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RIGGERS

SURVEY REPORT

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Background

LOOKING DEEPER INTO THE CIRCUS SCHOOL RIGGER PROFESSION

This survey is part of the RIGGERS project – React Invent Get together for a Goal: Expertise in Rigging Services (2021-1-SE01-KA220-HED-000023168). The project is led by Stockholm University of the Arts (SKH) and FEDEC – International network for professional circus education. The project aims at enhancing the quality of safety measures in circus schools.

The project is co-funded by the Erasmus+ programme of the European Commission. For more info, please visit [the dedicated page on FEDEC website](#).

In line with the project's aim, the RIGGERS survey is an attempt **to map the sector of specialists dealing with all aspects related to safety and rigging in circus schools.**

In the circus sector, we often refer to these individuals with the term “rigger”¹. Within circus schools, “riggers”² are specialist technicians dealing with all aspects related to the safety of those working and training to become artists. They have many responsibilities, from buying and maintaining the relevant apparatus, taking care of the equipment and training spaces, to ensuring that the safety rules are understood and shared by the staff of the school, and transmitting the basic rules which will become the working rules of an artist's life.

Even if the number of riggers employed by schools has more than doubled since 2014 (FEDEC 2021 Sector Survey), showing their importance in the sector, there is almost no data about them and on how they perceive their profession.

This report analyses the collected information about the profession of riggers in circus schools and suggests possible further actions.

¹ While developing the project and running the survey, we encountered different words: technical director, circus technician, head rigger, accrocheur-se, gréeur-se...Finally, we decided to use the word “rigger” to simplify the work. While the title in the contract and the tasks may change, everyone who took part in the survey recognizes him/herself in the cloud of meanings to which the word “rigger” refers. For more info about the meaning and etymology of the word “rig”, you can [visit the dedicated wiktionary page](#).

² For the sake of brevity, in this text we will use the word “rigger” as a synonym of “circus school rigger”, except where clearly indicated.

PARTICIPATION

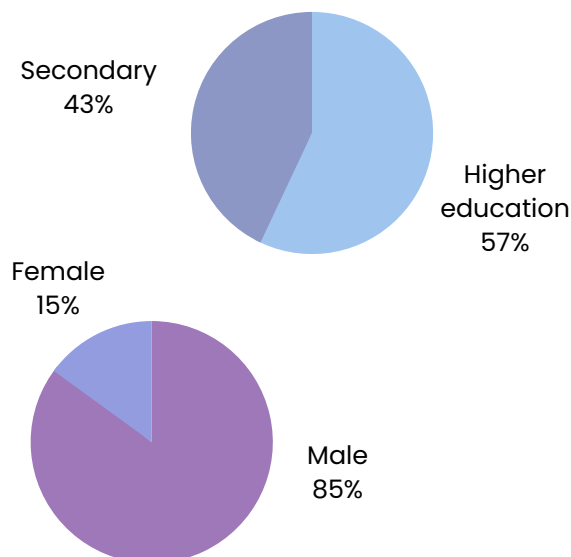
WHO IS THE CIRCUS SCHOOL RIGGER TODAY?

The survey was open for responses from 17 of March until 8 April 2022. Later, the survey was open again from 29 June until 28 July 2022, with the specific aim of collecting more information from secondary schools.

The survey was addressed to **all individuals involved in safety & rigging among the 58 FEDEC member schools.**

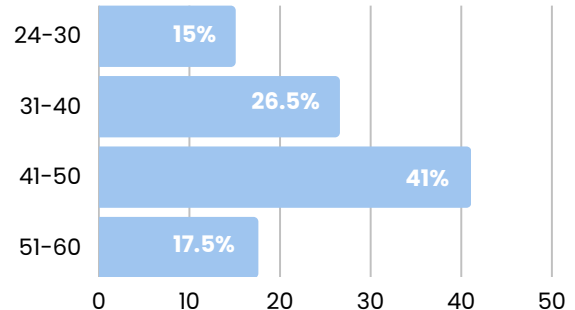
We were aware that some schools only have one person in charge of all safety aspects, while others have a technical department with several people in charge of different aspects of safety and rigging. Therefore, schools were allowed to fill in several questionnaires.

We collected 34 valid responses from 28 different schools. The schools concerned are both secondary (57%) and Higher education (HE) levels (43%).

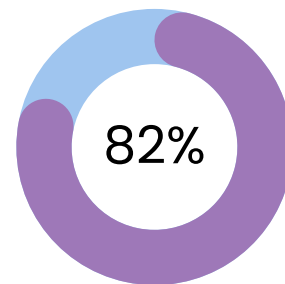


Respondents are mainly male (85%), between 41 and 50 years old (41%). Out of the 34 valid responses, 5 were sent by women.

AGE RANGE



The great majority of the respondents (82%) are riggers born in the same country where their school is based.



