

Career Opportunities in RTF & Entertainment

(from *UT Communication Career Services; Experience.Com; [How to Break into Hollywood](#), 1996, Linda Buzzell*)

Lights! Camera! Action! The film and TV industries feed on their own charisma, but entertainment work is rarely glamorous. The tremendous costs and financial risks involved in the process of filmmaking can create an environment which is extremely stressful and demanding. Since there are vastly more applicants than positions to be filled, the film and TV industries have the luxury of selecting only the most talented and promising candidates. In the entertainment business, who you know is frequently just as, if not more important than, what you know. Your success is determined by how actively you network and develop professional relationships and contacts.

Getting Your Foot in the Door

As with most businesses that deal in artistic endeavors, the film and television industries don't need to actively recruit new employees. Thousands of interested applicants clamor for jobs every year, hoping to break into the field. Expect low pay due to the law of supply and demand. Take advantage of the "intangible" rewards you will receive, such as making contacts and gaining exposure to the industry. Illustrate your willingness to "pay your dues," and realize the hours will likely be long. While blanketing production companies, networks and studios with resumes is one way to get hired, there are other more effective ways to find available positions within show business:

Internships: One of the surest ways to get in the door is by participating in an internship program. Most major studios, networks and production companies use interns, and those that don't can often be easily convinced of the benefits of hiring cheap labor. Although interns usually spend their time engaged in grunt work, a few opportunities offer a better chance to learn the inner workings of these industries. Also, interning is an excellent way to make contacts and discover unadvertised job openings.

The Trades: The trades are the daily and weekly newspapers and magazines, such as *Variety* and *The Hollywood Reporter*, which report on trends and happenings in film and television production. In this business, knowledge is power, and the trades are the primary sources of information concerning projects in development, company shakeups, and other sources of new opportunities. Read each day by most Hollywood professionals, the trades are also used by candidates looking for job openings, auditions, submission requests, and lists of upcoming film productions.

Networking: Contacts are the key to doing business within the film and TV industries. As part of an insular community, entertainment professionals look to one another for help in arranging financing, setting up projects or securing creative talent. Unfortunately for applicants, they also tend to look to insiders when filling available job openings. Networking allows you to make contacts who can assist you in breaking into the field. Whether you ask friends, family, teachers, or co-workers, the odds are that you'll find someone who either works in or has connections to the film industry.

Independent Productions: The success of independent, low-budget feature films has resulted in an unprecedented rise in the number of such projects. Independent productions offer those with little or no experience the chance to work as Production Assistants and technical crew on both short-subject and feature-length films. While the pay is often low, especially given the long work hours, and sometimes non-existent, the opportunity for recognition and advancement is far greater on these smaller, less rigid production crews than on industry sets.



Career Services

Southwestern University at Georgetown, Texas
Prothro Center 1st Floor, 512.863.1346, 512.863.1270 fax
career.services@southwestern.edu
www.southwestern.edu/careers

Here to help you get ahead.

Alternate Options: The *agency mailroom* is a very desirable entry-level job, particularly if you're interested in becoming an agent. Based on good work you can move up to agent's assistant in six months to a year. After one to three years you may eventually become an agent. The training can also lead to studio or production company jobs. *Pages* functions as ushers/tour guides for "guest relations" for television networks and can provide access to power players. *Assistants on low-budget, non-union films* can make important industry contacts and take on more responsibility in an often less-structured hierarchy.

Blasting the Myths

Working in show business isn't always what you'd expect. Some common expectations and apprehensions include:

"Not being a film or TV major will limit me breaking into the field." Yes and no. Few positions in film or TV require a film or television background. For those that do, employers will pay more attention to your knowledge and experience than they will to any degree you've earned. That said, what students produce for film and TV classes, such as spec scripts, script coverage or short films, may well help them nudge their way into the field. Endeavor to compete by gaining those experiences outside the classroom.

