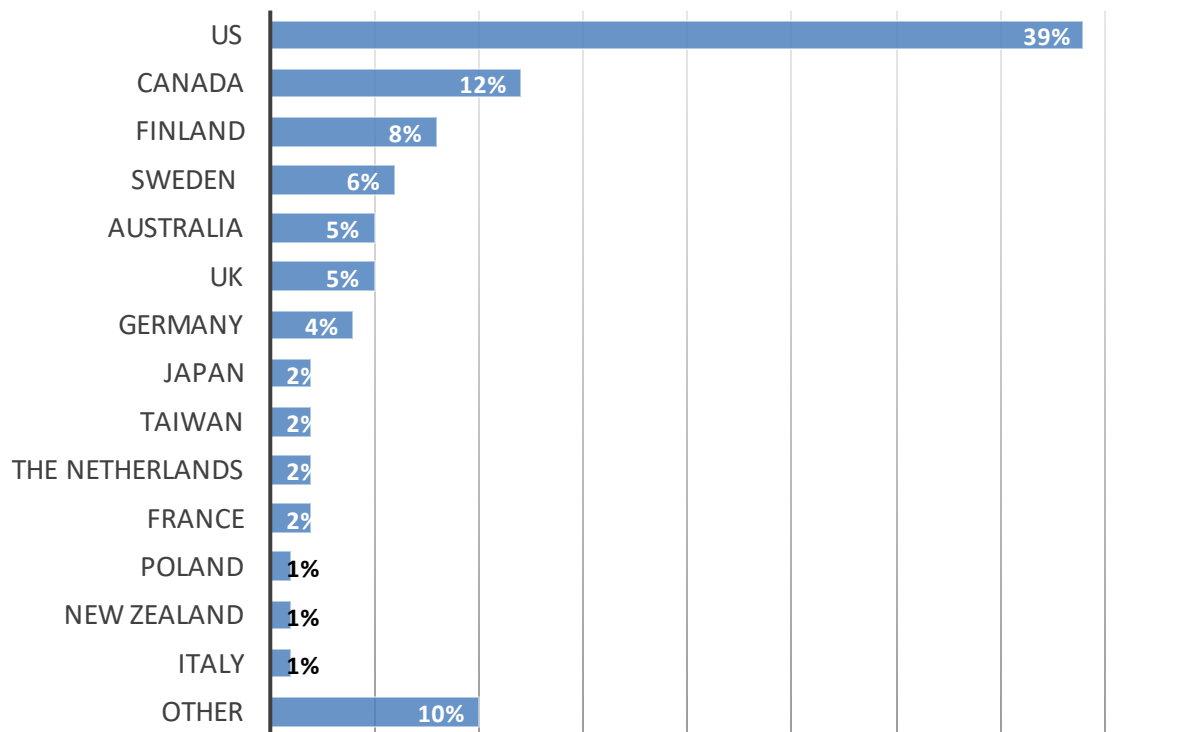
Most of the respondents were born in the United States or Canada (46%) and one-third were born in Europe (34%) (Figure 2).

Many respondents also worked in the United States (39%) or Canada (12%). This was followed by those working in Finland (8%), Sweden (6%), the United Kingdom and Australia (each at 5%) and Germany (4%) (Figure 3).

**Figure 2: Country of Origin**



Source: IGDA DSS 2021

**Figure 3: Country of Work**


Source: IGDA DSS 2021

### Snapshot: Disability

In the DSS 2021, 29% of respondents identified as having one or more disabilities:

- 15% - psychiatric or mental illness
- 8% - intellectual or learning disability
- 7% - physical disability
- 5% - neurological disability
- 4% - visual impairment
- 2% - hearing impairment

These figures might be slightly higher than the US working population. According to a [2018 CDC report](#), 26% of *all adults* in the US live with a disability.

## Snapshot: Marital Status & Children

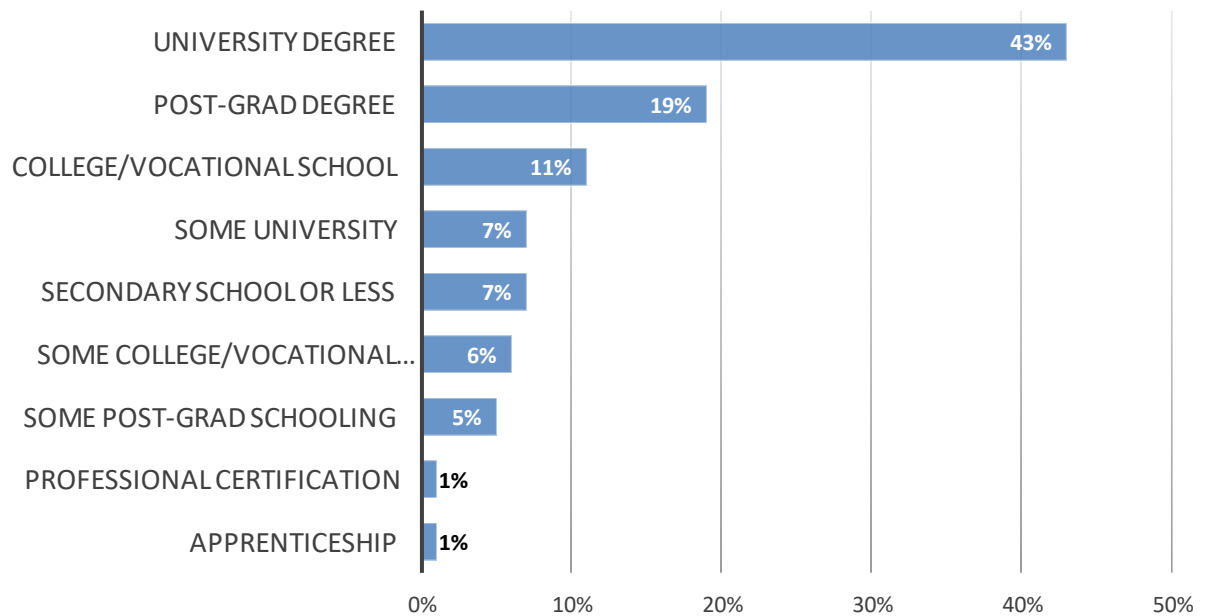
More respondents said they were married or partnered (61%) than single (36%). Another 3% were separated or divorced.

Fewer respondents reported having children (24%) compared to the 2019 DSS (35%). Most said they had school-aged children (12%) and/or pre-school aged children (11%). Only 5% said they had adult children.

## Snapshot: Educational Background

Respondents were highly educated. Nearly three-quarters (73%) had attained a degree or diploma from a college, vocational school or university while an additional 13% had attended some college or university (Figure 4).

**Figure 4: Highest Educational Attainment**



Source: IGDA DSS 2021

## Equity, Diversity, Inclusion

Respondents were instructed to consider diversity in terms of demographic characteristics such as age, sex, gender, race, ethnicity, disability, sexual orientation, etc.

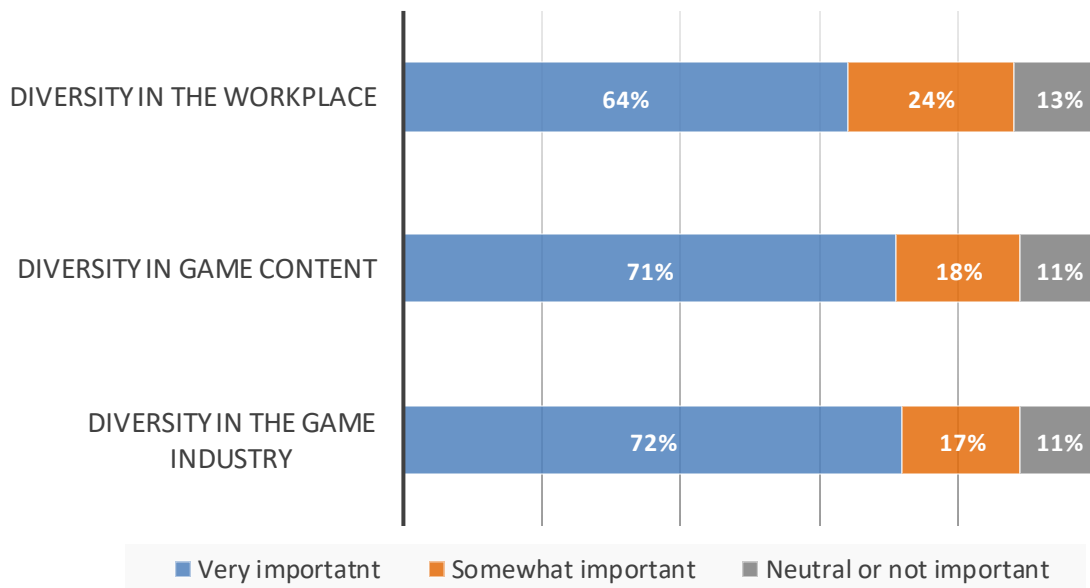
### Snapshot: Attitudes toward Diversity

The number of respondents who felt that diversity was 'somewhat' or 'very' important was at its highest in the history of the DSS (Figure 5).

- 87% felt that *diversity in the workplace* was important
- 89% felt that *diversity in game content* was important
- 90% felt that *diversity in the game industry* was important

Almost half of the respondents (49%) felt the game industry had become more diverse over the past two years. This is down from 57% in 2019, but an increase from 42% in 2017. A small group felt that the industry had become less diverse (2%), 28% reported that diversity had stayed the same and 21% were not sure.

**Figure 5: Importance of Diversity**



Source: IGDA DSS 2021

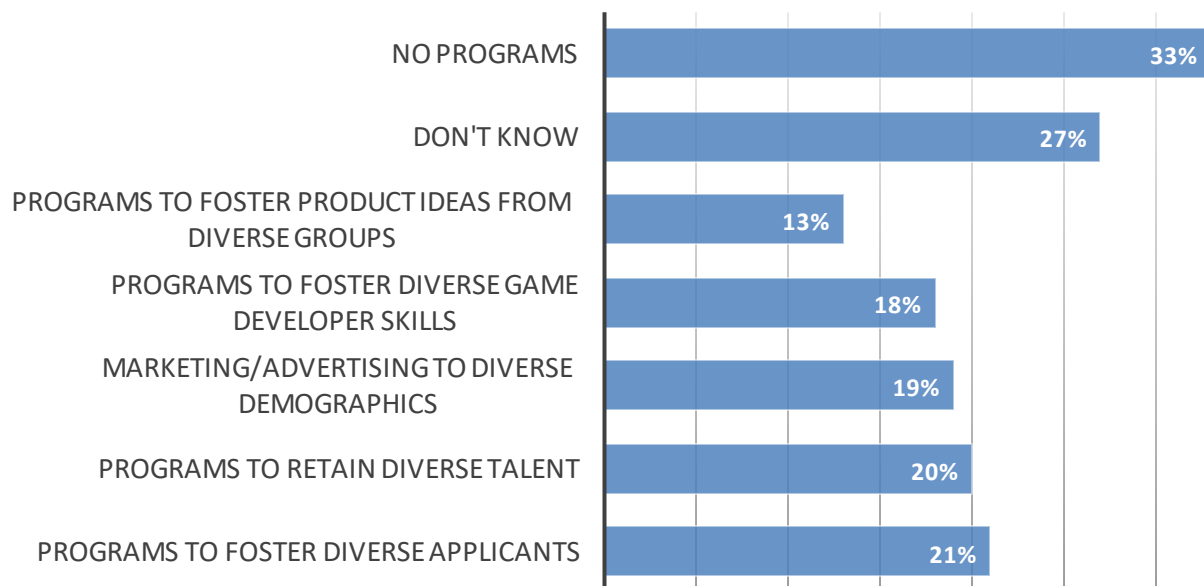


## Snapshot: Diversity Programs

Respondents were presented with a list of *programs* directed toward increasing equity, diversity or inclusion (EDI) and asked to check all the ones in place at their workplace (Figure 6). These included partnerships with community colleges, universities, non-profits or other groups to foster applicant pools, product ideas and skills and competencies among those from underrepresented groups. They also included retention programs such as on-boarding, mentoring and professional development.

