

Jobs in weddings and funerals: Working with the betrothed and the bereaved

by Elka Maria Torpey

What could be more different from a wedding than a funeral? At first blush, these two events might seem dissimilar. But if you think about it, they have a lot in common—especially when it comes to the work involved.

“A funeral carries a lot of the same functions as a wedding,” says funeral director Diana Kurz. “In many ways, they’re so much alike.” For example, both bring family and friends together, and each often involves a ceremony followed by a reception.

“It’s all tied through the idea of celebration,” adds funeral director Randy Molloy. The natures of the celebrations differ, but many of the tasks required to carry out the two events are the same. Similar tasks mean similar work for those whose jobs relate to betrothal or bereavement or, perhaps, both.

This article explores careers in weddings and funerals. The first section describes the industries and what they do and don’t have in common. The next section focuses on three event-related occupational areas: planning and management, catering, and floral design. A final section suggests other areas of employment overlap, along with sources of more information.

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For attendees, these are very different events. But for workers, weddings and funerals require similar tasks.

Similar work, different occasions

Weddings and funerals are big-ticket events in many people's lives. According to the Association of Bridal Consultants, the average cost of a wedding is more than \$27,000. People spend about one-fourth that amount on funerals, according to the National Funeral Directors Association—but even at an average of \$6,500, the amount is significant.

That spending translates into jobs for the people who make the events happen. In May 2005, the deathcare services industry employed about 136,000 wage-and-salary workers throughout the country, according to data from the U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics (BLS). BLS doesn't collect data on the wedding industry, but anecdotal evidence suggests that it employs large numbers of workers as well.

Common conditions

Workers in the wedding and funeral industries have some working conditions in common. Self-employment, nonstandard schedules, and stress are most prevalent.

Self-employment. Self-employment is more common among workers in these industries, especially in the wedding industry, than for U.S. workers as a whole.

About 11 percent of people across all industries worked for themselves in the United States in 2006, according to BLS. In comparison, about 80 percent of workers in the wedding industry are self-employed, estimates Richard Markel, director of the Association for Wedding Professionals International. Workers in funeral-related occupations do not have as high an incidence of self-employment. But BLS data suggest that funeral directors, for example, were more than twice as likely as U.S. workers overall to be self-employed in 2006. These data include both the incorporated and unincorporated self-employed.

Nearly all of the occupations discussed in this article can involve working for yourself. (See the box on page 41 for tips on starting a business.)

Schedules. Nonstandard work schedules are another similarity of jobs related to weddings and funerals. Many—but not all—workers in these industries are on the clock at times when others are off. “You work on holidays. You work at night,” says Laura Soll, a public relations specialist for the Connecticut Funeral Directors Association. “If you're someone who wants a 9-to-5 job, it's probably not for you.”

As is the case for workers in any industry, those in wedding- and funeral-related jobs vary in their preference for a nonstandard schedule. “Some people like it,”

says Leanne Kessler, owner of the Floral Design Institute, “and others resent it.”

Stress. Jobs in these industries can be stressful, say workers. Cakemaker and caterer Donna Nemecek explains one source of the pressure. “A wedding is a huge event in the life of your customers, and they expect perfection,” she says.

Funerals create similarly challenging expectations. “There’s only one chance to celebrate a person’s life like you do at a funeral,” says funeral director Kurz. “You want everything to be perfect, every single time.”

Different dynamics

In many ways, these industries are not alike, even with their similarities. The work required for weddings and funerals differs in focus, timeframe, and complexity.

Focus. Weddings are celebratory, and funerals are sad—or so traditional perceptions held. Weddings are still considered celebrations. But now, funerals are increasingly seen this way, too. The difference is in the focus of both events: Weddings mark the beginning of a couple’s future; funerals commemorate a person’s past.

With their forward focus, weddings tend to be more cheerful than funerals. And because of their upbeat nature, they usually provide employment options that funerals do not. Musicians or disk jockeys, for example, help to enhance a wedding’s festivities, and photographers and videographers capture its memories. “It’s an absolutely fun industry, and that’s probably why a lot of people get into it,” says Markel. “These people overwhelmingly say that they got into the business to celebrate life.”

Workers in the funeral industry also celebrate life, but in a more reflective manner. “You’re starting to see, more and more, these workers creating the most meaningful way to remember a person’s life,” says Kurz. Showing collections of photos or a DVD of a person’s life is one such way to reminisce. But the increased emphasis on representing a life lived doesn’t change the hardship for those who’ve lost a loved one. Helping those who mourn keeps the funeral industry distinct.

Timeframe. The amount of time that workers have to arrange either event also differentiates weddings from funerals, with weddings typically allowing more time for

preparation than funerals. And time constraints affect everything from flowers to food. “For a wedding, a week to 10 days before the event is usually the optimal time to start ordering flowers,” says floral designer Tim Farrell. “For a funeral, you usually have less time, so you need to know what’s readily available.”

Funeral director Molloy agrees that the time factor separates his job from that of wedding planners. “Yes, I make arrangements for limos and florists. Yes, I call caterers,” he says. “But it’s all done in 2 to 3 days, not 6 months to a year.”