BORN IN THE SAME COUNTRY WHERE THEIR SCHOOL IS BASED

At FEDEC, we usually hear from the sector that there are many vacant positions for riggers and it's difficult to recruit.

Is mobility an obstacle for riggers? And if so, is language an obstacle to working abroad? The survey does not reply to these questions which could be part of further investigation.

If we distinguish between Higher education (HE) and Secondary level schools, the gender gap does not change sensibly, while the age range does: riggers working in Secondary schools are often younger, and unlikely to start working for a Higher education school before the age of 41.

WORKING ENVIRONMENT

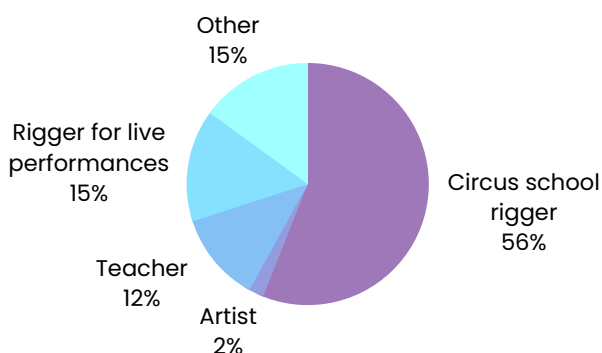
HOW IS IT TO WORK AS A CIRCUS SCHOOL RIGGER?

CORE ACTIVITY

When inquired about their core activity, 56% of the respondents answered “Circus school rigger”. Among them, many mentioned that their regular activities include being a rigger in live events, teaching a circus discipline (acrobatics, in most cases), as well as being an artist.

Furthermore, 2 respondents identified their core activity as “technical director”, and 2 others as “rigging teachers”.

WHAT IS YOUR CORE ACTIVITY?

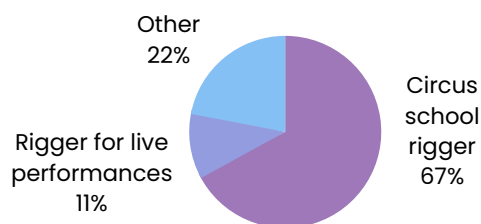


The situation is quite different if we distinguish Higher education and Secondary schools.

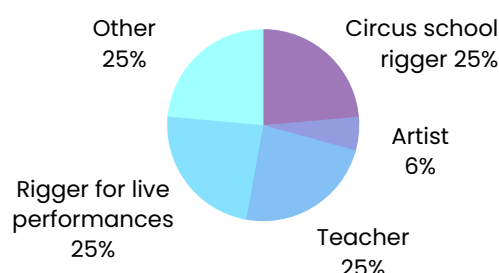
For respondents working in Higher education schools, being the school rigger is often the core activity, while **riggers employed by Secondary level schools are more likely to have other core activities such as being riggers for live performances or teachers.**

Probably, this is linked to salary issues, since few riggers at the Secondary level are working full time and therefore, they often diversify their sources of income.

Higher education



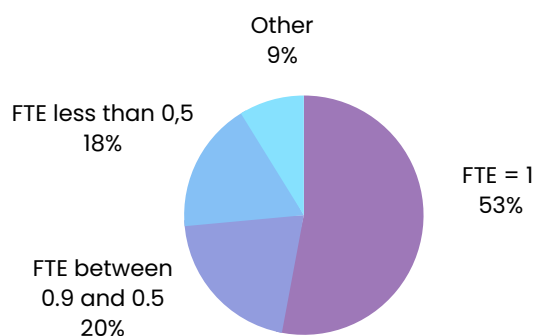
SECONDARY



KIND OF CONTRACT

The Full-Time Equivalent (FTE) is a unit that indicates the workload of an employed person in a way that makes workloads comparable across various countries and working contexts¹.

WHAT IS YOUR FTE?



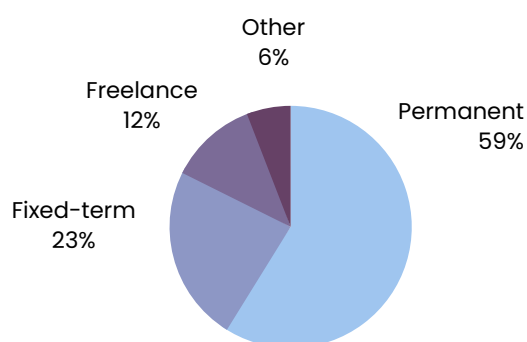
(Part-time contracts = 47%)

Globally, **53% of the respondents are working fulltime** (FTE 1). Among the 47% that are working part-time, the 20% has an FTE between 0,9 and 0,5.

¹ To give an example: an FTE of 1.0 is equivalent to a full-time worker (no matters if “full-time” means 35, 37 or 40 hours per week according to the country), while an FTE of 0.5 signals half of a full work load.