Reports of such programs were low. Indeed, one-third of respondents said that their workplace had no such programs and 27% did not know.

**Figure 6: Programs Directed to Increasing EDI**



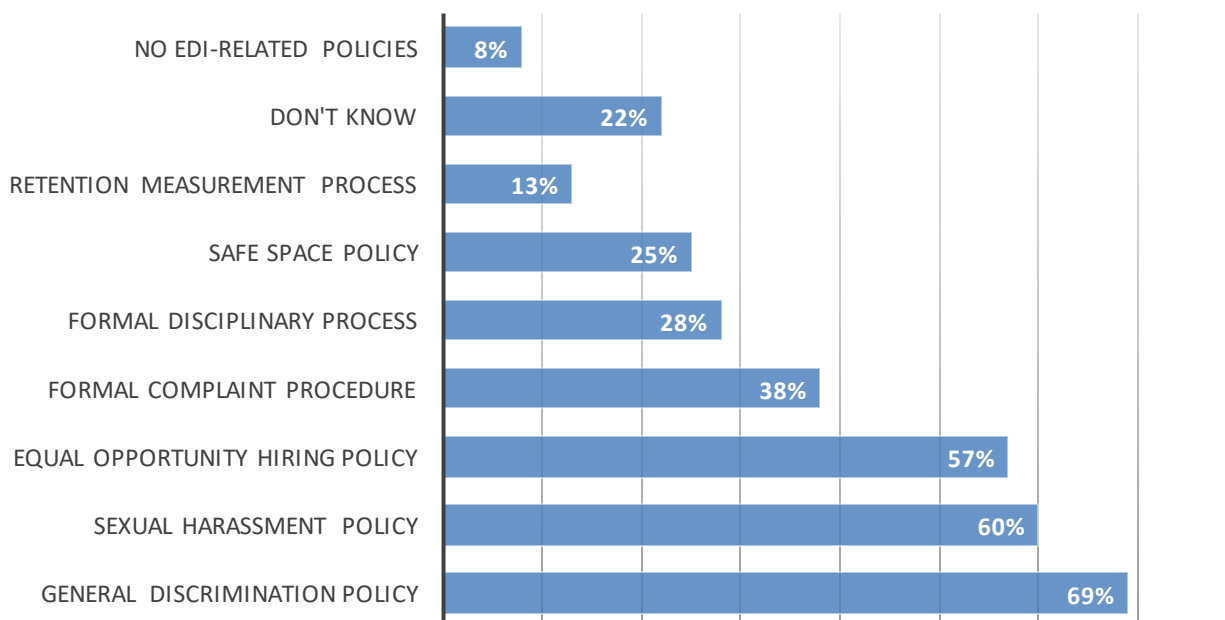
Source: IGDA DSS 2021

Respondents were also presented with a list of *policies* directed toward increasing EDI (Figure 7). Many said that their company had a 'general non-discrimination policy' (69%), an 'equal opportunity hiring policy' (57%) or a 'sexual harassment policy' (60%), though these numbers are somewhat lower than in 2019.

Importantly, only 38% said that their workplace had a formal complaint procedure for EDI issues and even fewer (28%) said that there was a formal disciplinary process.

Very few companies seem to measure and track retention of members from underrepresented groups (13%). Almost one-quarter of respondents did not know if their company had these or other EDI-related policies and 8% percent said that their workplace had no such policies at all.

**Figure 7: Policies Directed to Increasing EDI**



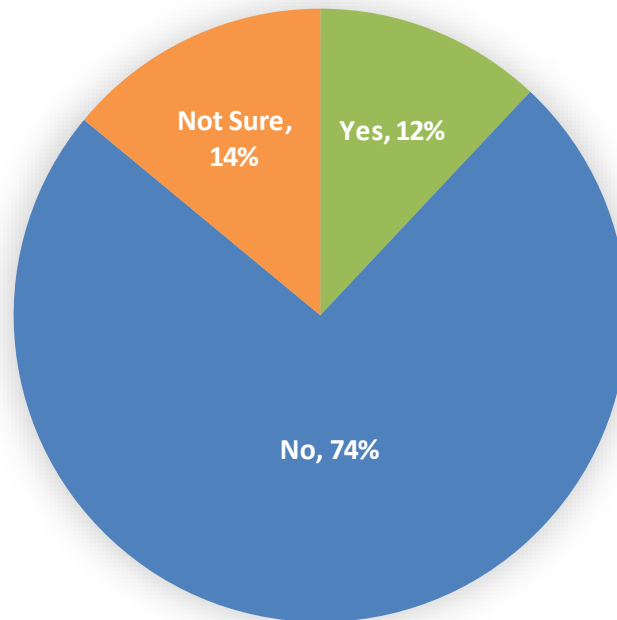
Source: IGDA DSS 2021

Crucially, only 41% of respondents felt that these policies were adequately enforced (compared to 59% in 2019), and another 47% were not sure.

In addition, 74% of respondents said 'no' when asked if there was equal treatment and opportunity for all in the game industry (Figure 8). A further 14% were not sure. These figures are also worse than the 2019, 2017, and 2016 data (where 65%, 50%, and 58% answered 'no', respectively).

The efficacy of these policies or other informal initiatives is therefore in question.

**Figure 8: Is there equal treatment and opportunity for all in the game industry?**



Source: IGDA DSS 2021

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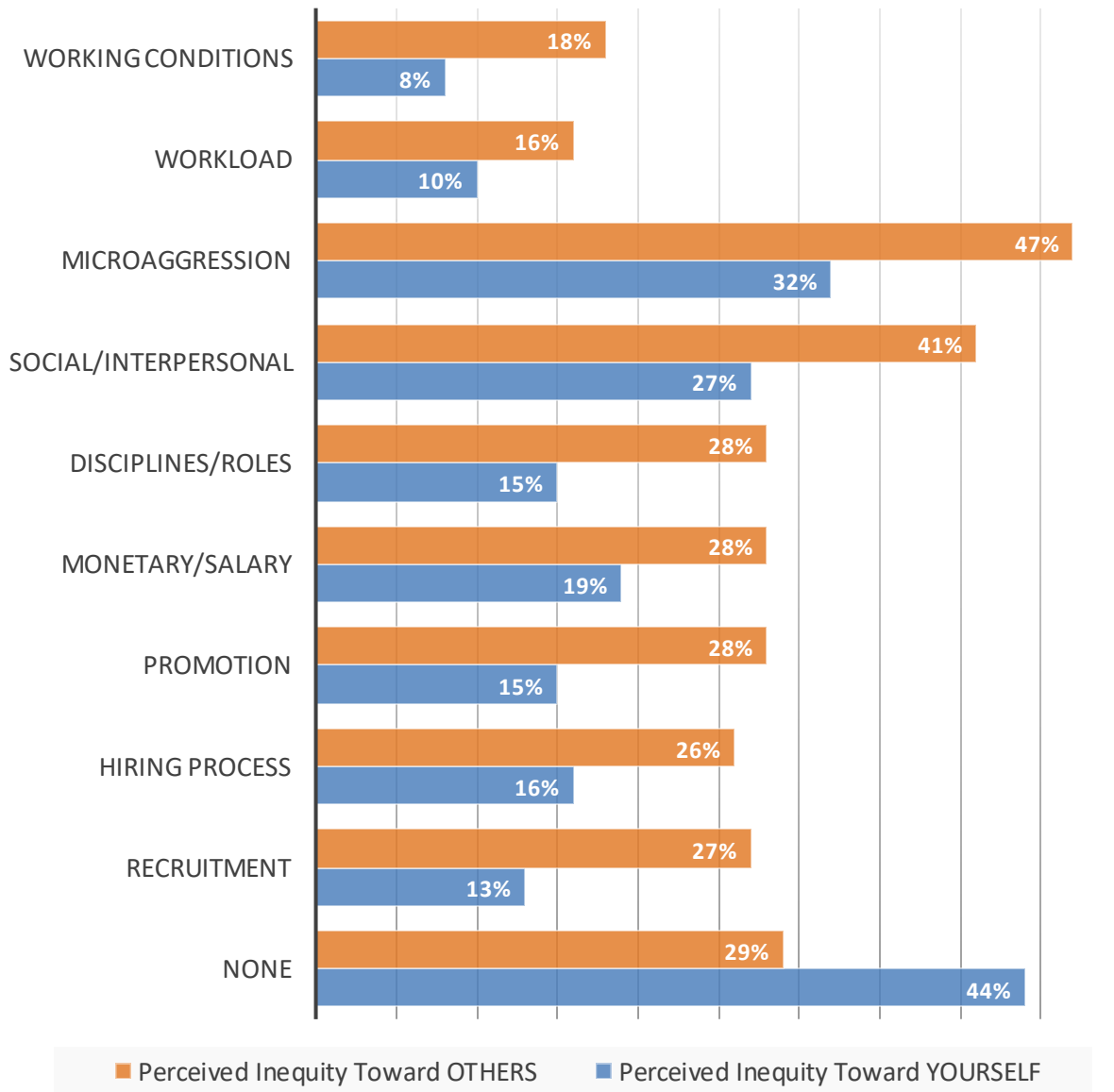
### Snapshot: Discrimination

Respondents were asked whether they had ever experienced or witnessed various forms of inequity (Figure 9). In the 2021 DSS, less than half (44%) said they had **never experienced inequity** themselves and even fewer (29%) said they had **never witnessed inequity** towards others.

Of those who did report inequity towards themselves or others, social/interpersonal or microaggressions were the most common. Overall, respondents reported witnessing inequity towards others at greater rates than directly experiencing it themselves.

In some instances, respondents in 2021 perceived higher rates of inequities towards both self and others compared to 2019, with a notable increase in microaggressions towards the self (32% in 2021 versus 23% in 2019) and others (47% in 2021 versus 38% in 2019).

**Figure 9: Perceptions of Inequity toward Self and Others**



Source: IGDA DSS 2021

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## Employment Overview of Game Developers

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The rest of the report only uses data from respondents who said they were involved in making games for pay. This includes those in support roles to core development (HR, marketing, administration, etc.) as well as those in QA. This excludes students not yet in the industry, academics studying the industry who do not make games, game journalists, event planners, etc. As such, the figures presented for demographics characteristics will differ from those presented for the whole survey sample above.

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### Snapshot: Employment Status

Of the respondents who were involved in making games for pay, the majority worked as permanent (67%) or temporary (5%) employees. A further 14% were self-employed, and 13% said they were freelancers or independent contractors. The vast majority (87%) worked in the industry on a full-time basis, while the remainder (13%) worked part-time.

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### Snapshot: The Unemployed

Only 4.8% of the survey sample (23 respondents) indicated that they were currently unemployed in the industry.

- 43% were at the end of a contract without a new one
- 29% had been permanently laid off
- 19% had been fired
- 5% were self-employed with no current projects
- 5% had quit

Over a third (38%) had been unemployed for 3 to 6 months and another 38% had been unemployed for over a year. The remaining 24% had been unemployed for 2 months or less. Almost all of them wanted to find another job in the game industry (91%).

This data may reflect an impact of COVID-19 because the rates of termination and the inability to land a new contract were much higher in this sample than in 2019 (+15 to 17%).

## Snapshot: Games as Primary Business

Most respondents worked at or operated companies wherein games and game-related products and services are the primary business. The majority (80%) said that games made up 100% of the work at their company and an additional 12% said that games made up at least half of the work that they do.

## Snapshot: Employment Volatility

While 67% of respondents indicated that they were permanent employees, when asked how many employers they had had in the past five years, the response average among employees was 2.1. Among freelancers/contractors, the average was higher at 4.2. As noted in previous reports, this continues to indicate some volatility among employees in ostensibly permanent employment relationships while also signalling that many freelancers seem to maintain stable relationships with a core set of clients.

