

Bookbinders and Bindery Workers

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Significant Points

- Most bookbinders and bindery workers train on the job.
- Employment is expected to decline, reflecting increasingly productive bindery operations, changing business practices, and competition from imports.
- Opportunities for hand bookbinders are limited because only a small number of establishments do this highly specialized work.

Nature of the Work

The process of combining printed sheets into finished products such as books, magazines, catalogs, folders, directories, or product packaging is known as “binding.” Binding involves cutting, folding, gathering, gluing, stapling, stitching, trimming, sewing, wrapping, and other finishing operations. Bindery workers setup, operate, and maintain the machines that perform these various tasks.

Job duties depend on the kind of material being bound. In firms that do *edition binding*, for example, workers bind books produced in large numbers, or “runs.” *Job binding* workers bind books produced in smaller quantities. In firms specializing in *library binding*, workers repair books and provide other specialized binding services to libraries. *Pamphlet binding* workers produce leaflets and folders, and *manifold binding* workers bind business forms such as ledgers and books of sales receipts. *Blankbook binding* workers bind blank pages to produce notebooks, checkbooks, address books, diaries, calendars, and note pads.

Some types of binding and finishing consist of only one step. Preparing leaflets or newspaper inserts, for example, requires only folding. Binding of books and magazines, on the other hand, requires a number of steps.

Bookbinders and bindery workers assemble books and magazines from large, flat, printed sheets of paper. Skilled workers operate machines that first fold printed sheets into “signatures,” which are groups of pages arranged sequentially. Bookbinders then sew, stitch, or glue the assembled signatures together, shape the book bodies with presses and trimming machines, and reinforce them with glued fabric strips. Covers are created separately, and glued, pasted, or stitched onto the book bodies. The books then undergo a variety of finishing operations, often including wrapping in paper jackets.

A small number of bookbinders work in hand binderies. These highly skilled workers design original or special bindings for limited editions, or restore and rebind rare books. The work requires creativity, knowledge of binding materials, and a thorough background in the history of binding. Hand bookbinding gives individuals the opportunity to work in the greatest variety of bindery jobs.

Bookbinders and bindery workers in small shops may perform many binding tasks, while those in large shops usually are assigned only one or a few operations, such as running complicated manual or electronic guillotine papercutters or folding machines. Others specialize in adjusting and preparing equipment, and may perform minor repairs as needed.

Working Conditions

Binderies often are noisy and jobs can be fairly strenuous, requiring considerable lifting, standing, and carrying. The jobs also may require stooping, kneeling, and crouching. Binding often resembles an assembly line on which workers perform repetitive tasks.

Employment

In 2002, bookbinders and bindery workers held about 98,400 jobs, including 7,400 as skilled bookbinders and 91,000 as bindery workers. Nearly one in ten work in the employment services industry, which contracts them out as temporary employees to companies that need their services.

Although some advertising agencies, and book, magazine, and newspaper publishers have their own bindery operations, employing some bookbinders and bindery workers, the majority of jobs are in commercial printing plants. The largest employers of bindery workers are bindery trade shops—these companies specialize in providing binding services for printers without binderies or whose printing production exceeds their binding capabilities. Few publishers maintain their own manufacturing facilities, so most contract out the printing and assembly of books to commercial printing plants or bindery trade shops.

Training, Other Qualifications, and Advancement

Most bookbinders and bindery workers learn the craft through on-the-job training. Inexperienced workers usually are assigned simple tasks such as moving paper from cutting machines to folding machines. They learn basic binding skills, including the characteristics of paper and how to cut large sheets of paper into different sizes with the least amount of waste. As workers gain experience, they advance to more difficult tasks, such as embossing and adding holograms, and learn to operate one or more pieces of equipment. Usually, it takes 1 to 3 months to learn to operate the simpler machines but it can take up to 1 year to become completely familiar with more complex equipment, such as computerized binding machines.

Formal apprenticeships are not as common as they used to be, but still are offered by some employers. Apprenticeships provide a more structured program that enables workers to acquire the high levels of specialization and skill needed for some bindery jobs. For example, a 4-year apprenticeship usually is necessary to teach workers how to restore rare books and to produce valuable collectors’ items.