Again, there is a huge difference between people working at Higher Education level, where 72% are working full-time and 28% part-time, and the Secondary level, where only 31% are working full-time and the number working part-time rises to 56%.

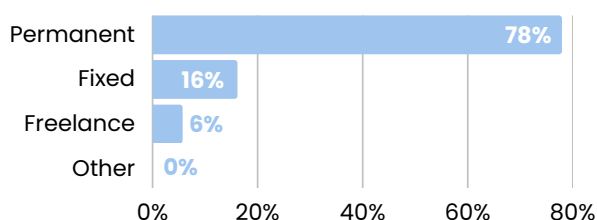
WHAT KIND OF WORK CONTRACT DO YOU HAVE?



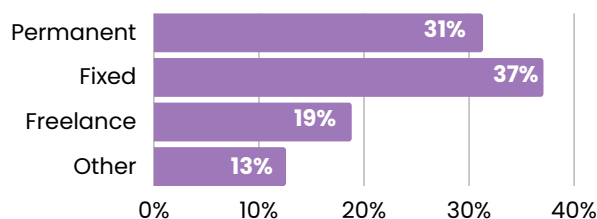
(Non-permanent contracts = **41%**)

Globally, **59% of the respondents are employed with a permanent contract.** This percentage rises up to 78% in Higher education schools and drops to 31% in Secondary schools, where the percentage of fixed-term contracts is slightly higher than the permanent ones (37,5%).

IN HIGHER EDUCATION



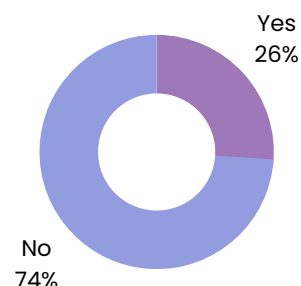
IN SECONDARY



SOURCE OF INCOME

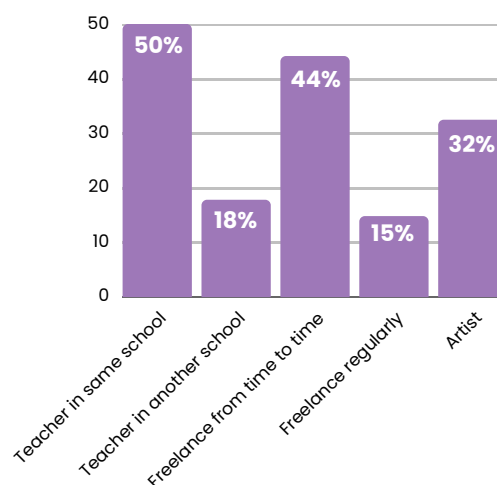
Almost half of the respondents are working part-time and with a non-permanent contract (fixed-term or freelance).

IS BEING A CIRCUS SCHOOLS RIGGER YOUR ONLY SOURCE OF INCOME?



Therefore, it is not surprising to see that, while "Circus school rigger" is the core activity for 56% of the respondents, **74% of them stated that they are doing other jobs, in addition to the main one.**

The most common alternative sources of income are working as a freelancer regularly or from time to time (53%), working as a teacher in their school or in another (50%), and lastly, being an artist (32%).



It is interesting to note that **only 23% of all respondents mentioned 1 alternative source of income**, while 35% mentioned more than 2 alternative sources of income. At the secondary level, this last data rises to 56% of the respondents.



MISSION & DUTIES

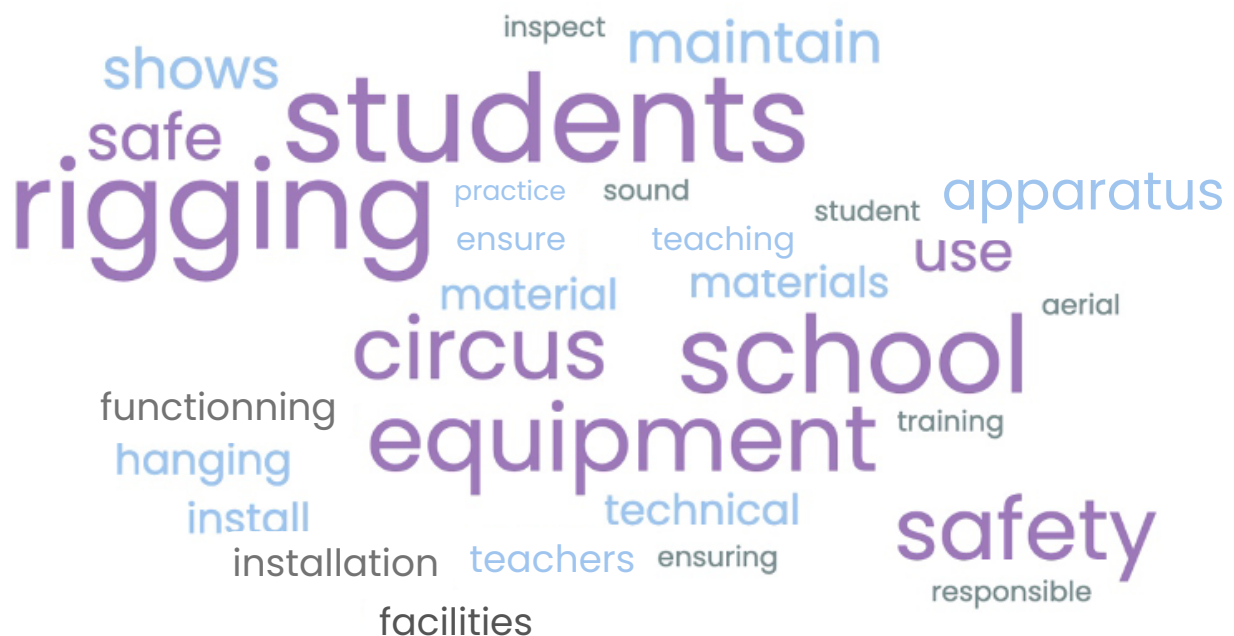
WHAT IS THE CIRCUS SCHOOL RIGGER ACTUALLY DOING?

