
Your Bottom Line

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Alternatives to independence

Desire to escape routine and 8-to-5 job restrictions encourages many professionals to open their own photography studios. Unfortunately, many of these new entrepreneurs soon discover that being "your own boss" doesn't live up to expectations.

Most independent photographers quickly forget the luxury of a 40-hour work week, and their financial security can ebb and flow like the wind. They have an infinitely heavier load of responsibilities, including those of hiring and managing other employees. If payday comes around and there isn't enough cash for paychecks, it is the owner who must dig into his or her own pocket for the money. If keeping the business afloat requires borrowing, the owner signs the loan papers with a personal guarantee. In some cases, a studio owner can work so many hours per week that his or her hourly pay falls below minimum wage.

Being the boss does have advantages, but these must be carefully weighed against considerable obligations that accompany such a position. After placing everything on the scales, many photographers find they are not suited to owning and operating a studio. These individuals would be far better off working for someone else.

The photo industry offers many jobs for experienced professional photographers—and for newcomers anxious to learn and willing to work hard. Possibilities include working for an independent studio or large photographic portrait chain such as Olan Mills, representing major color labs, selling amateur and professional products, teaching, and working for the media.

The photographic industry is broad and diversified—no qualified and energetic image-maker need go unemployed or underemployed. Photographers must, however, view their worth as employees in proper perspective. Before demanding a large salary, find an opportunity to prove yourself to potential employers.

Working for an independent photographer is one often-overlooked option for professionals. A majority of "mom and pop" studios operate terribly inefficient-

ly, with the studio camera room empty most of the time and the lab equipment running only a few hours per day. This happens because the owners do not have time to produce more work. But since they pay the same rent and overhead whether they photograph five or 20 sittings per day, hiring an employee to bring in and serve additional customers could generate much more money than it would cost.

In my conversations with other independent photographers, the need for good help is often mentioned. Many established studio owners are willing to hire even inexperienced assistants for \$15,000 per year, with potential to quickly move into the \$25,000-\$30,000 range. Obviously, jobs exist for photographers who can prove themselves hard-working and valuable to employers.

Despite this need for good help, few partially or fully trained photographers advertise their qualifications in the classified section of the newspaper. Advertising and asking for appointments with studio owners may provide chances for professionals to prove their value. Don't demand high pay at the very beginning. Instead, tell the studio owner you want to work and are willing to take any amount of pay he or she can offer at first. Such a proposal may land you a job, since owners often encounter inexperienced applicants who demand unjustifiably high salaries.

Working for a major national studio chain with department store or neighborhood locations is a misunderstood and underestimated opportunity. While these companies often pay photographers minimum wage, they also offer a very attractive commission structure. Most of these operations, battling poor-quality photography and low sales, pay photographers a flexible commission to encourage higher returns. As sales increase, the percentage of commission also increases, and a "hot" photographer can do very well. A friend of mine with no experience in photography worked for a traveling portrait studio that set up in department

stores, and earned between \$200 and \$800 per week plus expenses.

Non-senior school photography is another employment choice that can offer high pay, plus long vacations during the off season. I know a number of school photographers who net \$50,000 to \$100,000 per year. They work hard during their busy period photographing 500 to 700 students per day, but also enjoy months of relaxation or pursuit of other work.

For employment that is more steady year-round, an area to consider is photographic product sales. Retail sales personnel are often incompetent, causing photo store owners to seek knowledgeable professionals with sales ability. The work usually does not extend past normal closing time, and pay can be substantial.

Photographic equipment manufacturers also need experienced sales people, and possibilities are endless for employees who enjoy traveling. Large manufacturers such as Nikon or Canon hire representatives to cover an entire state or region. Smaller companies, such as those that manufacture professional lighting equipment, may employ a single salesperson to service a quarter of the country. Despite the traveling, salespeople normally return home for weekends and can make \$25,000-\$70,000 per year.

For professionals who love photography, work hard, and develop special skills, endless job options and rewards await. In this diverse business, there is more than one way to generate a healthy bottom line. 