Wedding and funeral work misconceptions

People often have preconceived ideas about jobs involved with weddings and funerals. But insiders know that some of these ideas are off the mark. To clear up a few common misconceptions, read what the experts say.

Misconception: Wedding work is glamorous.

Fact: Work in the wedding industry isn't as idyllic as people often think. "It's seen as one of those glamorous jobs, but it's not all that," says wedding planner Shelby Tuck-Horton of her occupation. "We work long hours. Sometimes, it seems like I'm doing the same things all the time. And at the wedding, we're there to work. We're not there to party with the guests."

Wedding planner Christine Gerlach feels the same way. "It's fun, and I love it, but it's not glamorous," she says. "There is a lot of hard work and research involved."

In the wedding industry, as in many others, some workers find success; others do not. "It's not easy, and it's not about making money," says wedding planner Paulette Davis. But for Davis and workers like her, turning other people's dreams into reality is its own reward.

Misconception: Work in funeral services is all about death and grieving.



Fact: Funerals involve death and grieving, but they're about much more than that. "There's the stereotype that it's all sad and black," says Colleen Murphy Klein of the

National Funeral Directors Association. "But it's really about working with families."

Funeral director Randy Molloy agrees. "It's not a sad profession," he says. "A funeral can be about a person who's died, but our job is for the living." Molloy enjoys what he does, in part because it's a chance to see the good side of people and to support them through a difficult time.

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Complexity. Weddings are usually larger and more elaborate than funerals, and that makes some tasks more complex. For a wedding, workers might need to create formal seating charts, more varied floral arrangements, or more extensive menus, for example.

Workers in the funeral industry also deal with details, but the challenge of the work more often centers on helping people cope with loss.

But in both industries, it is clients' gratitude that makes the effort worthwhile. "There's nothing more rewarding than having the family come back and say, 'That was beautiful,'" says Kurz.

Jobs related to "I do" and "Goodbye"

When Ann Nola made arrangements recently for both a wedding and a funeral in her family, she realized that the occasions involved many of the same tasks. "I was surprised by the similarities," says Nola, director of the Association of Certified Professional Wedding Consultants. Both events, for example, required an officiant to conduct the ceremony, and both required the coordination of many details, such as arranging for flowers, music, transportation, and guest accommodations.

Wedding association director Markel also has observed parallels between the work—and the workers—needed for weddings and funerals. "Not long ago, I met a woman who works for a funeral association, and we found that we have a lot in common," he says. "Our associations even have some of the same members." Floral designers and workers who release doves are among those who belong to both groups.

Of course, some occupations are specific to either weddings or funerals. Videographers, for example, digitally record events and most often work at weddings. Embalmers prepare the body of the deceased and are exclusive to funeral services.

This section presents three categories of work associated with both weddings and funerals: planning and event management, catering, and floral design. It focuses on the occupations and highlights their job duties, employment and working conditions, earnings and outlook, and skill and training requirements. Where applicable, distinctions are noted between specific wedding- or funeral-related tasks.

Wedding planners and funeral directors

Planning a wedding or a funeral, especially a large one, can often seem overwhelming to individuals or families. To help arrange all the details, many people turn to wedding planners or funeral directors.

Both wedding planners and funeral directors first meet with clients to help them determine what they want the event to be. Some people have no idea, in part because the options are numerous. “My job is to educate clients about the whole wide world of weddings,” says wedding planner Shelby Tuck-Horton. “I help them decide what they want.” Similarly, funeral director Kurz says that she talks to families at length to help them figure out their preferences. Cost is a factor for many people, so wedding planners and funeral directors also assist clients in establishing a budget for the event.

After priorities and price tags are set, wedding planners and funeral directors work to make the events happen. They communicate with vendors, negotiate contracts, and determine the logistics of what happens when. As event managers, they oversee each aspect of their events to ensure that everything goes smoothly.

Because many funeral directors and wedding planners work for themselves, they also have other tasks in common. Among these are marketing, managing staff, and accounting and bookkeeping. The planning and directing duties specific to their jobs are described below.

Planning weddings. Identifying the workers who plan weddings can be complicated, in part because there are so few required standards—and so many possible job titles. For example, according to David Wood, president of the Association of Bridal Consultants, wedding planners, bridal consultants, and wedding coordinators all do basically the same thing.

But within the industry, job definitions can vary. For example, some bridal consultants—such as those who help couples set up gift registries at department stores—have little to do with planning a wedding. Other planners, consultants, and coordinators are involved with planning but don’t work directly for the hosts of the event. For purposes of this article, wedding planners are a specific type of event planner: those who specialize in nuptial events and are employed by the bride, the groom, or the families.

“We are different because our job is to work for the bride and groom,” says planner Christine Gerlach of Austin, Texas. “If a button falls off a tux, we sew it on.”

Additional tasks might include helping the bride shop for a dress or making recommendations for a reception site.

Wedding planners like Gerlach commonly offer three levels of service: a comprehensive level, where the planner organizes the majority of the event; a partial level, where the bride arranges some details and the planner arranges others; and day-of services, where the planner helps out on or shortly before the wedding day.