It is hard to find a definition of the mission of a circus school rigger that can work despite the country and the kind of school.

Nevertheless, in order to define the borders of our considerations on circus school riggers, we can point out some key words.

In the survey, respondents were asked to summarize the purpose of their position in a maximum of 3 words.

The result is the following:



This cloud of 30 words is a summary of all responses combined, and it reflects the main features of the mission of a circus school rigger, notwithstanding the differences among countries and educational levels.

The most used words are:

- "students"
- "rigging"
- "equipment"
- "safety"
- "safe"
- "use".

Other relevant words are:

- "maintain"
- "material"
- "shows"
- "teachers"
- "apparatus"
- "facilities"
- "training".

These words are the first ingredients of the complex solution we are looking for.

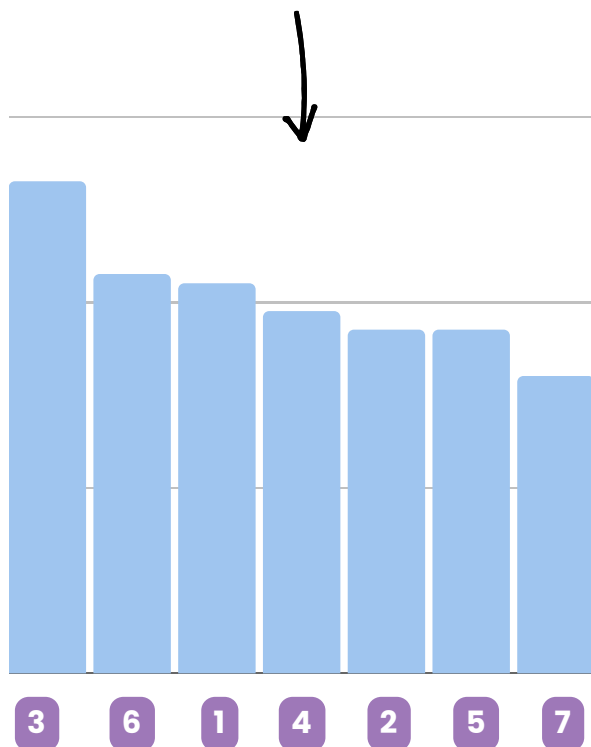
Respondents were also asked to rank by order of importance the following 7 different duties and responsibilities:

- 1** Overseeing **training safety**,
- 2** **Rig design for students' shows** and general training,
- 3** Ensuring that all training spaces are **equipped and operating** to industry standards,
- 4** **Training students on how to rig** and make basic safety maintenance of equipment,
- 5** **Training teachers on safety measures** & maintenance of equipment and facilities,
- 6** **Inventorying, managing, & maintaining** rigging and circus equipment including apparatus and safety equipment,
- 6** **Building & creating circus equipment**, structures, and props (when requested by students/staff).

In addition, respondents were also asked to give an estimation of the time spent on each of the seven duties.