"It seems impossible to get past the entry-level positions." Moving up in the film and TV industries can be a daunting task. Advancement in both professions almost always comes down to who you know. Consider every person you meet to be a potential contact. The simplest act, from running an errand for someone to staying late to assist with some paperwork, can lead to your next break. Remember, the industry is small, so don't burn bridges.

"It's easy to switch back and forth between film and TV work." If you're remarkably successful, true. Also true if you're not terribly successful—you can switch right over to the bottom rung. But for everyone in the middle, it can be difficult. First, people get pegged as skilled in specific arenas; e.g., a soap opera director is considered a soap opera director, and it will be hard for him to find work in other forms of television, let alone in film. Second, most people land jobs through contacts, and people tend to move in crowds. If your friends all work the TV commercial scene, you'll probably have a hard time finding work in feature films. That said, "easy" is a relative term—switching from one industry to another is light years easier than breaking into either field in the first place.

"I won't know what to do, and I'm afraid of making a mistake." Don't worry. The upside of entry-level work is that you have time to learn the ropes before being responsible for crucial parts of the production process. Still, it's important to have thick skin when starting out in entertainment. Because so much goes wrong on a consistent basis, a great deal of blame-shifting takes place, and the most junior person is always the easiest target to blame for production difficulties. Don't take things personally and continue to do your job as best you can. Insiders tell us most temper tantrums pass quickly, and good work is ultimately recognized.

Entry-level Positions

Most creative careers in entertainment, such as writers and actors, do not have clear career paths—there is no one clear place to start. So, if you want to become a writer or an actor, become one—writers only need a word processor and actors only need head shots and a subscription to *BackStage West*. Designers, composers, cinematographers and editors should look to student

and independent films to practice their craft and build up “reel” credits. Unlike writers or actors, artisans can earn money and build contacts through a variety of ways while “supporting their hobby.” Production designers can find work in art departments as art directors, coordinators, costumers, prop master, set designers and location scouts. Sound designers can work as sound transferrers, mixers, engineers, recording artists, Foley editors and so on. Cinematographers work as assistant cameramen and gaffers, and composers may work as orchestrators, conductors, music editors and music supervisors. These positions are still competitive, but they can be acquired through standard job hunting methods: networking and working your way from one job to the next. Note that most positions in entertainment are unionized, so be aware of what you will need to do to qualify for union membership.

Between your day job and your career pursuit, you’ll be very busy. Unfortunately, you also need to promote yourself simultaneously. Acquiring an agent, lawyer and manager provides you with a stamp of legitimacy, but unless you’re extremely fortunate, these individuals will likely focus on their more prominent clients, leaving you to fend for yourself. Your next step is to cozy up to individuals who can offer you work: producers, directors, casting agents, etc.

Alternate Routes

The film and TV drop-out rate is high. Most people coming in are bright and capable of excelling in other fields. Also, after a decade of waiting tables, an actor may give up on his goals. Or, after a couple of years working 60-hour weeks at \$25,000 a year, a casting assistant might decide she’d like to go into a field where advancement is easier. If things don’t work out as planned, a number of other professions value the creative talents developed in the film and television industries, such as:

Film Business Affairs: Creative departments are just small fractions of large media conglomerates. Human resources, real estate management, marketing, accounting and legal departments are a few of the larger departments surrounding the creative execs. Film folks with accounting, legal, or business backgrounds often end up in, or prefer, these roles. Considering how competitive the creative field is, these jobs are comparatively easy to acquire.

Film Service Companies: A flip through *The Hollywood Reporter Bluebook* (an industry bible) demonstrates there are thousands of companies outside of studios and production companies that are involved in the film industry. After 10 years or so in the field, many individuals move to one of these companies. Normal hours and stability are frequently the allure.