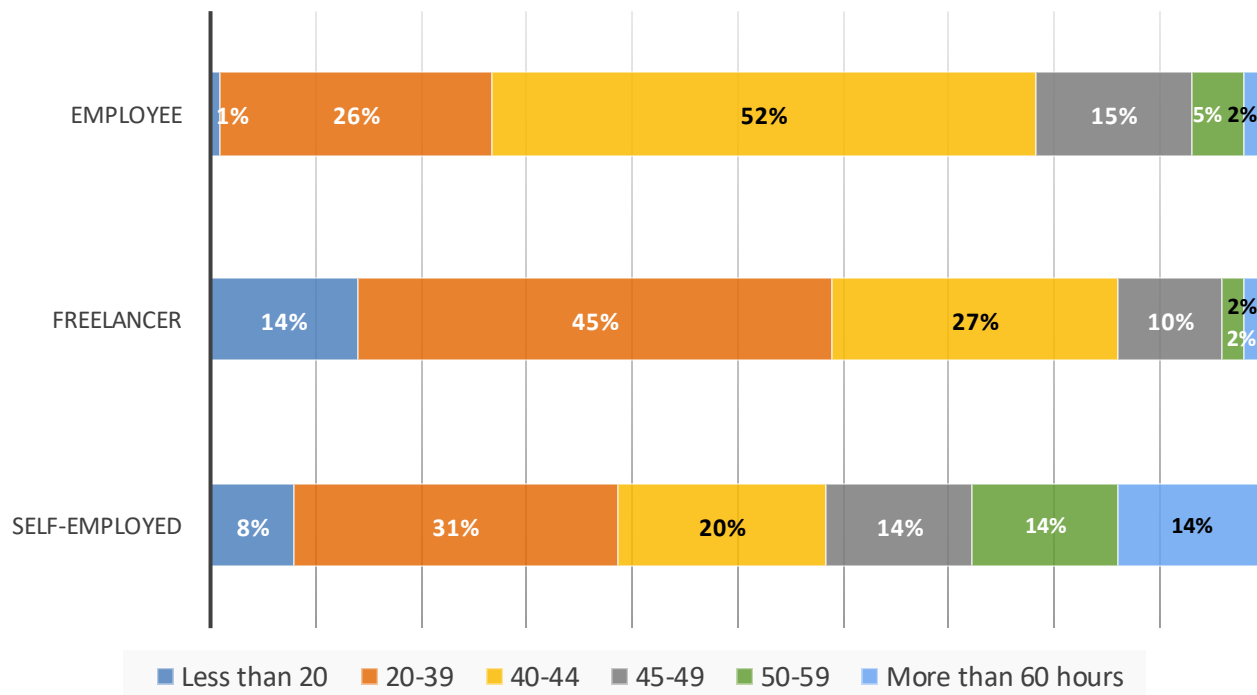
The data still suggest that many self-employed respondents start their own business after working in the industry as an employee or freelancer. For this group, the average number of employers in the past five years (including themselves) was 2.3 and 61% said they had worked for other game-related employers in the past. However, this is down from 71% in 2019.

## Snapshot: Hours of Work

Hours of work differ by employment profile (Figure 10). Most employees (52%) worked 40-44 hours per week, or less (27%). In comparison, only 27% of freelancers and 20% of the self-employed worked these 'standard hours'. In general, self-employed respondents worked longer regular work weeks and freelancers worked shorter regular work weeks.

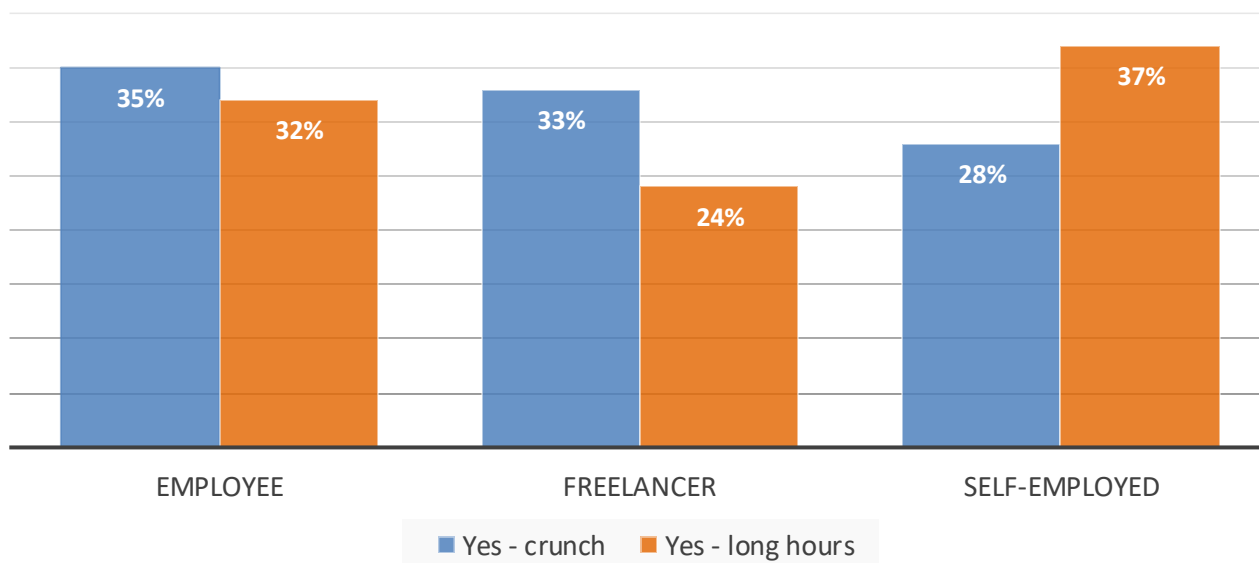
Yet, many respondents still experience long hours (Figure 11). Across all respondents, one-third said their job involved crunch time and a further 22% said that their job required periods of long hours, extended work hours, or extended over time, but they just didn't call it crunch.

**Figure 10: Regular Hours Per Week**



Source: IGDA DSS 2021

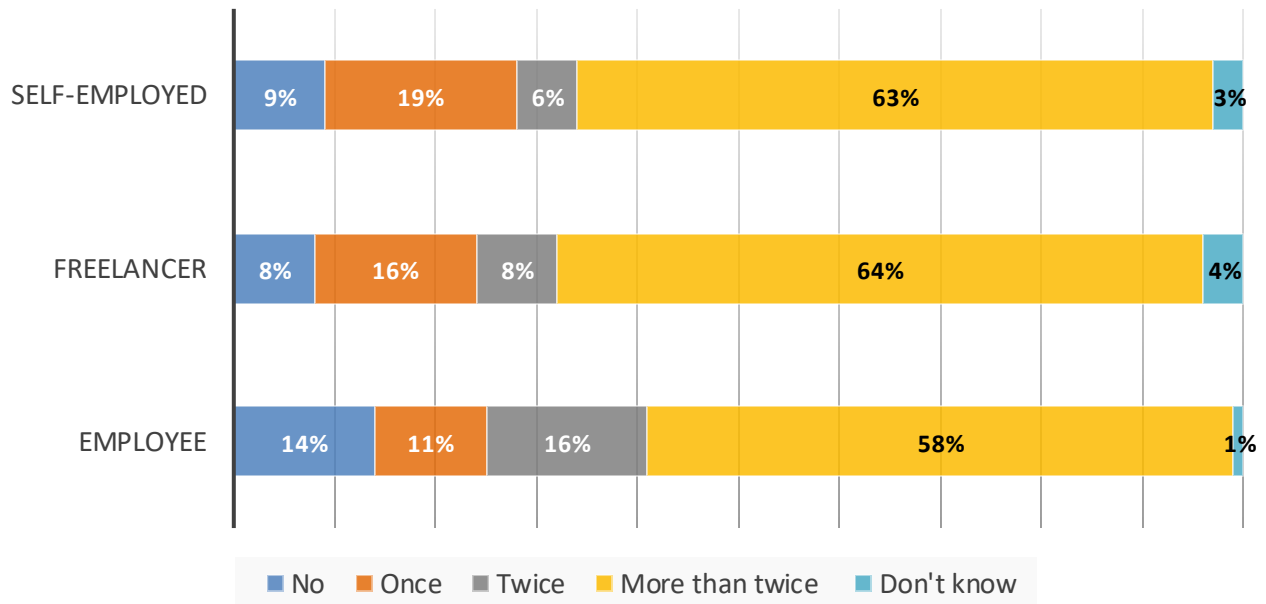
**Figure 11: Incidence of Crunch or Long Hours by Employment Type**



Source: IGDA DSS 2021

Among those who experienced crunch, 58% of employees, 64% of freelancers, and 63% of the self-employed had **crunched more than twice in the past two years** (Figure 12). This is much higher than the 2019 DSS where about 35% of respondents engaged in crunch at that rate.

**Figure 12: Crunch in the Past Two Years by Employment Type**

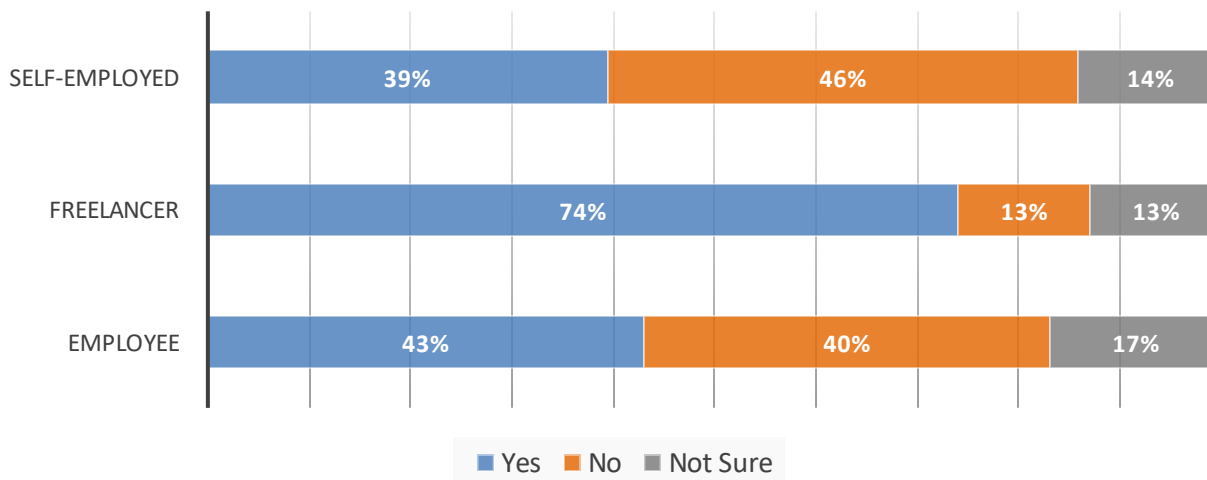


Source: IGDA DSS 2021

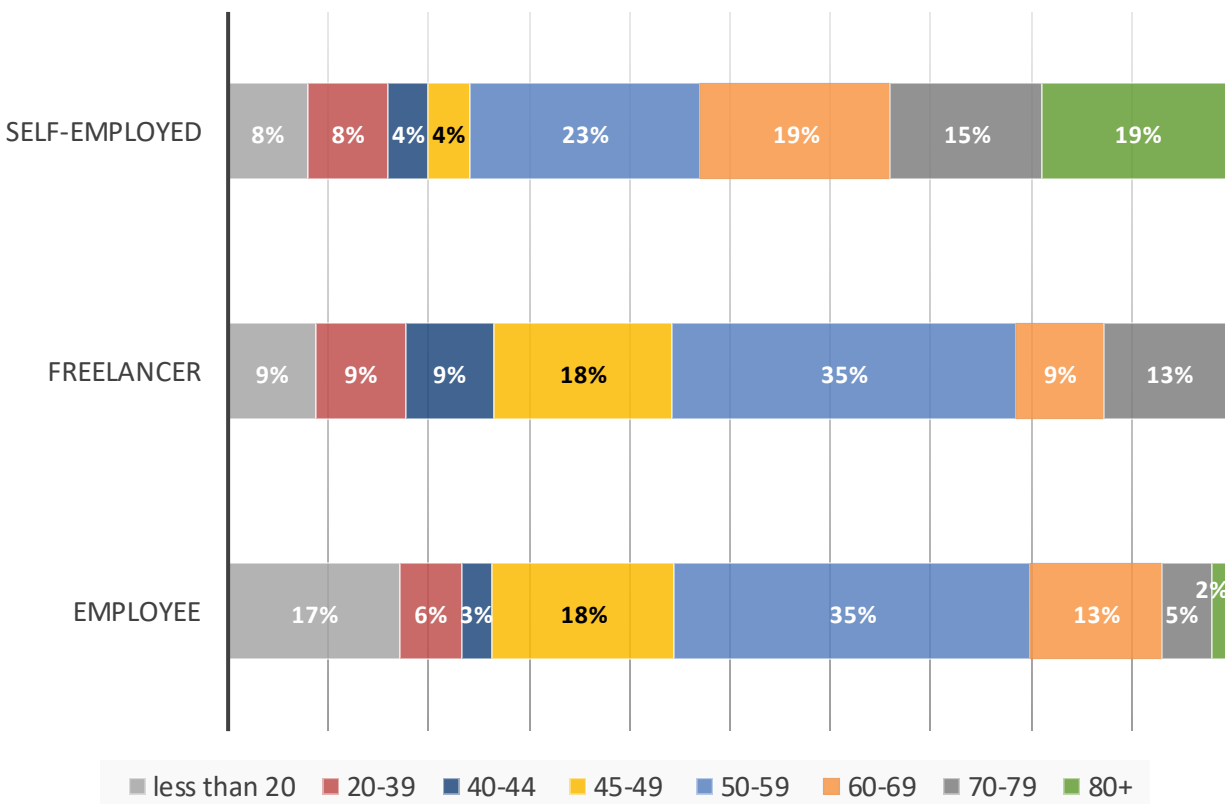
Almost half of the sample (47%) felt that crunch or long hours was **expected** as a **normal part of their job**. This was particularly true among freelancers (74%) (Figure 13).