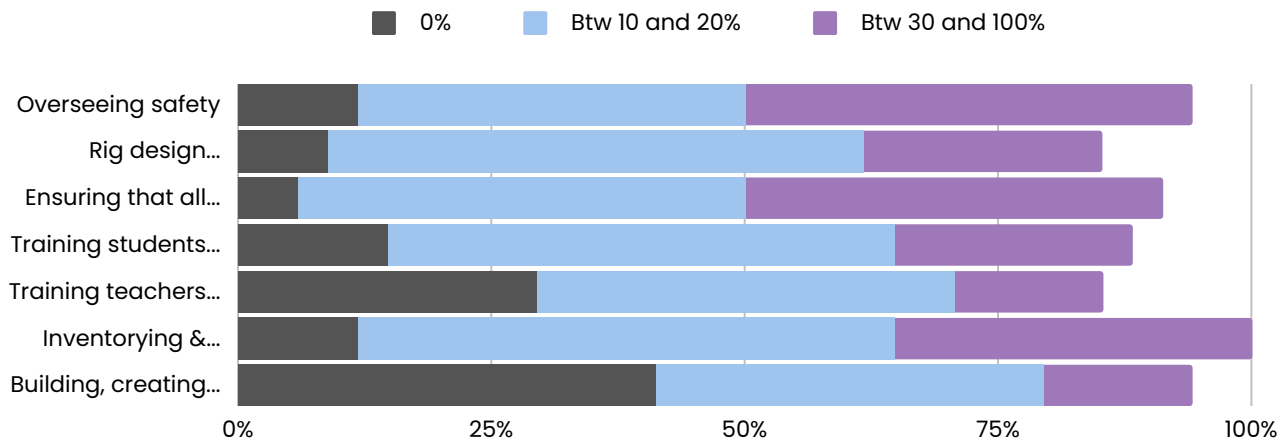
For 35% of the respondents, **the most important responsibility is: "Ensuring that all training spaces are equipped and operating to industry standards"**.

This responsibility is also the one that scored most among the 7 proposed, which means that most of the respondents ranked it either in first, second, or third place.



**RANK BY ORDER OF IMPORTANCE THESE 7
DIFFERENT DUTIES & RESPONSIBILITIES**

COULD YOU GIVE AN ESTIMATION OF THE TIME SPENT ON EACH TASK?



Other relevant duties are:

- **“Overseeing training safety”** (ranked as most important by 28% of the respondents, and third most scored responsibility)
- **“Inventorying, managing & maintaining rigging and circus equipment including apparatus & safety equipment”** (ranked as most important by only 9% of the respondents, but second most scored responsibility).

When it comes to the time spent on each duty, the aforementioned ones are again the ones on which riggers are spending most of their time.

But data suggest that **“Rig design for students' shows and general training”** is also relevant, as:

- **53%** of riggers spend on it between 10 and 20% of their time,
- **32%** of them spend on it between 30 and 100% of their time (i.e., it is one of the duties on which they spend the most time on)
- only **9%** of them is spending no time on it.

This means that almost all respondents are spending time on such duty (only “ensuring that all training spaces are...” has a higher percentage on this criterion).



By combining the above-mentioned keywords and the most chosen responsibilities, we can attempt to define the mission of the circus school rigger with 3 main features:

1 – Training spaces

The circus school rigger is working in a training space, not on a stage. This also means that she/he needs a strategic view of the space and has to consider the different types of users, as well as the different kinds of classes and/or events that take place in the training space.

2 – Students safety

The safety of the students is the priority for all circus school riggers. No artistic or economical need has more importance than the safety of the students. Working with students include often working alongside teachers, training students and teachers directly, designing the rigging with and for them, and being present during student rehearsals and performances.

3 – Equipment, apparatus, facilities

The mission of any circus school rigger is always connected with the management and maintenance of the school equipment, the apparatuses, and the facilities. In certain cases, this means creating and building new equipment based on students' demands.

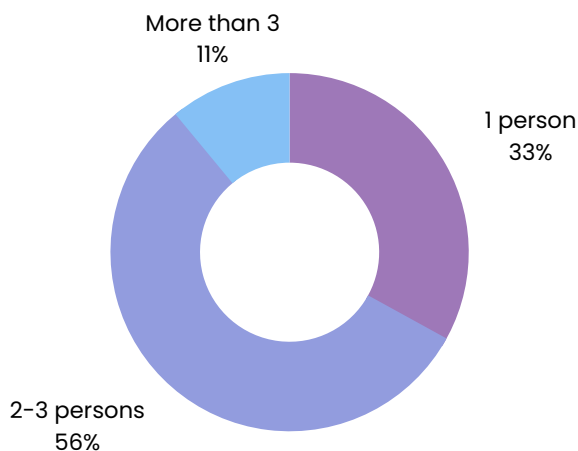


SUPPORT AT WORK & CAREER DEVELOPMENT

WHO IS SUPPORTING THE RIGGER?

One of the starting points to developing the current RIGGERS project was that riggers in circus schools often work in isolation, with many responsibilities on their shoulders. In addition, they lack reference documents and collective organisations (unions, etc.) to help them better implement their work.

HOW MANY PEOPLE ARE IN CHARGE OF SAFETY AND RIGGING IN YOUR SCHOOL?