Experienced planners involved in making arrangements from start to finish might spend 100 hours or more on a wedding; planners just starting out often spend even longer. Because most planners deal with an array of vendors and details over a long time, they need to set a schedule of what to do when, especially if they’re juggling arrangements for more than one event. Partial-level or day-of services require less time.

Unlike most brides, wedding planners don’t always count the hours in anticipation of the big day. Still, most do look forward to the culmination of their work. “The best part is when the bride walks down the aisle,” says planner Tanya Porter. “It’s magical to see the look on the groom’s face.”

Directing funerals. The essential duties of funeral directors extend beyond organizing and orchestrating an event. Funeral directors see their primary role as that of a caregiver. They provide both general and specific support in many ways. “We’re caring for the deceased, but we’re also caring for the family,” says Kurz. “It offers a whole new set of services, which is really wonderful.”

Kurz and other funeral directors help families with important details, such as filing the death certificate or finding ways to pay for bereavement services. They might even perform the funeral service. When necessary, these workers make referrals to other professionals, including accountants, counselors, and social workers.

“If people need to go to probate court, you go with them,” says Molloy. “If they need you to help call the bank or real estate agent, you do it.” And some funeral directors follow up with family members after the funeral to see how they’re dealing with their grief. Because they are familiar with the mourning process, these workers can provide reassurance to clients along with comfort. “Sometimes,” Molloy says, “all they need is to be told that what they’re going through is normal.”

Although working with the family is important, handling the body of the deceased is also the funeral director’s job. Some families opt for embalming, which

involves cleaning and temporarily preserving the corpse. Many funeral directors manage this part of their jobs by concentrating on the service they are providing. “It can be unpleasant, but not necessarily,” says Molloy. “Knowing that you’re helping a family can help you get through it.” Others enjoy, and even choose to focus on, the technical aspects of embalming. Laura Soll of the Connecticut Funeral Directors Association describes a large part of the work’s appeal: “It’s like giving the person a tribute.” Embalming isn’t required of all funeral directors, but most need to learn how to do it.

Dealing so closely with the deceased and the deceased’s loved ones often gives funeral directors a sense of kinship with their clients. “You become almost a part of the family somehow,” says Kurz. “Working with the families and providing guidance and support is what we’re about.”

Employment and working conditions. According to BLS, funeral directors held about 22,000 wage-and-salary jobs in 2005; many others were self-employed. Most of these positions, says Molloy, are in small, family-run funeral homes. BLS doesn’t collect data on wedding planners, but industry sources estimate that there are about 10,000 full-fledged wedding planners and about 5,000 more who do just a few weddings each year. And, they estimate, most wedding planners are self-employed.

Those who work part time, doing a few weddings a year, might also organize other events—such as meetings and conventions—as their primary job. Others hold positions unrelated to event planning. “Most people start out part time,” says Wood, “because it’s kind of a complementary business to the 9-to-5 job.”

Gerlach says that she started her wedding planning business while working full-time for an insurance company. She had a degree in education and, during college, had gained event-planning experience as social chair of her sorority. “I never intended for it to become a full-time job,” she says of planning weddings. But now, she’s so busy with her business that she hardly has time for anything else.

Wedding planners and funeral directors usually work indoors, but they also travel to meet with clients and vendors or to visit event sites. Their schedules vary. “Our busiest times are from March until November,” says Tuck-Horton of planning weddings. During this busy time of wedding preparations, full-time planners

Misconception: Wedding planning is a great career for young workers.

Fact: Men and women of all ages can make a career of planning weddings. But, experts say, older workers—not younger ones—often fare better in this line of work. “This is an industry where I feel age is a plus,” says wedding planner Tanya Porter. Wedding planner Karrol Pinney agrees. “Moms are wary of hiring someone to plan a wedding who is the same age as their daughter and who has never been married herself,” she says.

Pinney’s advice? Get started early, but hold off on working solo. “It’s best to spend your twenties working for another planner, or at least in the wedding field, for a larger organization,” she says. A job at a hotel or reception facility, for example, can be a good way for future planners to gain wedding exposure.

Misconception: Funeral directors are morbid.

Fact: Most funeral directors are outgoing and people-oriented, not somber and obsessed with death.



They strive to make people feel comfortable with an uncomfortable topic, but typically, they aren’t drawn to the macabre any more than the average person. In fact,

their ordinariness is often an occupational advertisement. “When people deal with a funeral director and find out that it’s a normal person doing a job,” says Molloy, “they become interested in the career.”

What calls many funeral directors to their occupation is the ability to work closely with others. According to Michael Smith of the American Board of Funeral Service Education, “It’s not the gory kinds of things people think of that most funeral directors like about their jobs.”



work 5 or more days a week, including weekends, and often log more than 40 hours each week. Hours may decrease during the off-season.

Funeral directors' schedules are always changing. "We're essentially on call 24-7," says Kurz. "We might have every other weekend off." BLS data show that many funeral directors work 40 hours a week, although some work considerably more. Still others work only part time in the occupation.

Earnings and outlook. According to BLS data, funeral directors had median annual earnings of \$47,630 in May 2005. The highest earning 10 percent made more than \$89,990, and the lowest 10 percent made less than \$27,670. These data are for wage-and-salary workers only and do not include the self-employed.

