

TV INDUSTRY PERSONNEL

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ABOVE-THE-LINE vs BELOW-THE-LINE

TV production personnel are usually categorized as either *above-the-line* or *below-the-line*. Creative personnel such as producers, writers, directors, and actors are classified as *above-the-line*, while technical personnel such as camera, audio, TD, VTR, grip, and gaffer are classified as *below-the-line*. Although it may appear as if this is a delineation between “creative” and “technical” jobs, it is actually done merely for accounting purposes on a TV show’s budget. Below-the-line personnel are usually paid a **fixed** salary or set wage based on their union’s contract, while above-the-line personnel usually work on **negotiable** salaries that are much higher than their union’s minimum wage. Just about any camera operator or audio technician is going to cost about the same rate, whereas the salary for a particular actor or director can vary significantly depending on the salary a particular actor or director can command.

As such, a TV production’s below-the-line costs can be figured out fairly easily based on the mere number of technical personnel needed for the production, where as the same show’s above-the-line costs can vary astronomically depending on the particular individual actors, directors, and writers hired for the program. Marlon Brando would command a much higher salary to star in a program than Henry Winkler. Judith Krantz would command a much higher salary to write a TV mini-series than the writers on *Melrose Place*. Likewise, Steven Spielberg would command a much higher salary to direct than the guy who directed the “Maxercise Creme” commercial.

ABOVE-THE-LINE PERSONNEL

1. Executive Producer - the *owner of the TV program* and as such, the *ultimate authority for the project*. Sometimes the executive producer is merely the money or the “*bank*” *behind the project* and has very little creative input or interest in the project. The main interest is *managerial concern for a financially profitable project*. Executive producers usually hire a team of qualified producers, directors, and writers to take care of the creative aspects of the TV program. If you were having a house built for you, you would be considered the executive producer since you would have the ultimate authority over whom you hire as your architect, general contractor, and subcontractors, and you are also responsible for paying all of the wages for the workers as well as all the bills for all of the materials to build the house. Executive producers do not belong to any unions or professional guilds because they are management. (*Try to name the executive producers of some of your favorite TV shows*).
2. Producer (PGA) - hired by the executive producer to be *in charge of the creative quality of the TV show*. The producer is similar in nature to the *architect* who designs your house, but who does none of the actual work of building the house. The producer will hire a director to serve as the general contractor to be in charge of the daily responsibilities on the set, but the director normally must answer to the producer in regard to overall quality and progress of a particular episode of the TV series. Producers are hired because they know the best directors, writers, music directors, and art directors to hire for a project, and they also know how to coordinate and “*work with*” these creative artists for optimum results. In the end it is the producer who is *responsible for the overall quality of the finished product*, and it is the producer who must answer to the executive producer.
3. Associate/Assistant Producer (AP) - assists the producer in any manner needed. Some producers have a lot of responsibility in coordinating the creative aspects of the show, while other AP’s are merely glorified secretaries that assist in coordinating schedules, telephones, and contracts in non-creative, clerical roles. Since this is usually a non-union job, an AP can make as little as minimum wage for working a 60-hour week, or, if the individual is well-liked and valued by the producer, command a very handsome salary. Friends and relatives of the producer who start out as AP’s usually get good salaries, while unknowns usually get paid peanuts until they can prove their value on the job to the producer.