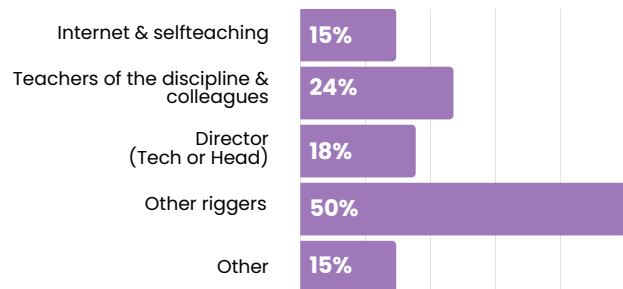
According to the survey, **56% of the schools have a team of 2-3 people in charge of safety and rigging**; a technical director and a technician.

Once again, there is a consistent difference between Higher education and Secondary levels: 47% of Secondary level schools have

only 1 person responsible for safety and rigging, and the same percentage declared that they have 2-3 people in charge.

When asked about who they consult for advice, **a large number of riggers declared that they seek advice outside the school.** 50% of the respondents declared that they are usually consulting their peers in the performing arts sector. 23% of them seek advice from colleagues, while 18% usually ask their director (technical or head).

WHO DO YOU ASK FOR ADVICE?



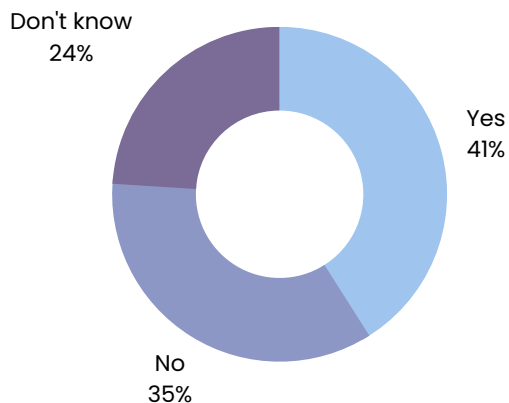
Finally, **55% of the respondents declared that they are having regularly scheduled meetings with their supervisor and/or other staff members.**

Only 34% of all schools are having weekly meetings.

Are schools providing some kind of continuing professional development opportunities, such as training courses?

35% of the respondents answered no, while another 24% declared that they don't know about it.

IS YOUR SCHOOL PROVIDING CONTINUING PROFESSIONAL DVLP OPPORTUNITIES?



When asked about the reasons for this, most of the respondents declared that **the school is lacking the money and time to provide them with such opportunities.**

In some cases, there is no specific training for circus school riggers in the country, and going abroad would be complicated in terms of time and money.

Among the 41% who answered yes, various training courses were mentioned, among them the most mentioned were:

- **IRATA training** for Working at height
- **The training courses for riggers** at the Centre National pour Arts du Cirque in Châlons-en-Champagne (FRA)
- **AERISC Training**
- **LEEa Training** for lifting equipment
- **Orion Riggers training courses**, based on PLASA principles.

This variety of trainings is proof of the variety of competencies that a rigger in circus school is required to have, and shows that continuous professional development is recommended to keep up-to-date.

Contemporary circus arts relate to a multitude of technics, and disciplines, mixing various art forms which have an impact on the technical requirements and the safety of the environment.

It is crucial that the circus arts education sector stays adequate to this evolution with a set of unique, specific, and up-to-date safety and rigging measures.

”

"There so far haven't been any training opportunities. Things have been discussed but time, budget, and organization have meant nothing has yet taken place."

"Time is missing and there isn't any training in our country. You have to travel to France or Belgium. With a full-time job is difficult to manage your time."

"I am self-employed so I am responsible for my own professional training, not the school."

"I feel I am currently sufficiently trained for the tasks required. I regularly check websites, Instagram, etc."

“



QUALIFICATION & ACCESS TO THE PROFESSION

HOW TO BECOME A CIRCUS SCHOOL RIGGER?

82% of respondents said that there isn't a specific qualification needed to access the profession of circus school rigger in their country.

In Italy and Portugal, it is compulsory to hold a "work at height with rope access and positioning" certification, while other countries, such as Sweden, require a skylift certification.

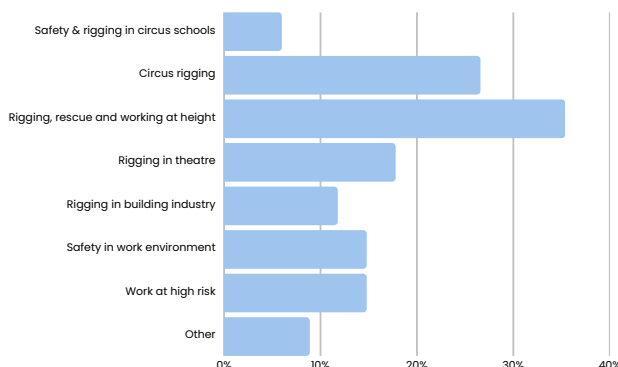
DO YOU HOLD A CERTIFICATION RELATED TO RIGGING?



70% of respondents answered "YES".

On the other hand, only 70% of respondents declared that they hold a certification related to rigging.