BLS does not collect earnings data on wedding planners, but industry sources say that their earnings vary.

As Wood describes it, "There are people making under \$5,000, and there are people making over \$250,000 a year." Wedding planners' earnings are based on the work that they do for their clients. They often charge a fee that is determined upfront—sometimes as part of a package that includes a set number of hours or services; less commonly, they charge by the hour or take a percentage of the total cost of the wedding. As with workers in most fields, beginning planners usually earn less.

BLS projects employment of funeral directors to grow more slowly than the average for all occupations over the 2004-14 decade. As more people opt for cremation, some of the services that funeral directors provide, such as embalming, are less needed. But many funeral directors now offer a wider range of services—such as the creation of video tributes—to help people say goodbye to their loved ones in special ways. And several

thousand jobs will be available to replace workers who leave the occupation permanently.

“It clearly is a profession with strong employment opportunities,” says Michael Smith, executive director of the American Board of Funeral Service Education. These opportunities tend to be best for workers who are willing to relocate or for those in large metropolitan areas. Molloy, who owns a funeral home, says that the business itself is highly competitive.

So, too, is wedding planning. “There are thousands of weddings every weekend, so you’re not going to be short on opportunities,” says Wood, “but you might have to promote your services. You need to be good at what you do.”

Wood estimates that about 10 percent of brides work with a wedding planner. With many busy couples strapped for time, hiring someone else to plan wedding details may seem appealing. “Twenty years ago, wedding planners struggled to make a living at it,” says Markel. “Now, more and more are making money. Some are still struggling, but they’re getting there. There’s a lot of potential.”

Skills and training. Wedding planners and funeral directors have similar skills, but their training differs. Both wedding planners and funeral directors must be organized, people oriented, and good with details. Understanding clients’ needs helps these workers excel in their jobs. Composure, tact, and listening ability are also important. “You’ve got to have an awful lot of patience because you’re dealing with some very emotional clients,” says wedding planner Wood.

Writing is another skill required in both occupations. In addition to communicating with vendors and clients—often through e-mail—these workers help to write content for documents such as obituaries, invitations, marriage announcements, brochures, and Web sites.

Tuck-Horton, who was once a management analyst, says that she uses many of those same skills in planning weddings. “My management skills help me to delegate,” she says. Organizational, analytical, and project management skills also carry over from her former job. Molloy says that being able to think on your feet is also important. Wedding planners and funeral directors might need to decide quickly, for example, what to do if an usher is late for a wedding or if a car is cut off in a funeral procession.

Most wedding planners need skills associated with

starting and running a business, and so do some funeral directors. Business owners, says Wood, must take the initiative to actively promote themselves and their services. “You’ll need to go out and get a Web site, have business cards made up,” he says. “You can’t wait for the phone to ring.”

Wedding planners have few, if any, formal training requirements, in part because there are no State regulations. Many planners take professional-development courses to become certified. But Markel advises prospective planners to carefully research an association and its certification programs before signing up.

Research should begin with asking questions. “Ask how long they’ve been around,” says Markel. “If they haven’t been around a long time, I’d ask who trained them.” The Better Business Bureau records complaints filed against a company. Finding out as much as possible about a program is important because certification can cost \$500 to \$900.

Joining a professional association may also be beneficial to planners. “Competition is stiff in this business, and to succeed you need to be part of an organization,” says Tuck-Horton. She suggests talking to association members about the pros and cons of membership before deciding which group to join.

In contrast, employment of funeral directors is strictly regulated. All funeral directors must be licensed in the State in which they work, and requirements depend on the State. The educational requirements are varied, but a 2-year degree and passage of a board exam is the usual minimum qualification. More than 50 schools offer 2- or 4-year degrees in mortuary science. Some States require that funeral directors be licensed in both directing and embalming; others allow for either one or the other. And many States require continuing education.

Wedding planners and funeral directors also find it helpful to have some form of guided, hands-on experience. And in some States, funeral directors are required to complete apprenticeships. Formal or informal apprenticeships are one way for them to learn from more seasoned workers.

But an important part of what planners and directors need to succeed can only come from practice and dedication. “Time is the best teacher,” says wedding planner Paulette Davis. “I am still learning every day.”

For more information. BLS information about funeral directors is available in the *Occupational Outlook*

Handbook and from the Occupational Employment Statistics (OES) program. The *Handbook* contains detailed information about the working conditions, earnings, outlook, and more for funeral directors and is available in many libraries, in offices of career and school counselors, and online at www.bls.gov/ocos/011.htm. OES survey data on funeral directors' earnings and employment are available online at

www.bls.gov/oes/current/oes119061.htm.

Another way to learn more about the occupations of wedding planner and funeral director is to contact the professional organizations that help define their roles.