During crunch or periods of long hours, 26% of respondents worked more than 60 hours per week, 29% worked 50-59 hours and 20% worked 45-49 hours. The self-employed worked the longest hours during crunch (Figure 14) with 19% working more than 80 hours a week.



**Figure 13: Crunch Expected as Normal by Employment Type**


Source: IGDA DSS 2021

**Figure 14: Hours During Crunch by Employment Type**


Source: IGDA DSS 2021

## Employment Relations Overview

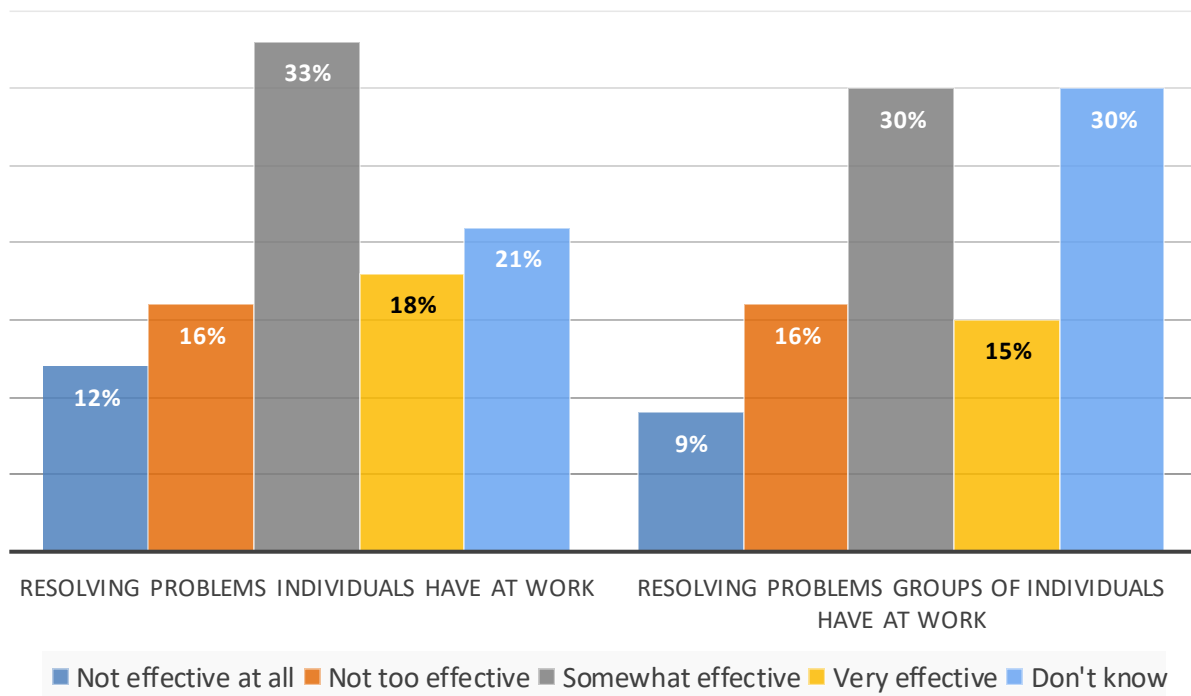
Employment relations questions were asked of the entire sample. They included views on the relationships between management and workers, how well employment problems are handled, and unionization.

### Snapshot: Labor-Management Relations

Most respondents thought the relations between employees/contractors and management at their place of work were good (43%) or excellent (29%) as opposed to fair (18%) or poor (9%).

However, respondents were mixed on how effective their company was at resolving problems that workers had at work. While most felt that their company was at least somewhat effective at resolving individual (51%) and group (45%) problems, about one-quarter in each case felt their company was not effective (Figure 15).

**Figure 15: Effectiveness at Resolving Problems at Work**



Source: IGDA DSS 2021

## Snapshot: Union Membership

There has been significant growth in unionization activity in the game industry. In the 2021 DSS 12% of respondents were unionized (6% in 2019).

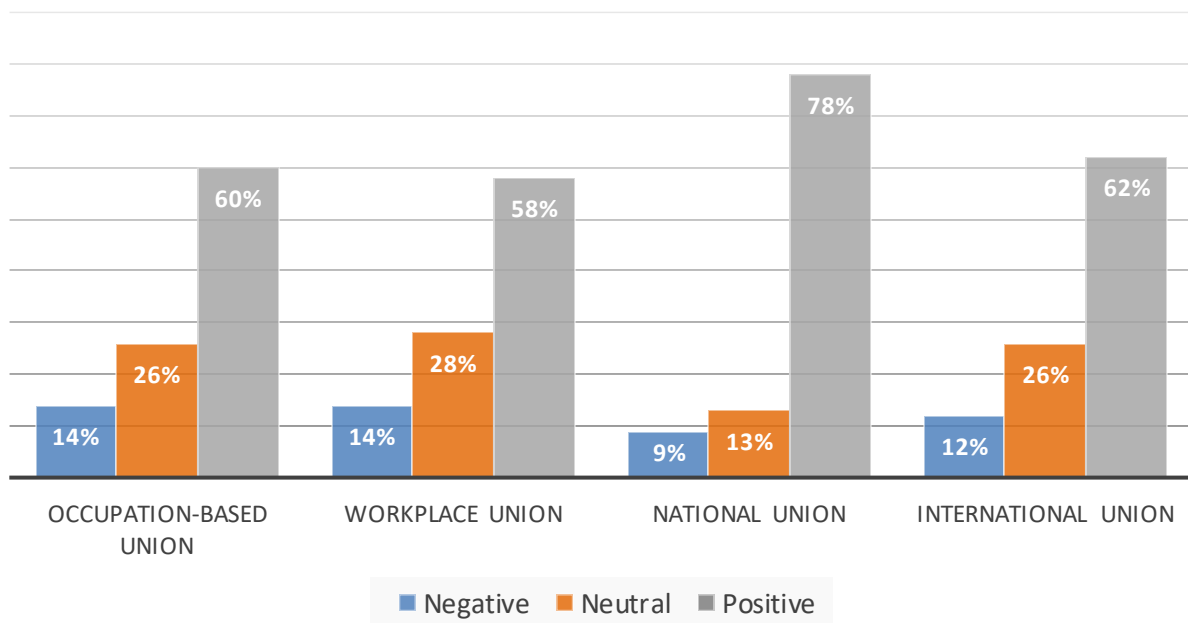
## Snapshot: Union Formation

Due to differences in national legal systems and localized organizing approaches, emerging game worker unions are taking many forms around the world. The DSS 2021 asked respondents how they felt about four structural forms:

- a union based on occupation or discipline - a craft union
- a union consisting of all developers at a single or multi-site workplace - an enterprise union
- a national union of all game developers - an industry or sectoral union
- an international union of all game developers

Respondents were favourable toward all types, but national unions for all game developers in a certain country was rated most positively (Figure 16).

**Figure 16: Opinions about Various Union Structures**



Source: IGDA DSS 2021

## A PROFILE OF EMPLOYEES

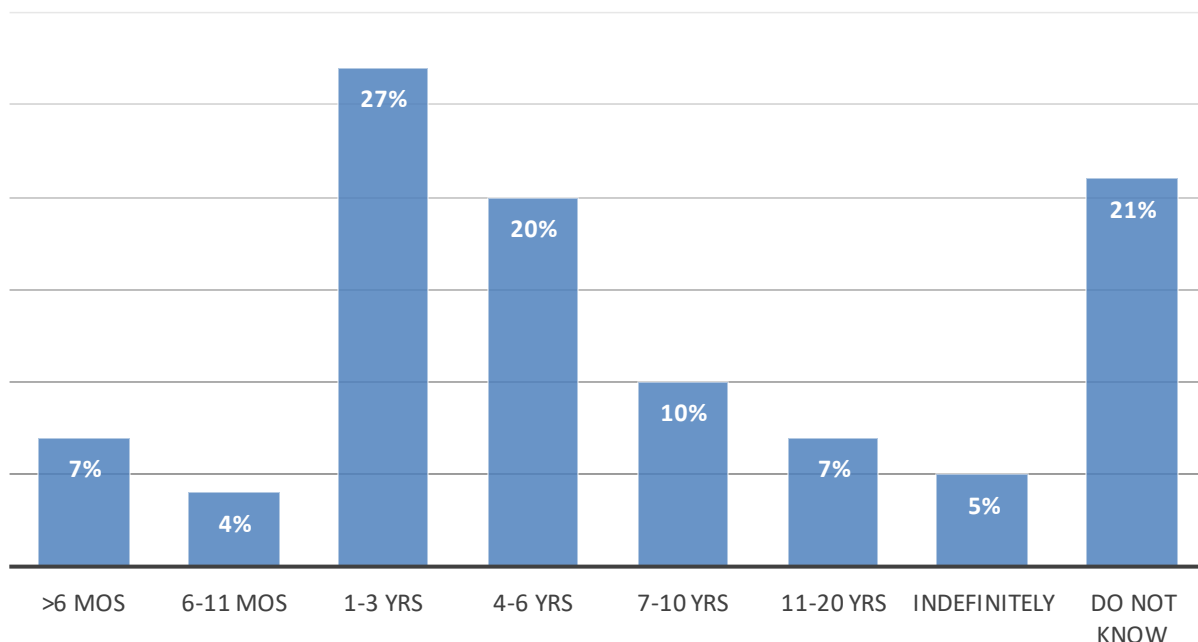
### Snapshot: Demographics

The typical employee in this sample was 36 years old, identified as White or as multiracial with White (78%) identified as a man (61%), and was working in the United States (41%). He was straight (70%) and likely to be married or partnered (65%). He did not have children (76%) and did not identify as having a disability (68%). He had a university or post-graduate degree (68%). This section is based on a sample of 301 employee respondents.

### Snapshot: Industry Experience and Job Security

Most employees (61%) had nine or fewer years of experience while the rest had been in the industry for ten years or more. In the past five years, almost three quarters (74%) had had one or two employers and just under one-quarter (23%) had had three to five employers. Most respondents seemed to expect high job mobility (Figure 17).