4. Director (DGA) - is hired by the producer or executive producer to be *in charge of coordinating the daily responsibilities on the set for the shooting of the actual program episode*. The director's role is similar in nature to the *general contractor* who is in charge of directing at the construction site the masons, carpenters, plumbers, and electricians who will actually build your house. Although in movie or film production the director is primarily responsible for coaching or "getting the performance out of the actors", *in television the director is more concerned with "calling the shots" in the control room during production*, rather than actually working with the actors. In other words, a movie director typically sits in the canvass chair on the set directing the actors and action through a megaphone, while *a TV director sits in the control room away from the set and calls for the TD (Technical Director) to take various camera shots through a PL (Private Line) headset to electronically edit the show in real time*. In film style production, the director just has one camera shot at a time to worry about, while in TV production, the director has at least four cameras shooting at once during a typical sit-com, newscast, or talk show. In sports broadcasts, however, a director may have as many as 12 cameras from which to select or up to 25 cameras during an event such as the Super Bowl.
5. Lighting Director (IBEW) - primarily responsible *lighting the set on TV show*. Unlike a director of photography or cinematographer in film who is intimately involved in camera placement, framing, depth of field, camera movement, and lighting of each shot, *the TV lighting director is concerned mainly with lighting a particular set that is used repeatedly on a show*, or lighting the set for a particular production number or musical act on a show. TV lighting directors work predominately in a studio and rarely work outdoors on location.
6. Art Director (SMPTAD-IATSE) - primarily responsible for the *"look" of show which is the result of the set design, props, costuming, and make-up*. Most art directors specialize in certain types of shows such as sit-coms, soap operas, game shows, talk shows, or newscasts. Although an art director will hire other specialists (or subcontractors) to handle each aspect of costuming, make-up, set dressing, set construction, and special effects, the art director is responsible for delivering the overall *"look"* of the show desired by the producers.
7. Casting Director (CSA) - primarily responsible for *finding the right actor for the part*. Instead of having the director and producers sit through long hours of "cattle calls", producers hire casting directors for their expertise in *presenting an appropriate selection of qualified actors who would be good for various parts in a series or particular episode*. Casting directors usually know better than directors and producers which actors are qualified for certain parts, what the individual actor's range is, and which actors are available to play certain parts. By limiting the producers' choices to a pre-screened "A List" of talent, the production saves much time and money in auditioning actors, and usually ends up with much better actors for the parts in the show.
8. Actors (SAG) (AFTRA) - are referred to in the industry as *"talent"* and are primarily responsible or *supplying the dialogue and visual action in front of the camera* for the film. In fact, any one whose voice or body appears on camera is considered "talent" whether he or she has any or not. Actors traditionally take their orders from the director (except for some actors who are big enough in the business to tell the director what to do). TV actors are provided their dialogue from the script and are coached in their delivery by the director. Most actors belong to both SAG and AFTRA so that they may work in front of both television cameras and film cameras. An actor must belong to the Screen Actors Guild (SAG) in order to work on TV shows shot on film such as *Melrose Place*, *Seinfeld* and *Star Voyager*. Conversely, an actor must belong to the American Federation of Television and Radio Artists (AFTRA) in order to work on shows that are shot on video tape such as *Roseanne*, *Married: With Children*, *Home Improvement*, and *General Hospital*
9. Writer (WGA) - primarily responsible for *writing the script or teleplay which contains the show's dialogue or spoken lines*. Various episodes of a TV series are usually written by different writers. This includes the plot (story) and dialogue for the episode. Although unknowns can sell story ideas to the show, the final script and final script and writing credit is almost always given to the staff writers on the show.

10. Music Director (ASCAP) - is primarily responsible for *composing and/or arranging a TV show's music*. Although the show's theme song is usually written by another composer, a show's music director is primarily responsible for composing and arranging the show's music scores and bumpers. On a talk show such as Letterman or Leno, the music director is responsible for selecting, arranging, and conducting the musical accompaniment for the show.
11. Production Assistant (PA) - assists just about anyone during a production. Again, a PA can serve a very important role in some productions, or merely perform menial tasks such as running errands, photocopying scripts, or making deliveries all over town. Depending on the production and the particular producer for whom the PA works, the job is sometimes an above-the-line position with a good salary. This, of course, is in situations in which the PA performs vital and highly-valued a particular producer. In most situations, however, PA's work 60-80 hours a week for a very low salary, and to add insult to injury, they are usually on-call 24 hours a day and have to use their own vehicles to perform the errands and deliveries for the production. A male PA is sometimes called a "gofer" (*go for this; go for that*), --while a female PA is called a "honeydo" (*honey, do this; honey, do that*). Although PA's are almost at the bottom of the production crew hierarchy (just a notch above a "runner"), they often climb the ladder over the years to become associate producers and producers. As such, there is a wise saying in the industry that most actors, writers, directors, and production crew heed, and that is, "Be nice to the PA" because the little PA serving you coffee right now could be the producer you are working for ten years from now.

