

Reality Check: Film and TV work

If we include everything from big-budget movies to online video platforms and streaming, there's never been a bigger opportunity to work behind the camera.

Everything from a Hollywood movie to an individual YouTube channel might need many of the same things: proper organisation and management, good camerawork and lighting, transport of crew and equipment, hair and makeup, production design, visual effects, and many more. The ~~most~~ best-known part of the industry makes spectacular feature films and well-known TV drama series, things that we'd usually call *single-camera drama*.

That sort of work is famous, but in terms of the number of jobs available, it's actually a small part of the industry as a whole. There are 168 hours in a week, and a TV channel that's on air twenty-four hours a day needs to fill them all. Most of the time, that material won't be made in the same way as a major feature film, and there's a lot of it. Most of the production work that happens every day *isn't* single-camera drama.

A lot of airtime is filled with *multi-camera television*, things like chat shows and news broadcasts. When that sort of production needs to cover an outdoor event such as a sports match or music concert, equipment goes on the road to an *outside broadcast*. Live TV demands perfection on cue: the pictures go direct to enthusiastic fans and there is no take two, and no way to erase a mistake. Also, the biggest online streaming events are often covered by the same people, using the same equipment, as a big TV broadcast – and they often get bigger audiences from all over the world.

Television news – at least, the part of it that isn't made in a studio - might involve ducking explosions in a warzone. It might also involve attending the local cake-baking competition. Either way, *news and documentary* means recording the real world in a way that will make sense to an audience later on. All filmmakers are storytellers, but news and documentary needs people who understand how to create a story that makes sense. If you're into the natural world, science and technology, documentary might be an opportunity to spend time investigating those things and telling other people about them. It can be boring, dangerous, or both, but it might even change the world.

Corporate video is easy to ignore: the simplest jobs might involve someone senior at a company, making a speech to the camera, though that's really not much different to some kinds of news work. The best work, though, is right up there with high-quality television, and often allows for much more creativity. A company with no other background in film and TV is much more likely to ask the crew to make its own decisions, as opposed to a TV production company and their favourite director, who may have some very specific ideas as to how things should be done. Corporates can involve access to amazing places and things, and tend to be better-paid than many kinds of broadcast and film work.

So, there are a lot of places to work other than in films and drama series. A lot of people will still want to work on something that they can see at the local cinema, though, and because it's so competitive, anyone who wants to do that is likely to have to start right at the bottom – on low-budget productions.

Starting out

The most important thing to realise when starting out in single-camera filmmaking is that some low-budget productions are more worthwhile than others. All will claim to offer experience, contacts, and of course a credit to the name of people who have worked on them. All of this is important, but it's important to make a living, too. Figuring out which jobs to pursue is a key skill.

How low can you go

The phrase "low budget" covers a wide area. Some people might think of a film costing a few million pounds as "low budget," at least compared to hundred-million-plus superhero movies. Other people might make a short film with a few friends one weekend, spend a few hundred pounds, and call that "low budget" or "microbudget." Sometimes, a production might spend huge amounts on a star actor or hiring a spectacular location, then try to save money by underpaying the crew, so it can be difficult to figure out exactly how much money is really being spent on what, and therefore whether what's being offered is reasonable.

In the UK, employment laws mean it's illegal to offer anyone pay below minimum wage – look up the minimums online. There are some exceptions, such as when people are on an apprenticeship scheme, but this is rare on the very smallest short film productions and will involve official paperwork (if it doesn't, it's probably not an official apprenticeship scheme.) Almost all work on film and TV productions is skilled, and skilled people deserve more than minimum wage unless there are very good reasons why.

Working time

Working hours in film and television are notoriously long. Worse, the work may be far from home, leading to long travel time. It's easy to end up with a very limited amount of sleep, which makes it hard to get everything else right, and can even create safety problems, especially with driving.

The law puts limits on how many hours people can work. The limits include the number of hours per day, the number of hours between working periods, the number of days per week, and rest breaks. Workers can choose to waive some of their rights, choosing to work longer hours, and producers will commonly ask for this on low-budget productions. It is normal for overtime to be paid on extra hours worked. Some roles, such as hair and makeup, are notorious for requiring people to arrive early and leave late.

On some productions, the concept of "prep and wrap time" will be used. This is extra time worked before the official start and after the official end of the shooting day to set up or pack away equipment. This time absolutely counts towards limits on working hours and overtime, and is paid; it should not be more than an hour on each end of the day.