To learn more about wedding planners, contact:
Association for Wedding Professionals International
6700 Freeport Blvd., Suite 202
Sacramento, CA 95822
1 (800) 242-4461 (toll-free)
www.afwpi.com

Association of Bridal Consultants
56 Danbury Rd., Suite 11
New Milford, CT 06776
(860) 355-0464
www.bridalassn.com

Association of Certified Professional Wedding Consultants
7791 Prestwick Circle
San Jose, CA 95135
(408) 528-9000
www.acpwc.com

For a list of educational programs in mortuary science and funeral services, contact:

American Board of Funeral Service Education
3432 Ashland Ave., Suite U
St. Joseph, MO 64506
(816) 233-3747
www.abfse.org

For information about funeral director careers and a list of State licensing boards, contact:

National Funeral Directors Association
13625 Bishop's Dr.
Brookfield, WI 53005
1 (800) 228-6332 (toll-free)
www.nfda.org

Caterers

Most weddings and many funerals have receptions that serve food and drinks to guests. The people who provide refreshments and related services for an event are known as caterers.

"Catering is the whole element of the event," says Prentice Pollard, director of catering and convention services for a major hotel chain. "It includes food and beverage, setup of tables and chairs—everything."

Catering provides many different job opportunities, including those in sales, setup, and food preparation and service. For purposes of this article, caterers are executives responsible for overseeing an entire catering business or department. Some of these workers have their own catering company; others are directors of catering or are in similar positions at hotels or other establishments. All are referred to collectively as caterers.

For weddings and funerals, as for other events, catering comes in two forms: on-premises and off-premises. On-premises caterers work at the event site; off-premises caterers are primarily located elsewhere and travel—with food and other necessities—to the event.

Pollard says that a caterer's job can vary, depending on where he or she works. Often, on-premises caterers in hotels and restaurants have a range of support entities—including workers who are responsible for different aspects of the event. Smaller or off-premises caterers arrange most of the details for wedding and funeral functions themselves.

Donna Nemecek is an example of someone who does much of the work by herself. She caters a few events in addition to running a wedding bakery. "My job is to work with the client to plan the cakes, desserts, and food for the event," she says. In planning a wedding, Nemecek might set up food tastings for her clients or discuss options and costs. She orders ingredients and supplies, decides how much food to make for the expected number of people, and prepares menu items.

Delivering the food is another responsibility of some caterers, as is hiring staff to work the event. Coordinating with other vendors, such as those that provide linens, tableware, glassware, or tables and chairs, can also be important—especially for weddings, in which brides often carefully choose each element.

"It's pretty much the same crew, the same concepts, for both weddings and funerals," says off-premises caterer John Bagge. Still, compared with a

funeral, catering for a wedding is often more complex because of the greater array of food, drinks, and decorations offered.

Caterers at large or on-premises establishments typically have many workers to handle the details. For these caterers, supervision is a primary responsibility. Colleen Racine-Bryan, former catering director at a Florida resort, describes her previous work. “As director of catering, I was in charge of any event—whether it was a meeting, a class, or a social event like a wake, funeral, anniversary, or wedding,” she says. Her daily tasks included checking on the staff, making sure accounts were paid, performing accounting and administrative work, and managing the preparation for an event.

Caterers at resorts, hotels, and elsewhere frequently interact with other employees, such as banquet managers or catering sales managers, and with customers to ensure their satisfaction. These workers also play a role in determining the marketing strategies and sales goals for their department. And nearly all caterers of weddings and funerals, regardless of where they work, share in this aspect of their jobs.

“Whether you’re an independent caterer or you work in a hotel, it’s all about selling the services you can provide,” says Jennifer Potts of the National Association of Catering Executives’ Catering Research Institute. “It’s about selling your customers peace of mind. They’re trusting you with a big event, and they want to know that you’ll do a good job.”

Along with providing services at meetings and events, caterers work with a wide range of clients, including schools, hospitals, airlines, other businesses, and individuals.

Employment and working conditions. BLS doesn’t collect specific data on caterers. It does, however, provide information on other occupations—such as lodging managers and food service managers—in which caterers are likely to be counted.

And BLS measures catering establishments. Data show that in 2005, there were about 11,000 catering establishments in the United States employing more than 147,000 workers in a range of occupations. Caterers account for a portion of these jobs, although the exact number is difficult to gauge. “Nobody really knows how many caterers there are in the United States,” says Potts, “because anyone can put up a sign and be a caterer.”

Caterers’ working conditions vary, but the days of

most are busy. Hours may run from 9 a.m. to 7 p.m. or later. Typical days off are Monday and Tuesday, although hours and schedules vary. “The most important thing is that your schedule needs to be flexible,” says Racine-Bryan. “Maybe you won’t have a Saturday off for 19 weeks, or you’ll work till midnight.”

Adding to the stressfulness of long workdays, say caterers, are demanding clients who expect an immediate response to their questions or concerns—regardless of whether the caterer has those days off. “You have to be willing to be very dedicated,” Racine-Bryan says. Pollard agrees: “You have to have a desire to do it.”

Catering jobs in hotels and other facilities are great for people who like change. “It’s a transient industry,” Pollard says. “There are a lot of companies you can work



with, and younger folks do a lot of transitioning.”

Earnings and outlook. Whether they work for themselves or someone else can affect caterers’ paychecks. And owning a business can have its rewards; those who do it well often enjoy considerable earnings.

But working for oneself isn’t without risks. Earnings of independent caterers fluctuate substantially and are tied directly to the success of their company. And catering businesses, like restaurants, are highly susceptible to failure during the first year.

