

Photographer Career Path Exploration

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Introduction

This article provides information for those interested in a career as a photographer. The given information about the job specifications, such as duties and benefits, may prove beneficial in helping those interested decide if this career is right for them. The following information about a photographer career will be presented in the following order: responsibilities, how to become one, pay and benefits, job outlook, and an interview with someone in this occupation.

Responsibilities of Photographers

Photographers' main responsibility is to capture images using both their creative and technical skills according to the U.S. Department of Labor (2019). They need to understand how to take professional photographs, which includes analyzing the composition of subjects within the photographs (U.S. Department of Labor, 2019). Photographers tend to use digital cameras and photo-enhancing software to edit the images on the computer (U.S. Department of Labor, 2019). When capturing the photographs, lighting equipment is utilized along with various photographic techniques while some will additionally use drones to capture aerial views (U.S. Department of Labor, 2019). Photographers need to be able to carry their equipment and stand for a long time (U.S. Department of Labor, 2019). The U.S. Department of Labor (2019) states that photographers keep an archive of their images and create a digital portfolio to show others their work, and they also need to advertise and market themselves to potential clients. Photographers are often self-employed, so they have added responsibilities, including scheduling their own appointments, paying bills, and buying necessary equipment (U.S. Department of Labor, 2019).

According to the U.S. Department of Labor (2019), specialties in the photographic industry include aerial, commercial and industrial, drone, fine arts, news, portrait, and scientific. The working conditions and daily tasks differ depending on the type of photographer. Aerial photographers work in planes or helicopters where they take photographs of landscapes and buildings (U.S. Department of Labor, 2019). Commercial photographers take promotional photographs for marketing and advertising purposes while industrial photographers take photographs of machines and industrial processes for businesses (Evans, 2017; Francis, 2013). Drone photographers use unmanned aerial vehicles, or drones, to capture photographs for journalism and art as well as surveillance, law enforcement, and spying purposes (Rouse, 2015). Fine arts photographers sell their artistic photography (U.S. Department of Labor, 2019). News photographers, or photojournalists, photograph people and events for news organizations, so they may travel and may be sent to dangerous situations (U.S. Department of Labor, 2019). Portrait photographers capture group or individual photographs, and they often work in a studio and also travel to clients' desired locations (U.S. Department of Labor, 2019). Scientific photographers use photography to document experiments and other information for the scientific or medical

fields, so for instance, they may use microphotography, which is photography using microscopes, to photograph cells, or they may take photos underwater to study sea creatures (Sullivan, 2011).

How to Become a Photographer

As stated by the U.S. Department of Labor (2019), photographers tend to take classes or study photography in college although obtaining a college education is not required for most photography positions. Photographers tend to spend many years practicing their skills to get better. To do this, they often begin working with a professional photographer as their assistant (U.S. Department of Labor, 2019). Photographers often build portfolios which include a collection of their best and often recent photographs to prove their skills to future clients (Adorama, 2018). According to the U.S. Department of Labor (2019) those interested in news, industrial, or scientific photography will often need a bachelor's degree in either photography or a field, such as biology or medicine, related to the specific job. Those who use drones need a certification from the Federal Aviation Administration (U.S. Department of Labor, 2019).

Through their practice, photographers must develop several qualities. The U.S. Department of Labor (2019) explains they must be artistic because to create visually appealing photographs, they work with colors, shades, light, shadows, and distance. They need computer skills and must be detail-oriented to edit their images (U.S. Department of Labor, 2019). Photographers additionally need business, customer-service, and interpersonal skills to advertise to and attract clients and maintain their professionalism while taking photographs for them (U.S. Department of Labor, 2019). Having additional skills in photo editing and digital videography helps increase job opportunities and chances for aspiring photographers (U.S. Department of Labor, 2019).

Pay and Benefits

According to the U.S. Department of Labor (2019), the median hourly wage for a photographer in May 2018 was \$16.35. An hourly wage of less than \$9.54 was received by the lowest 10 percent, as opposed to more than \$36.71 which was earned by the highest 10 percent (U.S. Department of Labor, 2019). As stated by the U.S. Department of Labor (2019), in May 2018, the top industries for photographers were broadcasting; newspaper, periodical, book, and directory publishers; and photographic services. Those in broadcasting received the highest median hourly wage at \$21.89 while those in photographic services received the lowest median hourly wage at \$14.21 (U.S. Department of Labor, 2019). According to the U.S. Department of Labor (2019), in 2016, approximately 3 in 10 photographers were part time, and hours are flexible and vary depending on the season.

Job Outlook

According to the U.S. Department of Labor (2019), from 2016-2026, photographer employment is expected to decrease by 6 percent. Greater access to more reasonably priced digital cameras, more amateur photographers, and stock photographs available for access online have led to the decline in photographer employment because more individuals and organizations are able to easily take and find photographs themselves (Department of Labor, 2019).

From 2016-2026, employment for self-employed photographers is expected to increase by 12 percent according to the U.S. Department of Labor (2019). Additionally, portrait photographers will still be in need as well as commercial photographers because corporations need professional-quality images for their advertisements (U.S. Department of Labor, 2019). Drone photography offers a different perspective to photography, so drone photographers will remain in demand (Department of Labor, 2019).

Because photographers need little training and experience, competition is strong for most positions as explained by the U.S. Department of Labor (2019). Also, instead of hiring their own photographers, many organizations work with freelance photographers, which makes it difficult to find salaried photography positions (U.S. Department of Labor, 2019).