WHAT KIND OF CERTIFICATION RELATED TO RIGGING DO YOU HOLD?

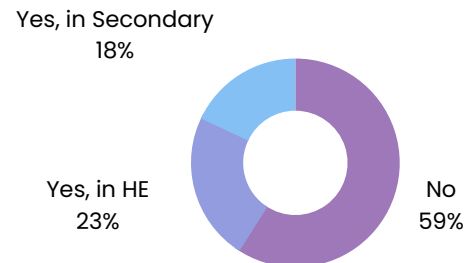


These certifications are varied:

- **35%** hold a certification in working at height (such as IRATA),
- **26%** hold a circus rigging certification (not specified),
- **18%** hold a certification in rigging for theatre.

As of today, certification specific to circus educational environments does not seem to be available.

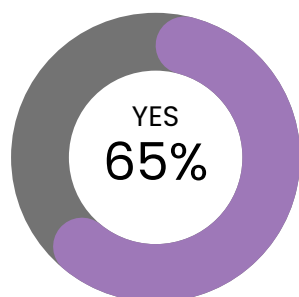
HAVE YOU PREVIOUSLY WORKED AS CIRCUS SCHOOL RIGGER?



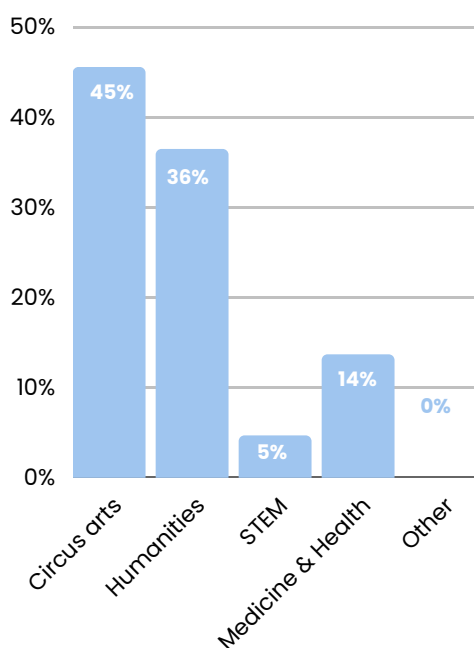
As for previous working experiences, the majority of respondents – 59% – have never worked before in a circus school.

Among the 41% who were previously working in another circus school, only 3 persons were in a Secondary school and are currently working at a Higher Education one.

This may suggest that often circus school riggers were previously working on their own as riggers and/or artists, and that at a certain moment of their career, they decided to join a school.

DO YOU HOLD A
HIGHER EDUCATION DEGREE?

As for the educational background, **65%** of the respondents hold a Higher education degree. Almost half of them – 45% – have a Higher education degree in circus arts.

WHAT KIND OF HIGHER EDUCATION
DEGREE DO YOU HAVE?

On top of that, if we consider all respondents who studied circus arts, whether in leisure school, at secondary level and Higher education level, we can see that 56% of all the respondents have studied circus arts.



For what concerns the riggers without a circus arts degree, very few of them hold a degree in STEM (science, technology, engineering, and mathematics disciplines) – contrary to what could be expected for such kind of profession – and most of them hold a degree in Humanities (i.e., fine arts, politics, philosophy, economy...).

This data suggests that the career path of a circus school rigger is currently not well defined. A Higher education school looking for a rigger prefers to train him or her in-house or take a professional from the performing arts sector.

This is not the case for teachers, that are often starting in secondary schools and then going to Higher education ones.

The only exception is France, where the circus education sector is probably developed enough to allow some riggers to have a more linear career.

EXTRAS

WHAT THE RIGGERS SAY

"No single questionnaire can cover every part of a job".

This sentence was the beginning of the last question of the survey, where we asked respondents to add any other information that they considered relevant in understanding the profession of circus school rigger.

These answers are hints for further inquiries to better picture and understand the profession.

We can divide the answers into **3 main areas**:

1 - Certification versus experience

Most riggers underlined that their main training was the experience they gained from working with artists and other riggers.

"(...) My job is not regulated in my country and there are no certifications, only training, experience, and credentials. I personally got numerous trainings from operating lifts and platforms to being first respondent and all my trainings helped me in my job, but there are actually no training in circus acrobatic rigging and none of the other trainings I have been in will ever compare with all the experience and knowledge I have gained by working with great people in the world of circus (...)"

"Even without training in the area, the time of experience and training in the circus area in a reference school, the contact and follow-up with the rigger professionals is continuous."

At the same time, many expressed the desire of dedicated training.

"(...) Being a rigger is more than hanging something or someone, we are creative too and we can use our skills to create new things. Maybe one creative course for riggers should be very interesting."



"I think that a training adapted to teachers who want to learn how to rig within their workplace would be good. Something not too complicated and affordable."