Paychecks for salaried executives also vary. Company size and geographic location can affect their pay. “Larger corporations pay much better than smaller ones,

unless it’s a private club,” says Racine-Bryan. As mentioned previously, BLS doesn’t collect data specifically on caterers, but a 2005 Hospitality Compensation Exchange survey found that directors of catering in hotels earned a median of \$58,596 per year, excluding bonuses. Higher-than-average earnings are due, in part, to the job’s time commitments and to these workers’ significant levels of experience.

Competition is strong for jobs with great responsibility and high pay. “It’s a competitive field,” says Pollard. “As you move up the ranks, it gets more so.” But, as with many other service occupations, there will likely continue to be a need for caterers to provide food and drinks for events such as weddings and funerals.

Skills and training. Caterers prepare for their jobs in several ways. Experience, education, or some combination of the two is often needed.

Whatever path they take to become a caterer, those who succeed in the wedding or funeral business share a few common traits. “I think the most important skill for my job is patience and being detail-oriented and organized,” says Nemecek. Business owners also need self-discipline, creativity, and the drive to work hard.

Other necessary skills for catering executives include leadership, the ability to work well under stress, and a working knowledge of computers and the Internet. People skills are also imperative because these workers regularly deal with employees, vendors, customers, and guests. “You really have to be dedicated and love food and people,” says Racine-Bryan. Pollard agrees. “This is a customer-service industry,” he says. “Having a nice personality is important.”

Sales ability is also a must, especially if you’re interested in becoming a director of catering. “Figure out if you’re a salesperson,” says Racine-Bryan. “Everyone who’s worked as a server or bartender is eligible for positions in catering sales, which can then lead to higher-level positions, like the director of catering.”

Sales, marketing, and other business



Tips for starting a business

Many of the occupations discussed in this article can involve starting a business. But before starting your own business, you need to ask yourself several basic questions.

» Are you willing to take the risk?

Many startups fail, particularly when they're not well thought out.

» Who will your customers be, and what services will you provide? Know your market and your niche.

» What resources will you need?

Writing a business plan can help you to think through and organize the specifics.

You might be thinking about working out of your home to keep down your expenses. But you need to be aware of hidden costs. "A home business is wonderful, but it can take over your life," says cakemaker and caterer Donna Nemecek. "After 25 years, the worst part of my job is that my business is still in my home."

The Small Business Administration has helpful information about starting a business, how to write a business plan, and other important issues to consider. This information is available by writing the administration at 6302 Fairview Road, Suite 300, Charlotte, North Carolina 28210; calling toll-free, 1 (800) 827-5722; or visiting online at www.sba.gov.

Public libraries also have books about starting and financing a business, and some of these are tailored to catering, wedding planning, and other popular startups that relate to wedding and funeral work. And State and local departments of commerce and economic development can inform you of their regulations.

Another valuable resource is SCORE, a national association that counsels small business owners by providing free advice from former entrepreneurs. Information is available by writing SCORE, 409 3rd Street SW., 6th Floor, Washington, DC 20024; calling toll-free, 1 (800) 634-0245; or visiting online at www.score.org.

skills can be particularly important for those who hope to run a catering company. Caterer John Kinsella suggests that prospective business owners take postsecondary courses in business. Those who don't take classes should at least know the basics of operating a business.

Formal training for caterers varies. Starting out in hospitality management is a popular choice. Learning hospitality management—the business of running hotels, restaurants, resorts, and similar venues—is especially important for those who hope to gain employment with one of these types of employers.

But the necessary training can be gained in different ways. Racine-Bryan estimates that more than half of all catering directors rise through the ranks of the food and beverage industry. And there's a reason for this. "There are lots of idiosyncrasies that you couldn't possibly learn except from experience," she says.

Yet, says Racine-Bryan, the educational requirements are becoming more stringent for caterers. "Now, there's a trend where employers want more college-educated people." Programs in business and hospitality management are available throughout the country. Industry experts say a degree in one of these subjects, along with some prior industry experience, is ideal.

Other catering executives prepare for their jobs with formal culinary training. Kinsella, for example, completed a 2-year culinary program and then gained hands-on experience working at a club. One of the club's owners had a small catering business; eventually, Kinsella took over.

For still other caterers, personal interests and experiences have helped to launch their careers. "I have always had an interest in cooking and making creative desserts for family and friends," says Nemecek, who taught herself much of what she has learned. Her foray into the professional world of cooking began when she and a friend took a class on cake baking at a local technical school.

No matter what their backgrounds, though, people in this occupation often need to work their way up. Many directors of catering, for example, might start off as catering managers, catering sales managers, or management trainees. As these workers gain experience, they can then qualify for director positions. Networking is an important tool in seeking higher level jobs.

Working with an experienced caterer or participating in an apprenticeship are other ways to gain hospitality-management, culinary, or general catering knowledge.

Some caterers also have credentials. Pollard is both a certified professional catering executive and a certified meeting planner, for example. Several organizations offer educational conferences for both novice and experienced caterers.