Entrepreneurship: Sometimes escapees from the creative tracks start their own businesses, based on skills they have acquired along the way, or in a niche that became apparent to them through experience. For example, a low-budget indie producer may quickly discover there are no optical effects houses catering to low-budget films, and consequently open one. Or a film distribution executive may discover there is no place to store 5,000 film prints safely, and open a storage space catering to this need.

Advertising: Advertising, considered one of the most creative fields in the world of big business, also provides film and TV professionals with the opportunity to use their imaginations and technical skills. Ad campaigns and commercial shoots demand the same level of creativity and technical precision necessary in the production of a feature-length film or television series. From scriptwriting and storyboarding to directing and editing, the skills and talents of former film and TV professionals help ad agencies meet the rising expectations of both clients and consumers.

Industrial Videos: Industrial video production allows industry professionals to extend their talents and skills beyond Hollywood and the networks to marketing, sales, and training materials. Assignments may include public service announcements, press kits, company news programs, training videos or low-budget commercials that air on local TV stations. Although projects often lack the creative scope and large budgets found in entertainment

productions, the opportunity to advance quickly toward more senior positions—especially producing and directing—makes this field particularly inviting. Industrial video operations tend to be small businesses, consisting of a proprietor and a few full-time employees, with editors, cinematographers and production crew needed for productions hired on a freelance basis. Industrial video companies receive their contracts from small and large businesses alike. Also, any city with industry needs industrial video companies, allowing film professionals to live outside of LA.

Teaching: Teaching college students the film and TV production techniques has always been an option for entertainment industry professionals. Film and TV departments are found in universities around the world, and they all value the practical experience and insider knowledge that professionals bring to the classroom. Teaching is an opportunity to step outside the stressful environment of production and play a role in influencing the next wave of film masterminds and technical specialists.

Journalism: The hectic, fast-paced journalism world is an excellent career option for former industry professionals. Writing drives the production of movies and TV programs, just as it does newspapers, news broadcasts, and web casts. Former film and TV professionals, especially those who’ve worked in broadcast news departments, are often skilled in making editorial judgments and producing concise, polished work. Additionally, a newcomer from the entertainment world with industry contacts and first-hand knowledge is well-suited to critic or entertainment reporter work.

Tips for Success

- **Attach yourself to a mentor** and be savvy about how a good mentoring relationship should work.
- **Be a good listener.** Listen completely before you talk.
- **Never make excuses.** Always be prepared to remedy something that is wrong.
- The right answer to a question that you don’t know is, **“I don’t know, but I’ll find out...”**
- **Do more** than you are paid to do.
- **Invest in karma.** Do favors and don’t ask for anything in return.
- **Don’t let people walk all over you.** People respect individuals who can stand up for themselves.
- Scope out where there is a need and **take action** to fill it.
- **Don’t focus on money.** Financial rewards will come as you get better at your craft.
- **Keep your long term goals in mind and work towards them.** Be aware of time when you might become sidetracked.

The Chutzpah Factor

“...there are only two sins in Hollywood: to be dull and to be desperate. Whether you are a film editor, studio executive or secretary, you need to sprinkle a little tinsel on your image to make it Hollywood.”

Know your personality and turn it up. Learn as much as you can about yourself, including quirks, talents, and strengths, so that you’ll feel more comfortable *performing* who you are. The more of yourself you can project, the more confident you’ll seem. Create a look and style that is uniquely generated from within and “sell” it.

Shed negative mental voices. Exercise positive internal messages so you remain confident and clear about your strengths.

Be aware of your fears of failing and of succeeding. Fear of rejection keeps people in their comfort zones and limits their ability to take new risks. Fear of success also keeps people from operating at their full potential. Knowing that you are truly good at something can often trigger feelings of self-doubt and insecurity.

Be creative and learn advanced “guerrilla chutzpah tactics” such as crashing the party or audition, dropping by people’s offices unannounced, leaving scripts behind, etc. But be extremely careful and do your homework first! *Ingenuity is valued, but ignorance is not.*