**Figure 17: Years Employees Expected to Remain with Current Employer**

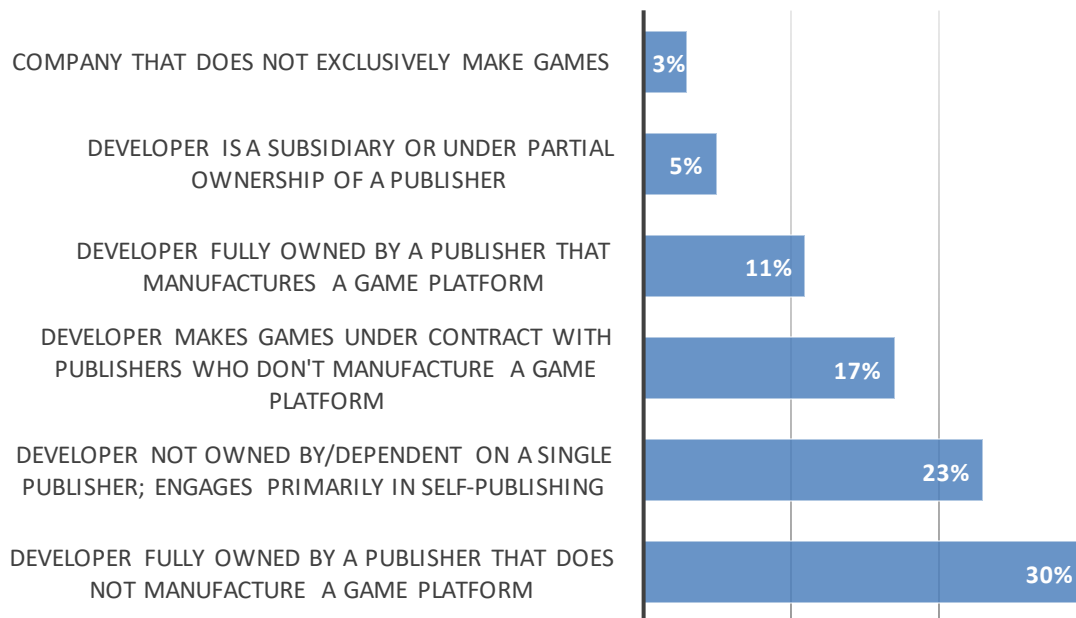


Source: IGDA DSS 2021

## Snapshot: Company Type

The most common company types where employees in this sample worked are outlined in Figure 18. Employees at independent studios made up 23% of the sample.

**Figure 18: Most Common Company Types among Employees**



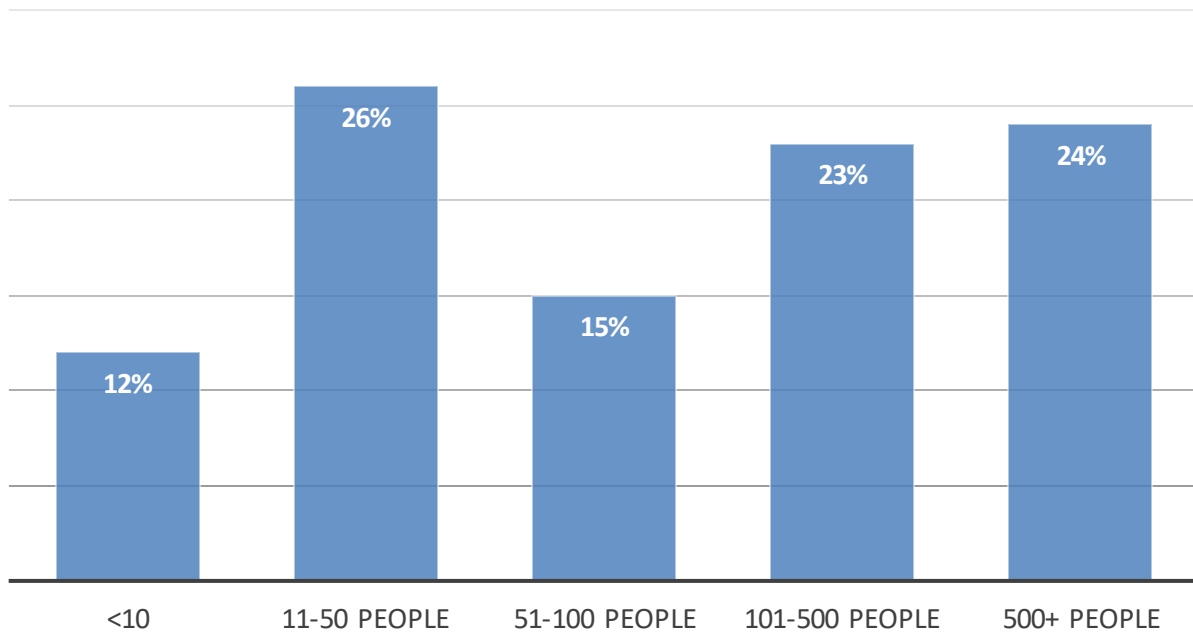
Source: IGDA DSS 2021

## Snapshot: Job Role

Management (33%) and design (incl. writer and UX/UI design) (27%) were the most common job roles held by the employees in this sample. These were followed by programming (24%), art (6%), quality assurance (3%), and administrative roles (incl. HR, marketing, legal) (2%). No employees in the sample worked in an audio role.

## Snapshot: Company and Team Size

As with past years, there are few mid-sized studios (Figure 19). Most employees worked in large or very large studios and a good proportion worked in smaller studios.

**Figure 19: Company Size among Employees**

Source: IGDA DSS 2021

Development teams were much smaller:

- 40% had teams of ten or fewer people
- 28% had teams of 11 to 50 people
- 32% had teams of more than 50 people.

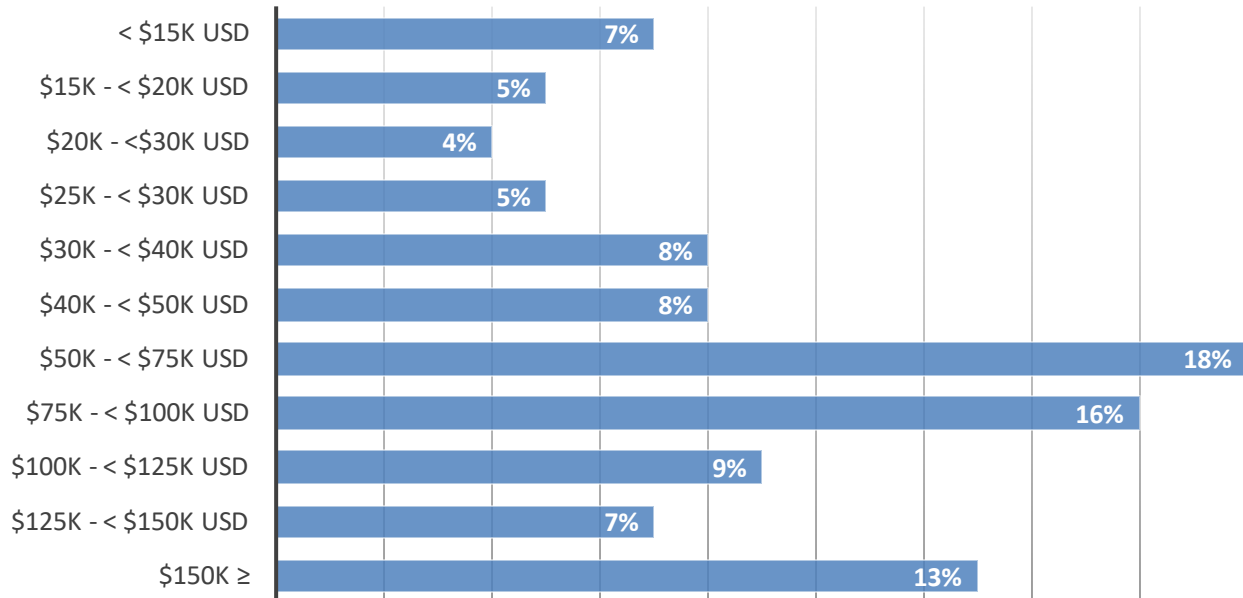
Most employee respondents only worked on a few projects at a time:

- 60% worked on one project at a time
- 36% worked on between two and five projects at a time
- 5% worked on more than six projects at a time

## Snapshot: Salaries

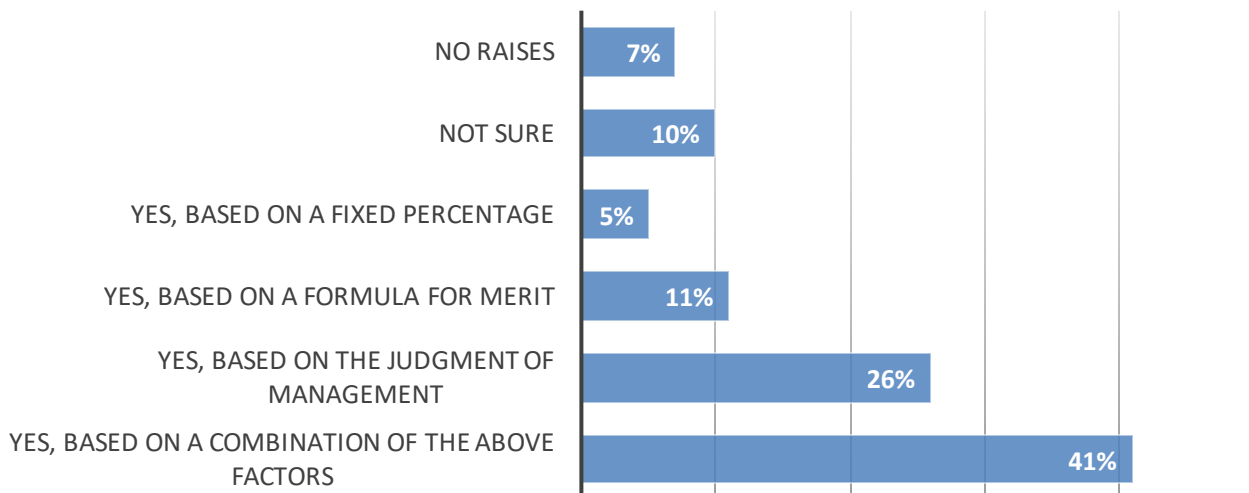
Over three-quarters (86%) of respondents said that their income was comprised completely from their work in the game industry. Only 3% said that they earned half or less of their income from their game-related work.

Most employees (63%) made over \$50K USD per year (Figure 20). The most common salaries were \$50-75K USD per year (18%) and \$75-100K USD per year (16%).

**Figure 20: Employee Salaries**


Source: IGDA DSS 2021

Over three-quarters of employee respondents (84%) indicated that their company offered some type of raise as part of their compensation (Figure 21). A small percentage (7%) did not get raises at all and 10% were not sure.