High school students interested in bindery careers should take shop courses or attend a vocational-technical high school. Occupational skill centers, usually operated by labor unions, also provide



Bindery work requires careful attention to detail because these workers are responsible for the final assembly of printed materials.

an introduction to a bindery career. To keep pace with changing technology, retraining is increasingly important for bindery workers. Students with computer skills and mechanical aptitude are especially in demand.

Bindery workers need basic mathematics and language skills. Bindery work requires careful attention to detail; accuracy, patience, neatness, and good eyesight also are important. Manual dexterity is essential in order to count, insert, paste, and fold. Mechanical aptitude is needed to operate the newer, more automated equipment. Artistic ability and imagination are necessary for hand bookbinding.

Training in graphic arts also can be an asset. Vocational-technical institutes offer postsecondary programs in the graphic arts, as do some skill-updating or retraining programs and community colleges. Some updating and retraining programs require students to have bindery experience; other programs are made available by unions to their members. Four-year colleges also offer programs, but their emphasis is on preparing people for careers as graphic artists, educators, or managers in the graphic arts field.

Without additional training, advancement opportunities outside of bindery work are limited. In large binderies, experienced bookbinders or bindery workers may advance to supervisory positions.

Job Outlook

Overall employment of bookbinders and bindery workers is expected to decline through 2012 as demand for printed material slows and productivity in bindery operations increases. Contributing to this situation is the trend toward outsourcing of work to firms in foreign countries, where books and other materials with long leadtimes can be produced more cheaply. Most job openings, however, will result from the need to replace experienced workers who leave the occupation, many of whom will be retiring in the next decade.

Computers have caused binding to become increasingly automated. New computer-operated “in-line” equipment performs a number of operations in sequence, beginning with raw stock and ending with a finished product. Technological advances such as automatic tabbers, counters, palletizers, and jiggers reduce labor and improve the appearance of the finished product. These improvements are inducing printing companies to acquire in-house binding and finishing equipment that allows printing machine operators to perform bindery work during “downtimes.”

Growth in demand for specialized bindery workers who assist skilled bookbinders will be slowed as binding machinery continues to become more efficient. New technology requires a considerable investment in capital expenditures and employee training, so computer skills and mechanical aptitude are increasingly important for bindery workers.

Because the number of establishments that do hand bookbinding is small, opportunities for hand bookbinders will be limited. Experienced workers will continue to have the best opportunities for these specialist jobs.

Earnings

Median hourly earnings of bookbinders were \$13.31 in 2002. The middle 50 percent earned between \$9.88 and \$17.73 an hour. The lowest 10 percent earned less than \$7.84, and the highest 10 percent earned more than \$21.90.

Median hourly earnings of bindery workers were \$10.51 in 2002. The middle 50 percent earned between \$8.27 and \$13.86 an hour. The lowest 10 percent earned less than \$6.95, and the highest 10 percent earned more than \$17.95. Workers covered by union contracts usually had higher earnings.

Related Occupations

Other workers who set up and operate production machinery include prepress technicians and workers; printing machine operators; machine setters, operators, and tenders—metal and plastic; and various other precision machine operators.

Sources of Additional Information

Information about apprenticeships and other training opportunities may be obtained from local printing industry associations, local bookbinding shops, local offices of the Graphic Communications International Union, or local offices of the State employment service.

For general information on bindery occupations, write to:

► Bindery Industries Association, International, 100 Daingerfield Road, Alexandria, VA 22314.

► Graphic Communications International Union, 1900 L St. NW., Washington, DC 20036. Internet: <http://www.gciu.org>

For information on careers and training programs in printing and the graphic arts, contact:

► Graphic Communications Council, 1899 Preston White Dr., Reston, VA 20191. Internet: <http://www.npes.org/edcouncil/index.html>

► Printing Industries of America, 100 Daingerfield Rd., Alexandria, VA 22314. Internet:

http://www.gain.org/servlet/gateway/PIA_GATF/non_index.html

► Graphic Arts Technical Foundation, 200 Deer Run Rd., Sewickley, PA 15143. Internet: <http://www.gatf.org>