Interview with Don Rogers at Ball State University in Muncie, Indiana

Don Rogers is a multimedia specialist for Ball State University's Marketing and Communications team. He is one of the photographers and videographers for *Ball State Magazine*, so he captures images of many Ball State events as well as students, faculty, and alumni. He obtained a bachelor's degree in journalism with a concentration in photojournalism from Ball State and has worked as a news, corporate, wedding, and portrait photographer. Don was interviewed by Calandra Weaver and Dr. Edward Lazaros on June 5, 2019. The interview questions along with Don's paraphrased responses are listed in the following sections:

1. What kinds of fun technology do photographers use?

Don (personal communication, June 5, 2019) explained that the cameras can use a Wi-Fi device called Case Air allowing pictures taken on the camera to be transferred to a smart phone. In Figure 1, Don holds a camera and a Case Air. The pictures are then edited quickly on a phone and distributed through email, which especially helps in urgent situations (D. Rogers, personal communication, June 5, 2019). For instance, at away football games, this technique is used to quickly distribute pictures (D. Rogers, personal communication, June 5, 2019). The Case Air attached to a camera along with the corresponding Case Air app on Don's phone are shown in Figure 2.

Figure 1: Don holds his camera and Case Air.



Figure 2: The Case Air attaches to Don's camera, and then, the images are transferred to his phone through the Case Air app.



Through shutter technology, modern cameras can capture motion and allow for a blur trail, which can create visually appealing dance images (D. Rogers, personal communication, June 5, 2019). The image consists of a painted-type blur with a very sharp image at the end (D. Rogers, personal communication, June 5, 2019). As pictured in Figure 3, Don (personal communication, June 5, 2019) uses a soft box umbrella to create a softer light with portrait images because it better captures the details of the subject and minimizes flaws. Then, in Figure 4, Don (personal communication, June 5, 2019) holds a 400mm lens which captures quick images and is best for capturing action shots at sporting events.

Figure 3: Don poses in front of a soft box umbrella which creates more flattering portraits.



Figure 4: Don holds a fast 400mm lens.



Photographers are basically computer operators who utilize modern technology (D. Rogers, personal communication, June 5, 2019). Technology allows photographers to select a mode that seems most appropriate depending on the nature of the shot, so they need visual experience to know how to select the most appropriate mode (D. Rogers, personal communication, June 5, 2019).

2. What do like best about your job?

Don (personal communication, June 5, 2019) says he enjoys the variety of his job because he never does the same thing from day to day. He explained that photo shoots can be very different than he expects beforehand, so he carries four portable flash units, or strobe lights, with him to every shoot because he does not know exactly what to expect (D. Rogers, personal communication, June 5, 2019). Don (personal communication, June 5, 2019) is pictured in Figure 5 holding a strobe light which has a miniature soft box attached to it. Don (personal communication, June 5, 2019) also has the opportunity to attend many important Ball State events, including commencement, sporting events, and alumni events. During 2018 and 2019, Don (personal communication, June 5, 2019) traveled and captured images for Ball State's Centennial Celebration Roadshows.

Figure 5: Don holds a strobe light with a miniature soft box attached to it.



3. What are the main challenges you have in your daily work?

According to Don (personal communication, June 5, 2019), it can be difficult to capture images in new and innovative ways. For instance, Beneficence is a commonly photographed statue on Ball State's campus, so it is Don's (personal communication, June 5, 2019) job to capture her in a way that makes her look different and will attract people. Additionally, it can be difficult to obtain access to certain locations where interesting shots can be taken and to collaborate with the people who can give him access to those locations (D. Rogers, personal communication, June 5, 2019).

4. How did you first get involved with photography?

Don (personal communication, June 5, 2019) began taking wedding pictures at as a teenager, and his first photography position was as a photographer for his local newspaper for which he captured local news events, such as car accidents and ribbon cuttings. The newspaper photographs were in black and white and had bad reproduction, so they needed to be photographed perfectly to appear clear enough in the newspaper (D. Rogers, personal communication, June 5, 2019). In Figure 6, he holds an old newspaper displaying one of his photographs. He also worked as a student photographer at Ball State, and later, he worked in freelance and as a corporate photographer (D. Rogers, personal communication, June 5, 2019).

Figure 6: Don shows a photograph he captured for his local newspaper.



5. What advice would you give someone interested in pursuing photography as a career?

Don (personal communication, June 5, 2019) explains that while he attended college, it was important for photography students to also have experience in writing, so he concentrated on both photography and writing. This helped him gain employment as a corporate photographer because he also wrote for the company (D. Rogers, personal communication, June 5, 2019). According to Don (personal communication, June 5, 2019), current photography students are expected to have additional experience in videography and audio because modern cameras additionally record videos and audio and because having additional experience in videography and audio can complement a photographer's images. Don (personal communication, June 5, 2019) said it is important to have photo-editing skills because he is expected to edit his own images. He also said writing skills are important because photographers need to tell the story related to the image (D. Rogers, personal communication, June 5, 2019).

As for beginning a photography career, Don (personal communication, June 5, 2019) stressed that new photographers need to make themselves visible, so they can do this through entrepreneurial skills, utilizing social media, and networking. According to Don (personal communication, June 5, 2019), his college degree helped him gain corporate employment. However, he continued to explain that making themselves visible and creating an amazing portfolio can help those interested gain employment (D. Rogers, personal communication, June 5, 2019).

Conclusion

A career in photography is something to consider for those who have creative, technical, and business skills. Creative and technical skills are needed to capture and edit photographs while business skills are needed for advertising and marketing themselves and for maintaining professionalism. Although employment for photographers in general is expected to decrease, there is potential for those who are hardworking and willing to be self-employed. There is also

potential for those interested in portrait, commercial, or drone photography. Those interested in a photography career may consider taking classes and begin to create a portfolio.

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