BELOW-THE-LINE PERSONNEL

1. Assistant Director (AD) (DGA) - assists the director in the control room by *reading camera shots, timing scripts, and coordinating cues, or on the set by coordinating the extras in the scene*. Becoming an AD is not a stepping stone to becoming a director. AD's are specifically trained to work with extras and not actors. Several AD's usually assist a director on TV shows that are shot on location.
2. Technical Director (TD) (NABET) (IA) - *executes the director's commands by selecting and mixing various cameras and video sources on the switcher (SEG) to go out over-the-air or to the master video tape recorder (VTR)*. The TD performs the fades, dissolves, cuts, keys, and electronic special effects such as wipes, chroma keys, and DVE that are used to electronically edit and combine the various video sources for a show.
3. Camera Operator (NABET) (IA) - primarily responsible for *framing the shot, focusing the shot, zooming in or out, and performing any camera moves on-the-air such as pan, tilt, dolly, truck, arc, pedestal, or tongue*. Camera operators usually have their particular shots written on the script for scripted shows such as sit-coms, soaps, and newscasts; or they have an assigned area or type of shot for unscripted programs such as talk shows and sports broadcasts.
4. Audio Technician (NABET) (IA) - primarily responsible for *miking, mixing, and sweetening the audio for a program*. Unlike movies, most TV shows use the "live" audio recorded on the set. As such, *miking* is very important for the overall quality of a show. On talk shows, the guests usually have wireless lapel mikes clipped to their shirts, while the host of the show uses a wireless hand-held mike to speak and gather responses from the studio audience. Singers typically use hand-held mikes, sportscasters use headset mikes, and newscasters use lapel mikes. In soap operas and sit-coms, the two boom mike operators on the set must get the best possible microphone placement for optimum sound pick-up without showing up in the shot or casting a shadow in the shot. *Mixing* refers to the balance between the dialogue and the music score in a drama, or the balance between the sportscaster's voice and the crowd noise during a baseball game. On talk shows such as Ricki Lake, the audio tech may have to balance 10-12 separate microphone feeds from screaming guests in relation to the host's microphone. In *audio sweetening*, the audio tech adds pre-recorded laugh tracks and applause tracks to the soundtrack of a sit-com to make the show funnier and more exciting. Even though most of these shows are shot before a live studio audience, all of the laughter and applause you hear in the program when it is aired on TV come not from the live performance, but from prerecorded tracks orchestrated with a mixture of various carts in the sweetening process.

5. Character Generator (CG) (NABET) (IA) - primarily responsible for *operating the CG or Chyron which produces the electronic titles and graphics used in a show* such as the roll credits at the end of a show, the key cards to identify people on a talk show, the score and statistics keyed over the picture during a sportscast, and the graphics used in newscasts.
6. Video Editor (NABET) (IA) - is primarily responsible for *electronically editing on video tape program segments, news stories, promos, and movie teasers and separators for block conforming*. On-line editors perform the technical operations of assembling a program according to the creative decisions of the directors, producers, or their assistants. Off-line editors are sometimes hired by the producers to make more of the creative decisions in regard to the artistic aspects of editing a program. As such, off-line editors make many of the creative decisions for the Edit Decision List (EDL) that the on-line editor will follow to technically assemble the actual master tape for the program.
7. Video Engineer (NABET) (IBEW) - primarily responsible for *maintenance and repair of all equipment used in production, master control operations, and transmission via satellite, microwave, and over-the-air broadcast*. Of all TV personnel, video engineers are in the highest demand. They are paid quite well and can always get a job. This job, however, requires extensive training in electronics which is not covered in most TV degree programs in college.
8. Floor Manager/Stage Director (DGA) - primarily responsible for *coordinating the action on the set or stage by relaying the director's commands to the crew and talent via hand signals*. Since the TV director is usually in a control room separated from the actors and crew on the set, the floor manager coordinates the work on stage by relaying the director's commands to the people on the set. Although the director can speak to the Floor Manager via the PL line headset feed during a taping, the Floor Manager must communicate to the stage personnel via hand signals since his or her voice would pick up on the live microphones during the taping.
9. Grip (Stage Hand) (IA) - primarily responsible for *moving and erecting scenery, flats and props on the set*. Since union regulations are very strict in regard to these matters, only grips are allowed to touch these particular items. If anyone else handles or moves these items on the set, a union grievance or possible walkout could occur. As such, if a polite cameraman helps a grip move a heavy prop, it could cause big problems for both of them as well as the production.
10. Gaffer (Electrician) (IBEW) - primarily responsible for *handling lighting instruments, dimmers, cables, generators, and other electrical equipment*. Just as a gaffer is not allowed to touch scenery or props, a grip is not allowed to touch any lighting equipment.
11. Unit Manager (IA) - is primarily responsible for *coordinating the logistical aspects for support services of the production such as transportation, food, lodging, location clearances, union contracts, etc.* A unit manager or production manager is very similar in nature to a "travel agent" for the production. Although it is not one of the "glamour" positions in the industry, it is still a very important function for the success of the production. Good unit managers are usually in high demand and the pay is quite lucrative.
12. Runner - primarily responsible for *running errands and making tape and script deliveries*. The lowest job in the TV industry hierarchy, being a runner is usually one's first job in television. Runners are non union and are usually paid little more than minimum wage. Job qualifications include: 1) speak English; 2) have a valid driver's license; 3) have a car in running condition; and 4) be able to work long hours for little pay with only the hope of someday being promoted to a PA position.