**Figure 21: Pay Raises among Employees**


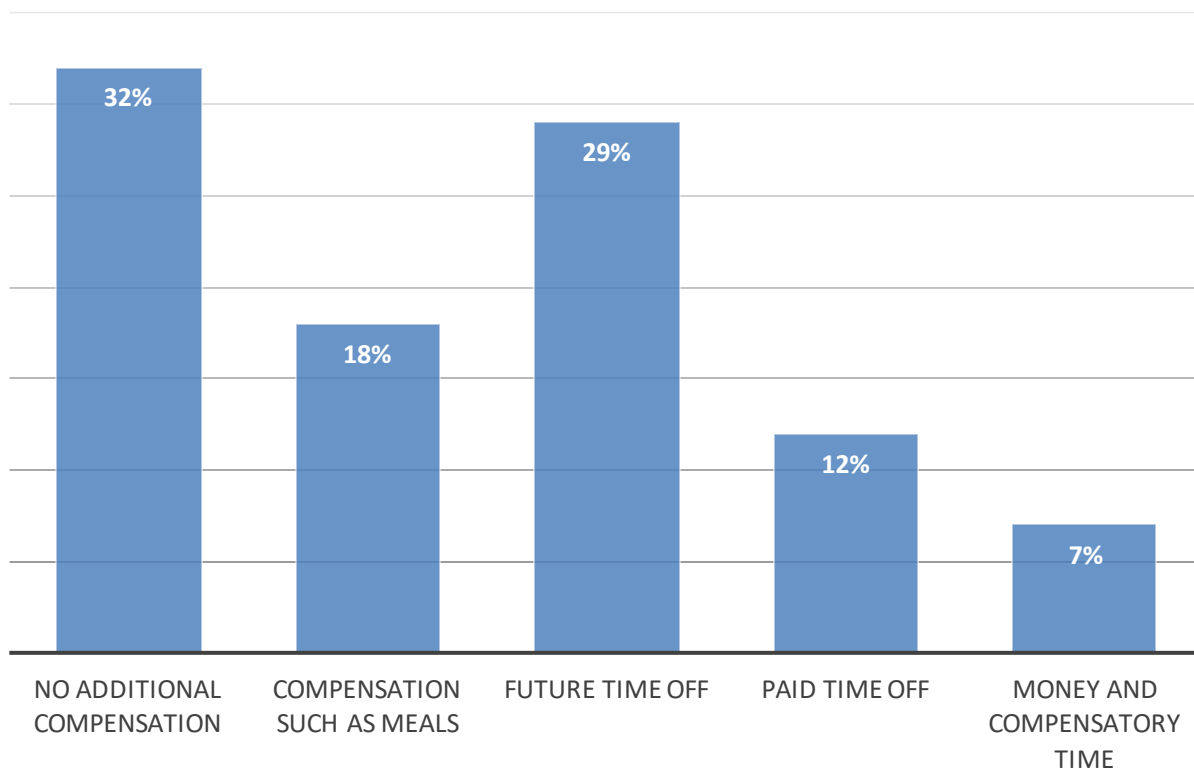
Source: IGDA DSS 2021

## Snapshot: Incentives and Overtime

Incentives and bonus payments were a popular method of compensation: 37% of respondents received lump sum payments, 30% received company equity and another 17% received royalties tied to game success. However, more than one-quarter (29%) did not receive incentives or bonus payments at all.

Overtime remains poorly compensated (Figure 22). One-third received no additional compensations for working beyond normal office hours (i.e., overtime or crunch). Only 12% received paid overtime and 7% received a combination of money and compensatory time.

**Figure 22: Overtime Compensation among Employees**



Source: IGDA DSS 2021



## Snapshot: Benefits and Time Off

Most employees (73%) were provided health coverage by their employer, but fewer employers provided life insurance (44%) or a retirement/pension program (54%). One-third did not have any form of life insurance, and 17% had no form of retirement plan. One-fifth had purchased these services individually through private vendors.

Many companies provide a packaged policy where time off for sick leave, vacation, and personal days are treated as one. Among this group, most employees (46%) reported between two and four weeks of paid time off. Some companies have separate leave policies. Among this group, most employees (40%) had between one and two weeks of paid sick leave and four to five weeks of vacation. A few had a small number of additional paid personal days.

Over half of employees had maternity/pregnancy leave (56%) or paternal/parental leave (52%) that was paid for by their employer or in combination by the government and their employer. However, 29% did not know their company's policy on pregnancy leave and 34% did not know their company's policy on parental leave.

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## Snapshot: Career Advancement

Almost half of employee respondents felt that their company had either 'good' (35%) or 'excellent' (11%) potential for promotion or career advancement. But 24% held a neutral opinion and 29% said that career advancement prospects were 'fair' or 'poor'.

## A Profile of Freelancers / Independent Contractors

### Snapshot: Demographics

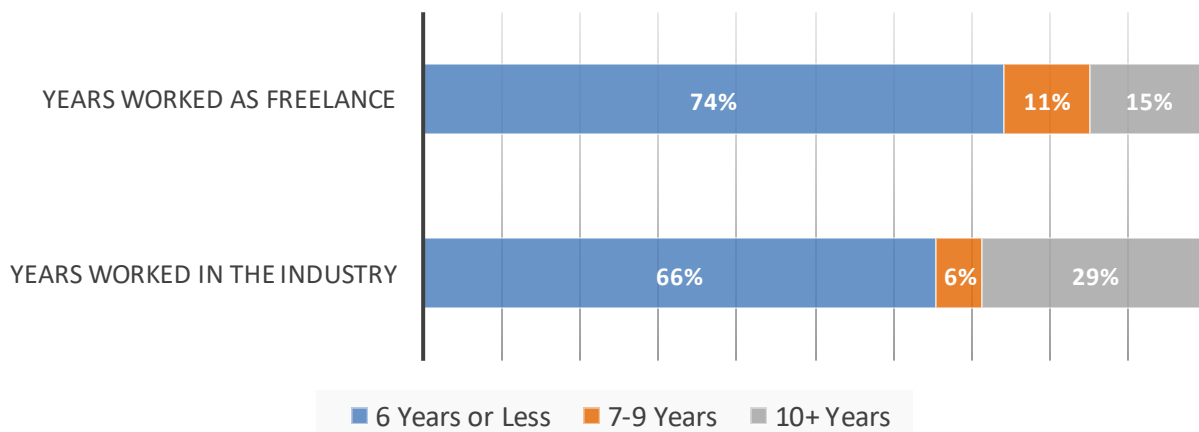
The typical freelancer in this sample was a 35-year-old man (54%) who identified as White or multiracial with White (71%) and was working in the United States (42%). He was straight (65%), could be partnered (54%) or single (43%) and did not have children (75%). He might have a disability (58%) such as mental illness (22%) and/or an intellectual (11%) or physical (14%) disability. He had a university or post-graduate degree (69%). This section is based on a sample of 55 freelance respondents.

### Snapshot: Job Experience and Job Security

Most freelance respondents had not been working in the game industry for long and many indicated that they had been freelancing for only a few years (Figure 23). Most freelancers (57%) had not worked in the game industry in other capacities, though 15% had previously been a permanent or temporary employee at a game-related company and another 23% had been both an employee and self-employed in the past.

One-third of freelancers said that they would stay in the industry indefinitely and only 11% said they would move on within the next six years. However, they might not remain in a freelance position. While 40% did not know how long they would remain as a freelancer in the industry, 44% estimated less than six years.

**Figure 23: Years in Industry and as Freelance**



Source: IGDA DSS 2021

Many freelancers seemed to concentrate their work with a handful of employers: 52% reported having only one to three employers/clients in the past five years and a further 39% reported having four to nine employers/clients.

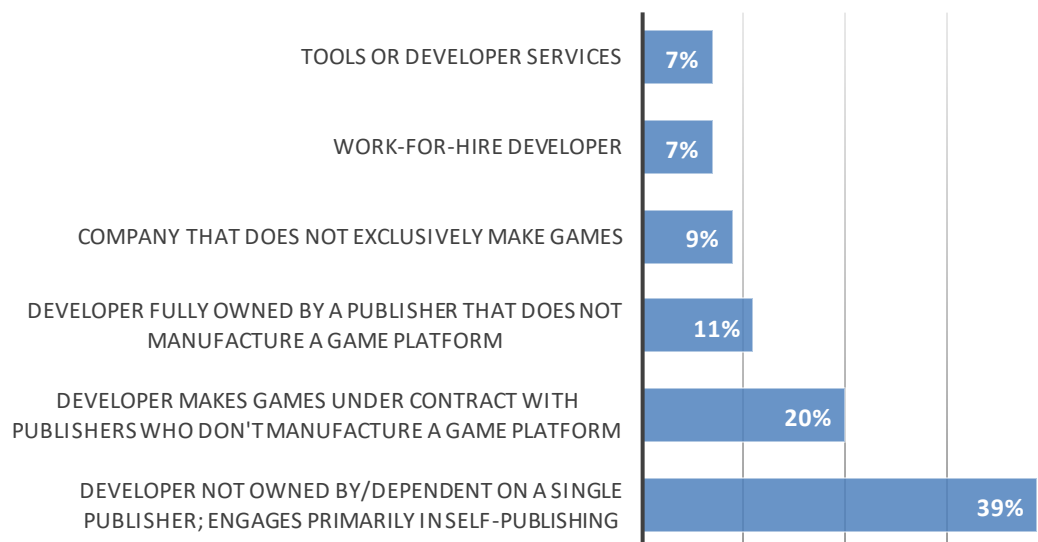
Most worked on a single contract (45%) or two to five contracts simultaneously (49%). Within each contract, freelancers typically worked on one project (70%). Multiple contracts were most often with different employers (77%).

Contracts tended to be short. Almost half worked on contracts of one year or less (48%) and only 14% had contracts of three or more years. Surprisingly, a sizable portion (24%) reported that they did not know the length of their current contract.

### Snapshot: Company Type

Freelancers reported working at different companies than their employee counterparts. The most common company types reported by freelancers are presented in Figure 24. Most were contracted by independent studios (39%).

**Figure 24: Most Common Company Type among Freelancers**



Source: IGDA DSS 2021

## Snapshot: Job Role

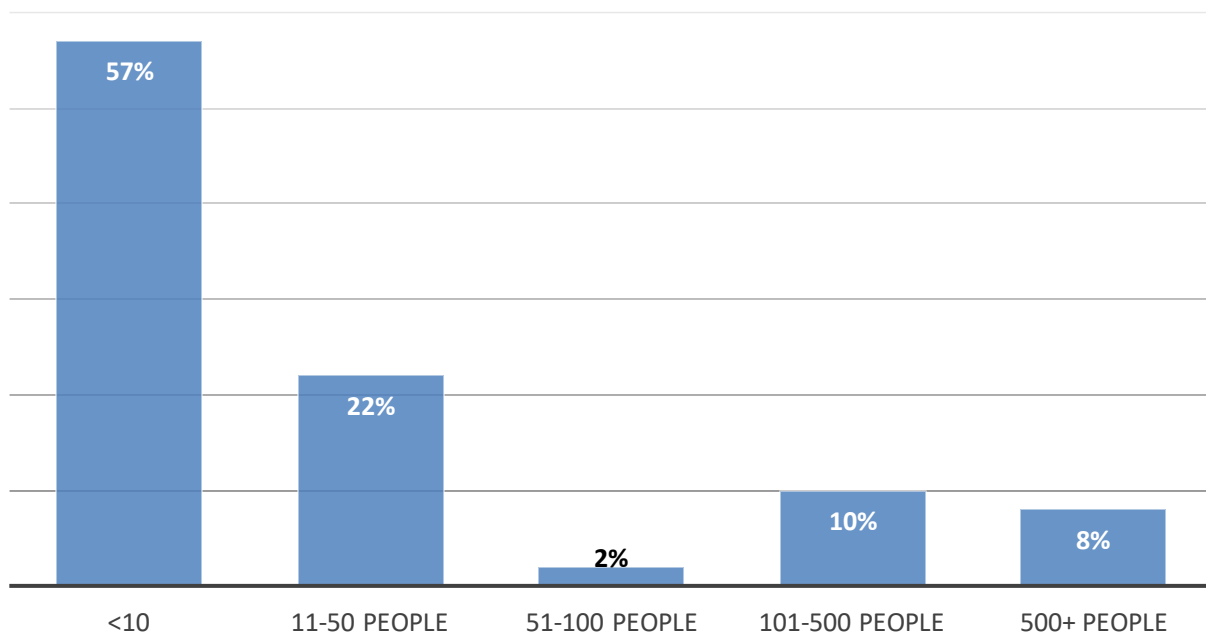
Most freelancers in this sample were gameplay engineers/programmers (21%), writers (13%), or game designers (11%). Interestingly, 13% reported holding a front-line management role, including team lead and producer/project manager while 6% reported a middle management role or higher.

## Snapshot: Company Size and Composition

Freelancers were most likely to be found at small or very small companies: 57% worked at companies with 10 or fewer people (Figure 25).

In line with this, freelancers were most likely to work on small development teams of two to five (36%), six to ten (28%), or 11 to 50 (24%) people.