2 - The stress of being a rigger

Many respondents mentioned stress as a major concern in their profession. This refers both to the relation with the risk, as an indissoluble part of the job, and to the working conditions and the need for recognition by the school.

"Circus is a space where people take controlled risks. As a circus school rigger, I am part of a circus culture. Circus culture allows for what are dangerous activities to be undertaken in as safe a manner as is achievable. My role is to enable risk. To help provide the equipment, the training, and the environment to allow for the development of the skills to undertake controlled risk."



"It is important to notice that many riggers work on their own and in that way they have a huge responsibility that very fast can be "personal". Regarding this - it is important to ask how the school can provide information about the practice to both students and colleagues."

"How to make awareness of the fact that the rigger has a huge responsibility and in that way, there is a risk, vulnerability, and human costs of being a rigger. You never hear about the riggers, the safety matters unless something happens, if there are accidents or mistakes or injuries. This psychological part of the job is of huge importance and not part of the questionnaire at all. Who takes care of the rigger if something goes wrong....what is the safety net for a rigger?"

"Looking at total hours over a week of the month doesn't show that I tend to work sporadically with long days for shows and/or late nights after students have left the space."

"Furthermore, the salary is not considered, I am considered as a hanging installer, however, this position should be as a hanging designer as I am the one who does the calculations to determine what type of material to use. This is a real problem in the industry)."

"I would simply emphasize the huge gap between the responsibilities taken on by designers and riggers and the technical and regulatory limbo within which they are required to operate."

3 – The recognition of the profession

Many respondents are ready to take the responsibility of collective action towards increased visibility of the profession in the sector, to gain recognition by the school directors (in terms of training, support, working hours, and visibility) and a sector awareness leading to mutual help.

"I think it's really important this approximation of riggers, and more important to meet, share and learn new things with other and more experienced riggers. I'd like to know more about great structures, machinery, and other ways of rigging, and learn about the new materials, equipment, and props. (...)"

"There are many things I would like to add - like the chance of stress etc.. but I think these are things that we should discuss together with other riggers because it's hard to know what is 'part of the job' and what is personal to our own experiences or situation."

"(...) There are lots of regulating instances in rigging but a lot of them don't actually get the reality that circus technicians/riggers are in and I look forward to US the circus school and circus riggers to lay down our own regulations one day so we are not under some entertainment rigging specialists rules..."

CONCLUSIONS

& IDEAS FOR THE NEXT STEPS

The starting point of the RIGGERS project was that circus arts are evolving, enriched by artistic, aesthetic, and technical innovations as well as by industrial and technological developments.

The circus arts sector is growing, and so does the circus education sector, in Europe and in the world. According to the FEDEC member survey, between 2014 and 2020, professional schools passed from 40 to 51, the number of circus teachers increased from 779 to 1650, and the number of students has exploded, going from 2899 to 15.245.

In parallel and as a consequence of this evolution, safety and prevention are becoming a priority for circus schools. Yet, there was no data about the riggers to support actions in the field.



IN A FEW WORDS...

According to the survey, a 45 years old man who studied circus arts and decided, for one reason or another, that he would become a rigger rather than an artist.

Aside of his core activity, he is doing other jobs such as teaching a circus discipline or rigging for performing arts events.

During his career, the rigger has undertaken different trainings, but most of his knowledge comes from practicing with experienced riggers and artists. His job often implies working extra hours, and sometimes it also includes stress caused by the burden of responsibilities concerning the students' safety and the equipment management and installation.

He is often working with 1 or 2 extra people, and yet he feels isolated and not recognized by his school. His job gets visible once an incident or an accident happens.

For those dealing with circus education, this picture is not something new. Yet, we have never had data to confirm such impressions.

Furthermore, the picture we get is more complex than the above-mentioned average portrait. The survey gave us a glimpse of the variety of educational backgrounds and career paths of circus school riggers.

In addition, we were able to make some steps towards a definition of the mission of the circus school rigger, and we collected useful information about the great variety of training courses a rigger can undertake.

Finally, we identified a clear need for support, inside the school and among peers. Most of the riggers need support to cope with the challenge of promoting technical prowess and artistic development while ensuring a secure environment during the learning paths of the students.

Possible further steps could therefore be:

→ **Raise awareness about the riggers.** As a way to raise awareness about safety and rigging in circus schools, as well as to promote a greater recognition of the profession and role of the rigger in schools.

→ **A depository of training courses** addressed to circus school rigger could be a useful tool for both newcomers to the profession and experienced riggers looking for up-to-date tools and competences. This could be also limited to a suggestion of the areas in which any circus school rigger could be trained in order to perform their work properly.

→ Finally, although the data collected is limited, this seems to confirm that **schools lack the necessary time and resources to support the rigger's professional development**, and that the strengthening of the circus school riggers community at an international level may be of great help. In fact, this is one of the aims of the RIGGERS project.





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