Productions should be organised well enough that they do not often have to ask crew to work more than the scheduled number of hours. It's a serious warning sign if the limits are frequently broken, and it's reasonable to ask questions about it.

Working time issues are often much more serious on longer-running productions such as feature films. It is common to work longer hours on shorter-running productions such as commercials, music videos and short films, which often only shoot for a couple of days. Often there will be time for a day off between productions, to sleep in and recover from the long days.

A grey area exists where several unrelated jobs are worked back to back, especially if one of those jobs involves unusual hours, such as night work, followed by an early morning. In this situation, it is difficult to hold any one production responsible for the long hours. Even so, everyone is still responsible for safety both on set and, for instance, when driving: car insurance may become invalid if the driver is too tired to drive safely.

Experience...

Besides money, people tend to work on small film productions for experience. This can mean a few things.

It's quite common for people on smaller productions to be "stepping up" - that is, working in a more senior role than they usually would. Someone who usually worked as a makeup artist, for instance, might take a job on a smaller production as the head of the makeup department, or a camera operator might work as director of photography.

On *very* small productions, this might mean the level of experience in the entire crew may be very low. There may not be a full crew – instead, people may do whatever work needs doing. Camera crew might help carry props, or the sound recordist might help move lights between takes. Things are likely to happen more quickly.

Either kind of job can be worth doing, especially as either of them should pay more than minimum wage. Still, it's clear which has the best chance of producing a good, watchable film. It's also clear which of them is most likely to offer the same sort of working environment as a fully-funded production, and which therefore offers the best experience.

One of the most important things about work on a film set is simply understanding the working environment: who to talk to, when to leave people alone, how not to be in the way, where to put things, like any complex job. That's the sort of experience most people want and need at the beginning. Some productions offer more of it than others, often based more on who's working on them than what's being produced. The more experienced a crew, the more like a higher-end show the environment will be, and the better a learning environment it will be.

...and contacts

Contacts are crucial in film and TV. Most people are self-employed, and giving a good impression when meeting people is a key skill.

That said, those "good contacts" can be difficult to pin down. In the worst case, people may make promises about future work that they don't or can't keep. Even if someone becomes very successful, they might not be allowed to take their friends with them; working a big job often comes with requirements, such as giving up control over who's on the crew.

And that's if someone becomes an overnight success. It's easy to find stories of independent filmmakers being recognised for their work and offered big, spectacular jobs. These stories are famous because they are rare. Exceptional success stories are exactly that: the exception, not the rule. Many people will work on or even make short films, which is fine, but it's not sensible to rely on the idea of being an overnight success because it is very, very unusual. At the very least, have *several* backup plans.

Should I go to university?

Colleges, universities and even companies offer courses in specific areas of media production, particularly engineering roles. Some of the best-known colleges offer undergraduate and postgraduate courses in various aspects of film and TV work. Most jobs in the film and TV industry do not require a degree, few require formal qualifications, and almost any industry role could be achieved by someone starting at the very bottom.

What's important is that anyone thinking of doing any sort of course related to film and TV compares the costs and the benefits, whether it's a few days learning a piece of equipment or a few years getting a degree. As we've already said, the single-camera part of the film industry is very competitive and very attractive as a career. Organisations which run courses know this, and some of them may try to take advantage of people desperate to find a way in.

Things to consider include:

- What qualification does the course offer? Is it officially accredited by an educational body? If not, what guarantees are there that the course teaches something useful, that has kept up with developments in the industry, and that other people will recognise?
- How is the course advertised? Does it use impressive images of well-funded single-camera drama production, and if so, does that reflect the reality of the course and the results achieved by or people who have been on the course?
- Who will teach the course?
- Who else will be on the course? Existing industry people looking to expand their abilities, or people with no experience looking to gain some?
- What is the success rate of people who have taken the course? How many end up in the job they wanted?

Any organisation which isn't able to easily answer all of these questions is suspect. For someone interested in the field, any course in a film or TV related subject is likely to be fun, at the very least, but many of them are very expensive, and it's reasonable to ask these questions.

- Phil Rhodes

Your Career in the Camera Department

We've included some documents to give you advice when starting out.

- The Bectu freelance survival guide.
- Standing up for yourself and each other.
- Your legal rights fact card.
- A guide to the Working Time Directive (from Thompsons, the union's lawyers).
- The Camera Branch has a quick guide to the TV drama agreement.
- Links to all the agreements are at: <https://camerabranch.org.uk/agreements/>
- BECTU's website of career advice: <https://www.creativetoolkit.org.uk/your-career>