**Figure 25: Company Size among Freelancers**



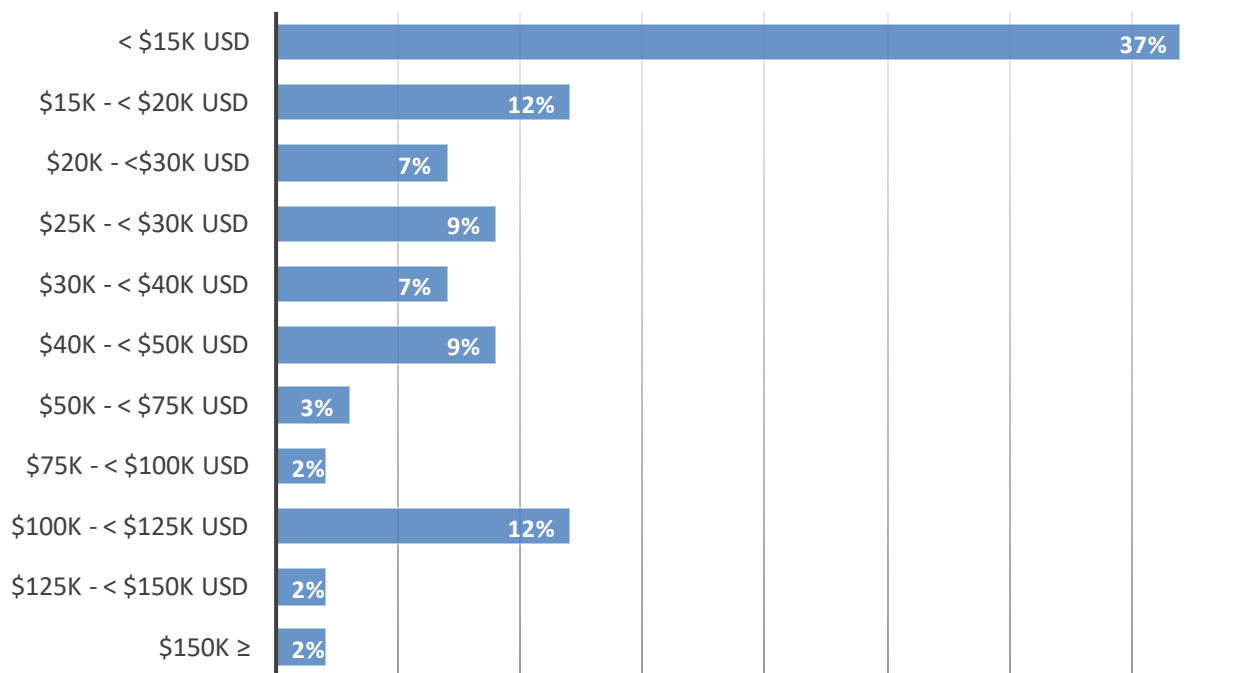
Source: IGDA DSS 2021

## Snapshot: Salaries

Overall, freelancers in this sample earned significantly less than their employee counterparts. Many freelancers earned less than \$15K USD per year (37%), and another 44% earned only between \$15K to \$50K USD per year (Figure 26).

Freelancers negotiate different payment modes with their clients/employers. Most were paid an hourly wage (53%) while others were paid per deliverable (20%), an ongoing retainer (6%) or some combination of hourly rate, retainer, and per deliverable payments (20%).

**Figure 26: Freelancer Salaries**



Source: IGDA DSS 2021

## Snapshot: Incentives and Overtime

Generally, freelancers did not negotiate incentives or bonuses as part of their compensation (75%). Some did negotiate royalties or shares tied to the success of the game (14%), company equity (14%), and/or lump sum bonuses (14%).

Most freelancers did negotiate extra compensation for overtime hours worked beyond normal office hours (65%). The most common negotiation was for paid overtime (23%), time off (12%), or some perks such as meals (10%).

Over half of freelancers (60%) reported that they had not been expected to work unpaid hours on a contract in the past two years. That still left 30% who were expected to work unpaid hours and 10% who were not yet sure.

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### Snapshot: Benefits and Time Off

Employer-provided health benefits was rare. Rather, freelancers reported relying upon government-provided health benefits (41%) and/or individual or private coverage (12%). Another 16% relied on parents or partners for their health coverage.

Most freelancers (68%) had no life insurance. If they did, it was often a private plan obtained individually (23%) or through their partner (6%). Half had a retirement or pension program, typically in the form of a self-funded individual plan (23%) or through a government plan (19%). Only 7% of freelancers had a plan with their employers.

Many freelancers (65%) had no vacation or vacation pay. Only 17% of freelancers' contracts included vacation and only 10% were paid in lieu of vacation time. A large portion of freelancers (39%) said that do not typically take vacation while two weeks was the norm for others (20%).

Most freelancers (69%) did not have sick days within their current or typical contract. As a result, a large portion take either less than 1 week per year of sick days (35%) or none at all (35%).

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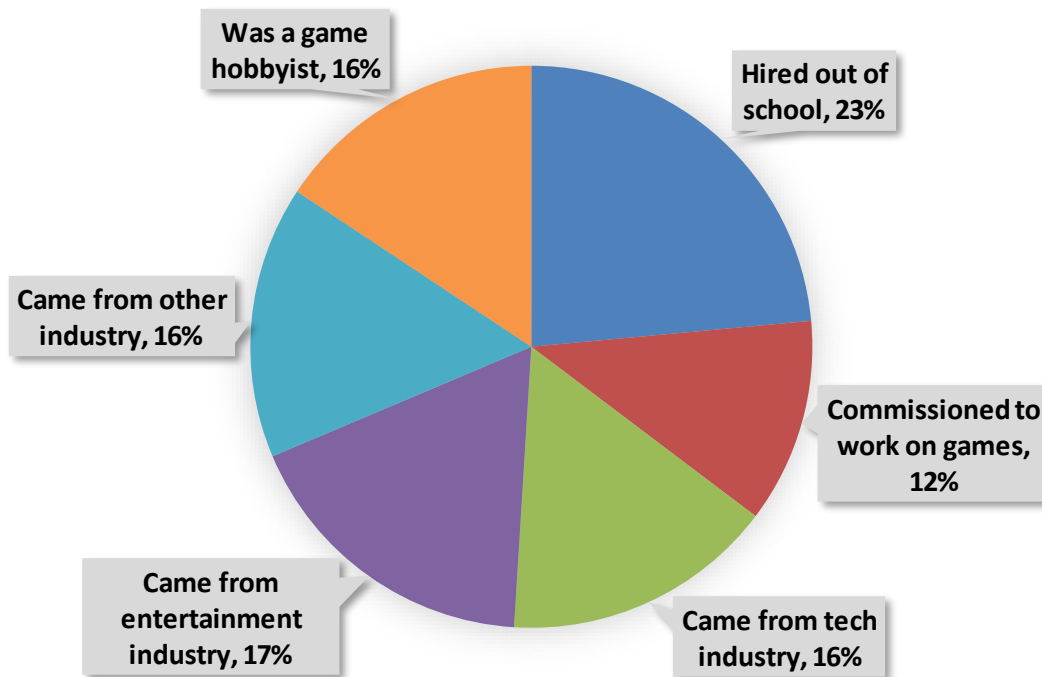
### IP and Credit

Most freelancers (92%) worked for hire and said their employer owned the IP. One-quarter said that their name was included in the game credits, but 22% said that they do not receive credit for their contribution to a game.

## Snapshot: Career Path

Freelancers became involved in the game industry through many pathways (Figure 27) including transitions from the other parts of the tech and entertainment industries.

**Figure 27: Freelancer Pathways to the Game Industry**



Source: IGDA DSS 2021

Many respondents said they freelanced for reasons related to personal control over their work and life, but the largest response option was that they could not find permanent employment at an established studio (Table 3).

**Table 3: Reasons Why Respondents Work Freelance**

	<b>% of respondents</b>
Could not find a permanent job at an established studio	23
To have more control over my working conditions (e.g., hours)	18
To work on more varied projects/games	14
To have more control over the content of my work	12
To make the games I wanted to make	10
I did not live near established studios and did not want to move	10
To have more control over my employment stability and/or risks	8
To work on a smaller team	4

Source: IGDA DSS 2021



## A PROFILE OF THE SELF-EMPLOYED

### Snapshot: Demographics

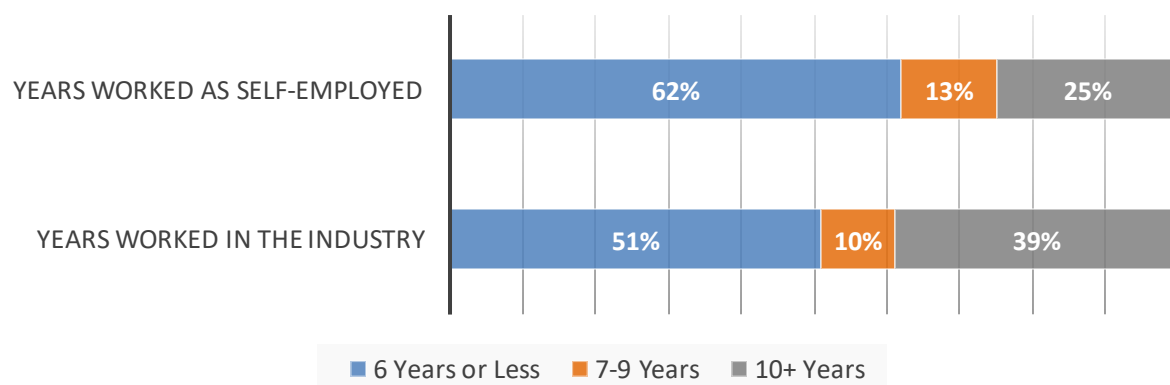
The typical self-employed developer in this sample was a 38-year-old man (68%) who identified as White or multi-racial with White (82%) and worked in the US or Canada (33%). He was straight (75%), likely to be partnered (62%) and probably had no children (57%). He did not report having a disability (78%). He was likely to have a university or postgraduate degree (55%) or some schooling at the university, college or vocational level (28%). This section is based on a sample of 60 self-employed respondents.

### Snapshot: Job Experience and Job Security

Many self-employed developers (39%) had worked in the industry for ten or more years and one-quarter had been self-employed for that long (Figure 28). Yet that left 62% who said they had been self-employed for less than six years.

In line with these findings, most self-employed respondents had worked as permanent or temporary employees in the past (41%), and 20% had previously worked as freelancers. On average the self-employed had had 2.3 employers, including themselves, in the past five years.

**Figure 28: Years in Industry and as Self-Employed**



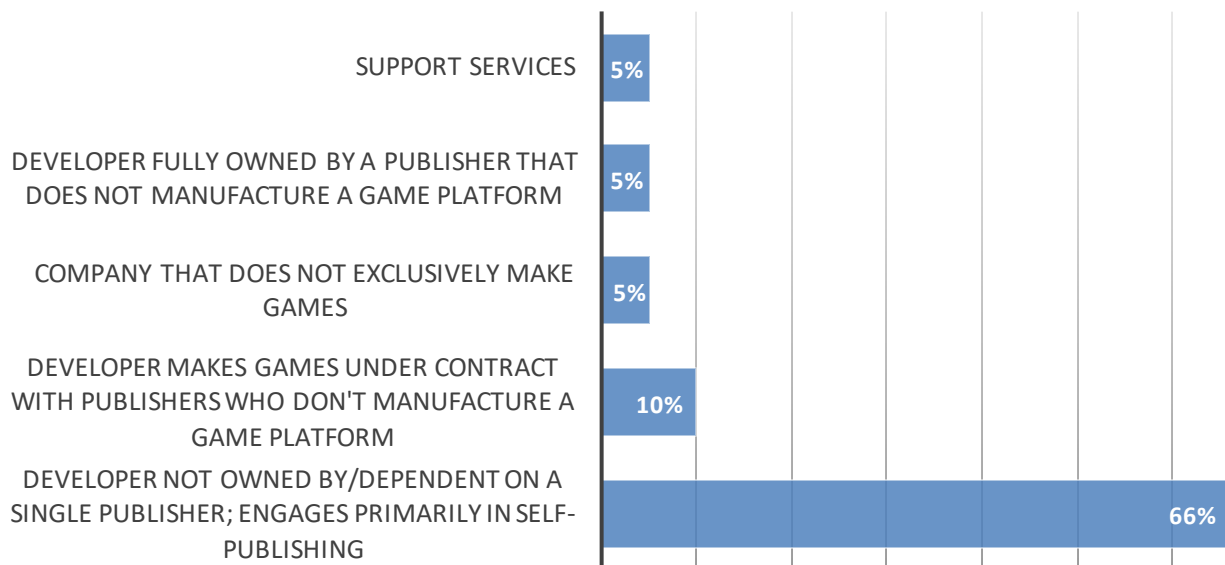
Source: IGDA DSS 2021

Most saw themselves staying in the industry for more than 20 years (57%) and a large proportion (45%) envisioned that they would remain self-employed for that time. But others were unsure; 28% did not know how long they would remain self-employed and 23% did not know how long they would remain in the industry.