For more information. BLS does not have information on the occupation of caterers. However, similar occupations covered in the *Occupational Outlook Handbook* and by the Occupational Employment Statistics (OES) program include lodging managers and food service managers. For lodging

managers, find *Handbook* information online at www.bls.gov/oco/ocos015.htm and OES data at www.bls.gov/oes/current/oes119081.htm. For food service managers, find *Handbook* information online at www.bls.gov/oco/ocos024.htm and OES data at www.bls.gov/oes/current/oes119051.htm.

For more information about the occupation of caterers, contact:

American Culinary Federation
180 Center Place Way
St. Augustine, FL 32095
1 (800) 624-9458 (toll-free)
www.acfchefs.org

International Special Events Society
401 N. Michigan Ave.
Chicago, IL 60611
1 (800) 688-4737 (toll-free)
www.ises.com

National Association of Catering Executives
9881 Broken Land Pkwy., Suite 101
Columbia, MD 21046
(410) 290-5410
www.nace.net

National Restaurant Association
1200 17th St. NW.
Washington, DC 20036
(202) 331-5900
www.restaurant.org

Floral designers

Flowers are common adornments at weddings and funerals. It's the work of floral designers to arrange foliage and flora for these and other occasions.

But there's more to their jobs than creating bouquets and putting flowers in vases. "It's a varied job, and that's what makes it so exciting," says floral designer Tina Stoecker. "You're never doing exactly the same thing twice."

Much of a floral designer's work involves flowers and plants, and most designers do wedding and funeral work. Floral designer Farrell says there are three separate floral components to these events: personal flowers, such as bouquets and corsages; ceremony flowers, such as altar or aisle decorations; and reception flowers, such

as designs for table centerpieces.

One difference between weddings and funerals is the types of arrangements used for each. Bridal bouquets, for example, are frequently created for weddings; casket wreaths are common for funerals.

The work designers do with clients, however, is similar for both nuptials and memorials. "It's pretty much the same for weddings and funerals," says Stoecker. Floral designers usually sit down with the bride or the bereaved to discuss preferences. They might show their customers pictures of different types of flowers or arrangements that are available to help them decide. Clients may have particular tastes or cultural concerns, and cost may be a factor.

To provide good advice to clients, designers also need to know what they can purchase at different times of the year and which colors and flowers work well together for certain arrangements.

After consulting with clients, floral designers order what they'll need, which can require careful timing. "You need to know the stages of life of flowers to be sure to get them the way you want," says floral designer Tim Farrell. For example, roses shipped on Friday for a Saturday wedding will still be in bud form on the day of the wedding; they need to be sent earlier so that the roses are fully open for the wedding day.

Funerals, like weddings, usually require getting the flowers ahead of time. White lilies, for example, come as buds and take a few days to open, so the designer needs to be sure that the flowers are shipped in time to reach their peak, but not too soon.

When an order arrives, there's much to do. Floral designers first must "process" the flowers. "Flowers and greenery have to be prepared, cleaned, and fed," says floral wholesaler Diane Lagerstedt. Different flowers have different needs, but all require re-cutting and placement into water or a water solution with a floral preservative of nutrients and antibacterial agents.

Removing dirt, leaves, and thorns is another big part of cleaning up flowers to sell or arrange. "It's a dirty, hard profession," says Leanne Kessler of the Floral Design Institute. "You're working with your hands and your body. Flowers don't come to you in a clean state." For example, preparing flowers for sale often requires floral designers to spend considerable time with a scrub bucket and gloves, individually cleaning stems and pulling off damaged petals.

The arranging comes next. Floral designers use a number of tools and materials, including wire, tape, bows, and devices that help to hold the stems of flowers in place. Both weddings and funerals involve a variety of arrangement choices. In addition to the basic distinctions between boutonnieres, garlands, bouquets, corsages, vases, or wreaths, for example, the shape and design of a particular arrangement can also affect the way it is made.

Besides the work that they do with blooms, buds, and greenery, designers have a range of additional responsibilities. “In most stores, everyone does everything,” says Kessler. “If the phone’s ringing, you answer it. If the floor needs to be swept, you do it.” For floral designers with their own business, accounting and administrative tasks also fall on their list of to-dos. “A lot of flower shop owners or managers are jacks of all trades,” says Farrell.

Just as flowers aren’t the only focus, wedding and funeral work isn’t all that these workers do. “Right now, wedding sales are about 10 percent of our business, and funeral sales are about 15 to 20 percent,” says Farrell. “But it varies.” Floral designers also prepare real or artificial flowers for businesses, holidays and other occasions, and everyday enjoyment.

One of the things that these workers like best about their jobs is the positive impact that their creations have. “I really enjoy helping customers express their emotions

through flowers,” says Farrell. “Whether it’s helping a bride to achieve that perfect look, creating a sympathy bouquet, or congratulating someone on a new baby, that’s what makes it rewarding.”

Employment and working conditions. Floral designers held about 63,920 wage-and-salary jobs in 2005, according to BLS. Many others were self-employed. Some floral designers who work for themselves open a shop; others work out of their home. Floral designers who work for someone else are often employed by traditional florists and grocery store florists. And some funeral home chains hire their own designers.

Floral designers’ workdays vary, depending on where they work. “In some places, you might be making vases all day,” says Stoecker.

