

This is one of a series of Fact Sheets on the photo imaging sector developed by industry experts to help people new to the sector understand the different job roles and the skills required in order to succeed. Fact Sheets are based on Job Profiles developed by Skillset. For the full list of *Job Profiles for the Audio Visual Industries*, visit www.skillset.org. We aim to keep this information as current as possible - a fully updated version will be available in the Winter of 2006. All Fact Sheets can be downloaded and printed from our website www.skillset.org/careers. To give us feedback, e-mail careers@skillset.org.

Working as an Assistant Photographer is one of the best routes into a career in professional photography. Assistant Photographers have the opportunity to learn on the job from a practicing professional, without having to shoulder the full responsibility of running a business and producing professional quality images before they are ready.

While leading photographers or photographic studios may employ several, not all photographers can afford a full-time Assistant. Working as a freelance Assistant Photographer to a pool of professionals may therefore be the best way to maintain regular employment. It also offers the opportunity to observe at close hand the working practices of a number of different photographers, which further enhances the training process.

The work

Assistant Photographers must be prepared to do whatever is necessary to ensure that a photographic shoot runs smoothly. This typically involves ordering film, preparing sets, checking that all equipment is functioning, setting up lighting and accessories, taking meter readings, and transporting film and prints to and from the laboratories.

When working from a studio, an Assistant will help out with the general administration of the studio, keeping the sets clean and tidy and printing photographs as required. They should keep records of the film stock, exposures, lighting set-ups, as well as the names and details of art directors, models, stylists, animal handlers and other contributors. Assistants may also be expected to download and optimise digital files, to scan film and to assist with image manipulation and enhancement. When clients are present during a shoot, it is the Assistant Photographer's job to entertain them, and to shield the photographer from unnecessary interference or interruption.

On location, the Assistant's duties may involve making a technical recce and assessment of the site in advance, checking for vehicle access, power and communications facilities. They will often organise transport, catering and accommodation, set up equipment, and source a local laboratory or reliable courier.

High-profile photographers sometimes employ several Assistant Photographers who are then known as First Assistant, Second Assistant, and so on. Here, duties will be divided between the various assistants at the discretion of the photographer. In most cases, the First Assistant is likely to provide direct support to the Photographer on set, while the Second Assistant assists with production and general administration.

Essential knowledge and skills

Assistant Photographers will be expected to have a good grounding in all creative and technical aspects of photography, set construction and lighting. They will also be expected to have a friendly and positive attitude and be able to anticipate the needs and requirements of the photographer.

As well as being organised and practical, they should have excellent communication and interpersonal skills, be able to foresee and evaluate potential problems, and deal with the unexpected in a calm and efficient manner. Assistant Photographers must possess good office skills, a polite and helpful telephone manner, be able to demonstrate keen attention to detail, and a willingness to learn.

Now that digital photography is becoming common in studios, an Assistant should know how to operate digital cameras and scanning equipment. They should also be aware of the different tools and techniques of image manipulation and enhancement; and be conversant with digital communications and the benefits to clients in terms of faster turnaround times at every stage of production.



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Training and qualifications

Though some photographers are happy to employ Assistant Photographers with little or no work experience, most prefer that applicants have some form of formal photographic training or previous experience in photography or advertising before seeking work as an Assistant. A good technical grounding in photography not only enables the Assistant to understand the necessary preparation, execution and presentation of the job, but also to meet with clients, art directors, models and other contributors and understand their discussions with the photographer.

A college qualification cannot guarantee employment, but courses which run effective work placement schemes help students gain valuable work experience and make industry contacts before they graduate. The Professional Qualifying Examination (PQE) offered by the BIPP (British Institute of Professional Photography) has a good reputation with employers. It is usually linked to an HND course, leading to a degree as well as the PQE. Prospective employers normally expect to see a portfolio of photographs – this should be well presented and consist of 10 to 15 photographs, that reveal a broad range of skills and competencies.

Well established photographers or studios often support work-based qualifications, such as Apprenticeships and NVQ/SVQs. Apprenticeships are available in Photo Imaging, incorporating Key Skills, a Technical Certificate (C&G 6924), and an NVQ at level 2 or 3. NVQ/SVQs are available at levels 2, 3 and 4 in Photography, levels 2, 3 and 4 in Digital Imaging, and levels 3 and 4 in Digital Photography & Imaging. Assistant Photographers will be expected to possess a full, clean EU driving licence.

Membership of a professional association such as the British Institute of Professional Photography (BIPP), the Association of Photographers (AOP) and the Society of Wedding & Portrait Photographers (SWPP) may also be beneficial. The BIPP and the SWPP offer a range of qualifications, usually awarded after portfolio submission, enabling a candidate to benchmark their skills against other successful practitioners working in the industry.

Health and Safety

Assistant Photographers are likely to be subject to physical stresses from carrying heavy camera equipment and lighting indoors and out, in all seasons, come rain or shine. They should therefore seek advice about appropriate techniques for lifting and moving equipment. In addition, they need to understand Health and Safety legislation and be capable of assessing and managing the risks and potential dangers associated with the use of electrical lighting, equipment and props. Freelancers should make sure that there is a current Public Liability insurance policy to cover their working activities, or that they have their own policy in place.

Where to go for more information

Skillset is the Sector Skills Council for the Audio Visual Industries. For information about training and professional qualifications, links to the Skillset network of training partners, and access to the comprehensive Skillset course database, visit www.skillset.org
Skillset Careers is the UK's only specialist media careers advice service delivering individual career solutions when and how you need them. For detailed media careers information and advice, contact one of the free careers helplines. Call **08080 300 900** in England (also available to callers from Wales and Northern Ireland) or **0808 100 8094** in Scotland, or visit the website www.skillset.org/careers

The British Institute of Professional Photography (BIPP) is a not for profit association of professional image makers that aims to improve standards, develop skills and encourage continuing professional development. The BIPP recognise over thirty colleges across the UK who have proved that they have the resources, facilities and expert lecturers necessary to run an effective professional photographic course. For details of BIPP Qualifications for practising professionals, visit the Membership pages on the BIPP website www.bipp.com. For a list of approved colleges, including those offering the PQE, e-mail mberry@bipp.com. Student membership is available to students attending a vocational course in photography at an educational establishment in the UK. The Institute's journal *The Photographer* is supplied free to all members. **T: 01920 464011**

The Association of Photographers (AOP) is a trade association of professional photographers, who campaign vigorously for photographers' rights and have had a key influence on the development of professional photography in the UK. Their publication *Beyond the Lens* is widely recognised as the definitive industry guide to copyright and licensing law, ethics and business practice. The AOP has a number of affiliated colleges and promotes, maintains and develops relationships between education and the professional industry. It also publishes *IMAGE* magazine, which reports on current trends in professional photography and image making.
www.the-aop.org T: 020 7739 6669

The Royal Photographic Society (RPS) is the industry's 'learned body'. Established over 150 years ago, it aims to promote the art and science of Photography. It awards distinctions that are recognised throughout the world and has established specialist interest groups, and meetings for its members, who are drawn from both amateur and professional photographers. It publishes a monthly Journal. **www.rps.org**