## Snapshot: Company Type

The self-employed also showed a unique company type profile (Figure 29). The majority (66%) identified as independent developers who engaged primarily in self-publishing followed distantly by other options such as support services.

**Figure 29: Most Common Company Type among the Self-Employed**



Source: IGDA DSS 2021

## Snapshot: Job Role

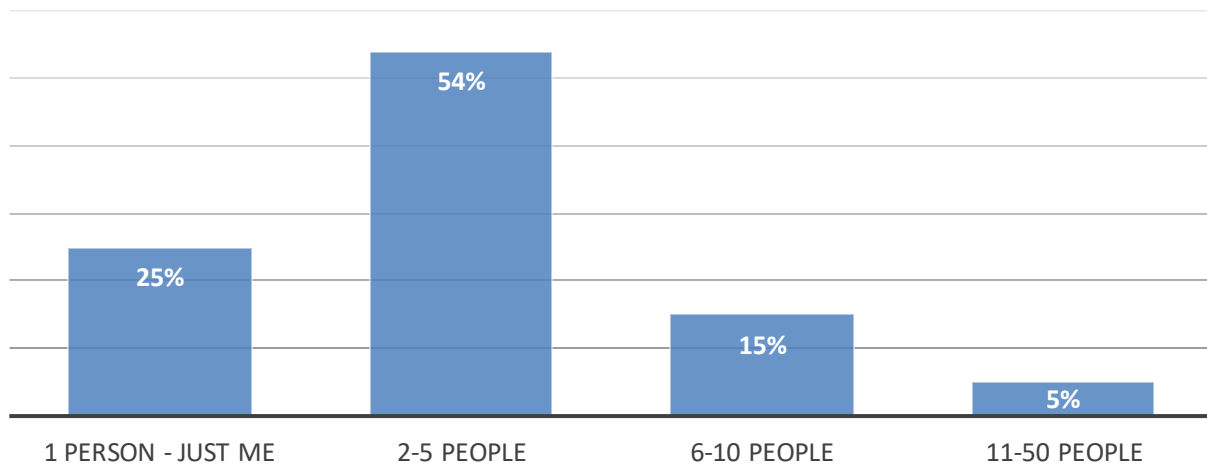
In addition to their role as owner, many self-employed respondents said that their primary role was senior management (36%), gameplay engineers/programmers (20%), game designers (11%), or producers/project managers (9%).

## Snapshot: Company Size and Composition

The self-employed respondents in this sample owned small companies, which were often one-person shops (25%) or had two to five people (54%) (Figure 30).

Development teams were typically comprised of between two and five people (74%), or six to ten people (24%). But there is fluctuation and limited security; 42% of the self-employed said that their team could shrink to just themselves over the course of a year.

**Figure 30: Company Size among the Self-Employed**



Source: IGDA DSS 2021

When staffing their teams, the self-employed reported hiring employees more often than contractors (the reverse was true in 2019), though there was a wide range:

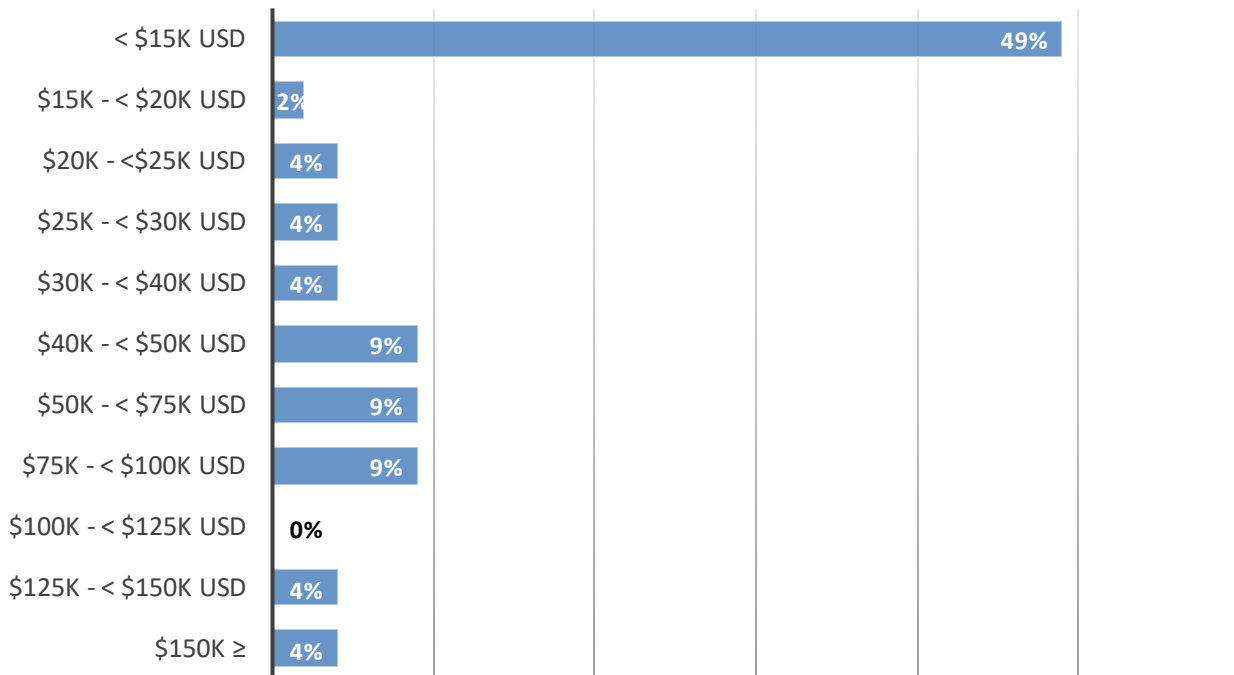
- 32% used only employees
- 25% had more employees than contractors
- 9% were half-and-half
- 16% had more contractors than employees
- 18% used only contractors

More than half of the self-employed respondents (58%) were running two to five projects at a time, 37% had one project and only 5% had six or more projects running at once.

## Snapshot: Salaries

Most self-employed respondents said that they worked full-time (68%) and 46% said that all their income came from their work in the game industry. However, they were not making much money. Notably 18% said that none of their income came from their game-related work and about half (49%) said that their annual income from game-related work was less than \$15K USD (Figure 29). In addition, 38% percent said that they do not make a salary or wage because they always forego self-payment to cover other company needs (such as payroll or general overhead costs). Only 27% said that they never had to forego their salary or wages.

**Figure 31: Self-Employed Salaries**



Source: IGDA DSS 2021

Self-employed developers relied on a variety of sources to support their companies and often required more than one source. The most common were self-funding (63%), sales (44%), public granting agencies (17%) and family and friends (17%). Respondents relied less often on investors or arrangements with publishers (each at 14%) and crowdsourcing (9%).

## Snapshot: Benefits and Time Off

Self-employed respondents took very few sick days: 27% did not take sick days at all, 32% took less than one week per year and 20% took one week. Vacation was slightly more common: 56% took between one and four weeks, but 10% took less than a week, and 17% took none.

Most self-employed respondents did have a form of health coverage, though 9% said that they did not. They relied upon government plans (61%), or private plans (20%).

Compared to health, a greater percentage of the self-employed had neither life insurance (54%), nor a pension/retirement program (37%). Most relied on a private provider for life insurance (32%), and on individual contribution plans (25%) or government plans (32%) for retirement.

## Snapshot: Career Path

Compared to freelancers, the self-employed seemed more likely to choose this career path out of desire rather than necessity. Most respondents said they worked for reasons related to personal control over their work and life, particularly to make the games they wanted to make (Table 4).

**Table 4: Reasons Why Respondents are Self-Employed**

	% of respondents
To make the games I wanted to make	76
To have more control over the content of my work	54
To have more control over my working conditions (e.g., hours)	53
To work on more varied projects/games	36
To have more control over my employment stability and/or risks	32
To work on a smaller team	29
I do not live near established studios and did not want to move	15
Could not find a permanent job at an established studio	10

Source: IGDA DSS 2021

## Conclusion

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The Developer Satisfaction Survey is an important source of actionable information for the entire game development community.

First, as outlined in previous reports and reinforced by a growing list of corporate scandals, equity, diversity and inclusion is a pressing issue. It is wonderful to see that the reported value placed on diversity by the 2021 respondents was the highest ever in the history of the DSS. However, only half felt the industry had become more diverse over the past two years. The data indicate that most developers, at least in North America, are still young, male, White, and without childcare responsibilities.

Many respondents (74%) felt that there is not equal treatment and opportunity for all in the industry. In addition, 56% of respondents perceived inequity towards *themselves* and 71% perceived inequity towards *others* based on gender, age, ethnicity, ability, or sexual orientation. These numbers are higher than the 2017 and 2019 DSS, particularly for microaggressions towards the self and others. This may reflect a combination of factors. Greater awareness and reporting might reflect a truer record rather than a rise in acts, but increased emphasis on EDI may also bring more retaliation, particularly in subtle forms. While respondents indicated various programs and policies geared toward EDI at their workplaces, only 41% felt that these policies were adequately enforced. These issues can no longer be ignored or side-stepped.

Second, efforts must continue to ensure that game industry jobs are good jobs. Most respondents worked on a full-time basis as employees. However, this does not mean that developers are in long-term stable employment nor without employment risks. Employment and income insecurity remains relatively high, particularly for freelancers, the self-employed and those they employ. As well, unlimited and unpaid overtime remains a concern and seems to have been higher among the 2021 respondents than in previous years.

Freelancers in this sample earn significantly less than their employee counterparts. Most do not have incentives or bonuses, few negotiate overtime pay and few have health, life or retirement benefits. There is still concern about the misclassification and misuse of freelance/independent contract labor and the lack of permanent employment for those who wish it. Companies may be skirting the definition of independent contractor to hire de facto employees while avoiding regulatory regimes and payroll costs.

Self-employed respondents likely work full-time at their own indie company and seem to enter self-employment after some experience in the industry.

However, the evidence suggests that self-employment carries as many if not more employment risks. Despite some high-profile successes in recent years, the life of a self-employed indie developer is not easy; almost half (43%) reported earning less than \$15K USD per year and 41% had to forego a salary or wage to meet company needs. Many in this group have inadequate health and retirement provisions.

Though the model of career advancement within project-based industries like game development is to switch jobs, projects and studios to enhance reputation and access more prestigious projects, this creates an environment of precarity and places many employment risks on workers. Industry churn through start-ups, bankruptcies, studio closures, relocations, mergers and acquisitions, game project cancellations and changes to tax and funding regimes add to the fluctuating landscape.

Members of the game community continue to seek a role in the governance of their workplaces and in the regulation of their industry. Many felt that their companies were ineffective at dealing with the problems that individuals and groups face at work. Growing numbers of developers feel that unionization can help. Twice as many were members of a union in this sample than in 2019 and respondents continue to have positive views about a range of union forms – particularly national unions for all game developers in a particular country.

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## Next Steps

This Summary Report addressed only the most salient points from the DSS and engaged in limited comparison across questions or to past surveys. Look for past reports on the [IGDA website](#) and the [authors' website](#).

The number of developers who took the DSS 2021 was fewer than in other years (except 2017) and there continues to be considerable drop-out across the survey (i.e., people start, but do not finish). We continue to tweak the survey to provide for a better experience and to find a balance between comprehensive questioning and survey length. We will continue in our attempts to reach a broader international audience and to achieve a larger representative sampling of the global game community.

If you would like to assist with translating this report into other languages or reaching a wider audience for our next survey in 2023, please reach out to us at [staff@igda.org](mailto:staff@igda.org).