Several factors influence a floral designer’s schedule. Hours vary from shop to shop, and certain times are busier than others. “Many times, the height of demand is the holidays,” says Kessler. “You’ll likely be working Christmas Eve. And if there’s a wedding, you’re working Saturdays.” Farrell also describes 60-hour weeks during December, the week prior to Valentine’s Day, and in April, May, and June because of Easter, Mother’s Day, proms, and weddings. Despite the increase in weddings during the summer, some shops have reduced hours in July and August, which can result in floral designers working less.



Working conditions usually vary based on individual location. For example, some floral designers sit when they're working, but that may depend on shop policy. Often, design work is physically demanding. "You can be standing on your feet most of the time and lifting," says Lagerstedt. "If it's wedding work, there's a lot of small-motor work. It can be hard on the hands, because you're twisting wires and such to make corsages."

The job can also involve some travel to deliver and set up arrangements. This is especially true for weddings and funerals. "Generally, designers go on a wedding or funeral delivery because it's so important," says Kessler. "If something needs to be fixed, they need to be there."

Earnings and outlook. According to BLS, median annual earnings of floral designers were \$21,060 in May 2005. The highest earning 10 percent made more than \$32,960, and the lowest earning 10 percent made less than \$14,710. These data are for wage-and-salary workers only and do not include the self-employed.

Earnings depend on the designer's geographic location and on his or her experience; earnings increase with experience, and entry-level workers usually earn less than experienced workers do. As with self-employed workers in other occupations, self-employed floral designers may have greater fluctuations in their earnings.

BLS projects average employment growth for floral designers over the 2004-14 decade. BLS also expects that job opportunities will be good because of the need to replace current workers who retire or leave the occupation permanently for other reasons.

Floral designers who have their own shop will likely face competition from other businesses that offer floral arrangements. However, this trend might be less marked in the wedding and funeral industries because families often prefer specialty shops for their event's floral needs.

Workers in the industry say that getting entry-level floral-design work is relatively easy. Moving up in the field, however, is more challenging. Larger shops sometimes present better opportunities for advancement.

Another way for floral designers to advance is to open their own business. "It's not difficult to get started," says Stoecker of the option. "It's relatively inexpensive, and it's not difficult to learn, either. But it is difficult to be successful."

Skills and training. Like workers in many fields, floral designers have a range of skills, education, and experience.

Artistic ability is essential for floral designers. These workers must be good with their hands and able to identify the colors, shapes, and sizes that work best together in an arrangement. Some experience with an art discipline—such as drawing or painting—can help to hone this skill. Stoecker, for example, majored in art in college and says that the design part of her work draws upon this foundation.

Floral designers also need to be good communicators. "There are very few shops where you're making floral designs all day long, so interpersonal skills are very important," says Farrell. Designers work with customers, suppliers, and others in their industry, so it helps if they like dealing with people.

Floral designers who run their own shop also need business skills, including math ability, to keep the company's finances in order. Ira Silvergleit, director of research and information at the Society of American Florists, says that many designers enter the occupation because of an interest in flowers—but without business skills, their shops are less likely to succeed.

"The biggest challenge today for floral designers is that they really need to understand business to do well," says Farrell. Kessler agrees. "What designers really need to be successful business owners are confidence and the ability to promote themselves," she says.

There are no formal requirements to be a floral designer. As a result, workers take a variety of paths to employment. Formal training programs are available, and many floral designers attend events or classes. Others train primarily on the job.

Many schools around the country, including high schools and community colleges, offer classes in floral design. Training in the basics is usually available from these courses, says Farrell, but designers also need to get practical experience in a flower shop. "I think on-the-job training is best," says Farrell. "Shops are very specific, and it's better to learn there at that shop."

After floral designers have gained some work experience, they can attend seminars on more advanced subjects, such as how to make funeral wreaths or wedding bouquets and corsages. Completing an accredited program offered by the American Institute of Floral Designers enables designers to demonstrate their knowledge and design ability.

For more information. BLS information on florists is available in the *Occupational Outlook Handbook* and

from the Occupational Employment Statistics (OES) program. The *Handbook's* information about floral designers is online at www.bls.gov/oco/ocos292.htm.

OES data are online at

www.bls.gov/oes/current/oes271023.htm.

To learn more about starting a floral design business or about careers in the floral industry, contact:

Society of American Florists

1601 Duke St.

Alexandria, VA 22314

(703) 836-8700

www.safnow.org

To learn about floral design accreditation, contact:

American Institute of Floral Designers

720 Light St.

Baltimore, MD 21230

(410) 752-3318

www.aifd.org

Beyond black and white: Researching further

There are other occupational similarities between weddings and funerals besides the ones described in this article. For example, both industries employ musicians; clergy; building and grounds cleaning and maintenance occupations, such as janitors and cleaners and landscaping and groundskeeper workers; and transportation workers, such as limo and hearse drivers.

To learn more about these and other occupations, check out the *Occupational Outlook Handbook*. The *Handbook* provides detailed profiles of many of the occupations described above. It also has information about occupations that are specific to either weddings or funerals, such as photographers and funeral attendants.

The OES collects data on the deathcare services industry. For a detailed online profile of occupations employed in this industry, see

www.bls.gov/oes/current/naics4_812200.htm.

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