
Dancers and Choreographers

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Significant Points

- Many dancers stop performing by their late thirties, but some remain in the field as choreographers, dance teachers, or artistic directors.
- Most dancers begin formal training at an early age—between 5 and 15—and many have their first professional audition by age 17 or 18.
- Dancers and choreographers face intense competition; only the most talented find regular work.

Nature of the Work

From ancient times to the present, dancers have expressed ideas, stories, and rhythm with their bodies. They use a variety of dance forms that allow free movement and self-expression, including classical ballet, modern dance, and culturally specific dance styles. Many dancers combine performance work with teaching or choreography.

Dancers perform in a variety of settings, including opera, musical theater, and other musical productions, and may present folk, ethnic, tap, jazz, and other popular kinds of dance. They also perform in television, movies, music videos, and commercials, in which they also may sing and act. Dancers most often perform as part of a group, although a few top artists perform solo.

Dancers work with choreographers, who create original dances and develop new interpretations of existing dances. Because few dance routines are written down, choreographers instruct performers at rehearsals to achieve the desired effect. In addition, choreographers usually are involved in auditioning performers.

Work environment. Dance is strenuous. Many dancers stop performing by their late thirties because of the physical demands on the body. However, some continue to work in the field as choreographers, dance teachers and coaches, or artistic directors. Others move into administrative positions, such as company managers. A few celebrated dancers, however, continue performing most of their lives.

Daily rehearsals require very long hours. Many dance companies tour for part of the year to supplement a limited performance schedule at home. Dancers who perform in musical productions and other family entertainment spend much of their time on the road; others work in nightclubs or on cruise ships. Most dance performances are in the evening, whereas rehearsals and practice take place during the day. As a result, dancers often work very long and late hours. Generally, dancers and choreographers work in modern and temperature-controlled facilities; however, some studios may be older and less comfortable.

Training, Other Qualifications, and Advancement

Most dancers need long-term on-the-job training to be successful. Some earn a bachelor's degree or attend dance school, although neither is required. Becoming a choreographer usually requires years of dancing experience.

Education and training. Training varies with the type of dance and is a continuous part of all dancers' careers. Many dancers and dance instructors believe that dancers should start with a good foundation in classical technique before selecting a particular dance style. Ballet training for girls usually begins at 5 to 8 years of age with a private teacher or through an independent ballet school. Serious training traditionally begins between the ages of 10 and 12. Boys often begin their ballet training between the ages of 10 and 15. Students who demonstrate potential in their early teens may seek out more intensive and advanced professional training. At about this time, students should begin to focus their training on a particular style and decide whether to pursue additional training through a dance company's school or a college dance program. Leading dance school companies often have summer training programs from which they select candidates for admission to their regular full-time training programs. Formal training for modern and culturally specific dancers often begins later than training in ballet; however, many folk dance forms are taught to very young children. Many dancers have their first professional auditions by age 17 or 18.

Training is an important component of professional dancers' careers. Dancers normally spend 8 hours a day in class and rehearsal, keeping their bodies in shape and preparing for performances. Their daily training period includes time to warm up and cool down before and after classes and rehearsals.

Because of the strenuous and time-consuming training required, some dancers view formal education as secondary. However, a broad, general education including music, literature, history, and the visual arts is helpful in the interpretation of dramatic episodes, ideas, and feelings. Dancers sometimes conduct research to learn more about the part they are playing.

Many colleges and universities award bachelor's or master's degrees in dance, typically through departments of dance, theater, or fine arts. The National Association of Schools of Dance accredits 65 programs in dance. Many programs concentrate on modern dance, but some also offer courses in jazz, culturally specific dance, ballet, or classical techniques. Courses in dance composition, history and criticism, and movement analysis are also available.

A college education is not essential for employment as a professional dancer; however, many dancers obtain degrees in unrelated fields to prepare themselves for careers after dance. The



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completion of a college program in dance and education is usually essential to qualify to teach dance in college, high school, or elementary school. Colleges and conservatories sometimes require graduate degrees but may accept performance experience. A college background is not necessary, however, for teaching dance or choreography in local recreational programs. Studio schools prefer teachers to have experience as performers.

Other qualifications. Because of the rigorous practice schedules of most dancers, self-discipline, patience, perseverance, and a devotion to dance are essential for success in the field. Dancers also must possess good problem-solving skills and an ability to work with people. Good health and physical stamina also are necessary attributes. Above all, dancers must have flexibility, agility, coordination, and grace, a sense of rhythm, a feeling for music, and a creative ability to express themselves through movement.

Because dancers typically perform as members of an ensemble made up of other dancers, musicians, and directors or choreographers, they must be able to function as part of a team. They also should be highly motivated and prepared to face the anxiety of intermittent employment and rejections when auditioning for work.

Advancement. For dancers, advancement takes the form of a growing reputation, more frequent work, bigger and better roles, and higher pay. Some dancers may take on added responsibilities, such as by becoming a dance captain in musical theater or ballet master/ballet mistress in concert dance companies, by leading rehearsals, or by working with less experienced dancers in the absence of the choreographer.

Choreographers typically are experienced dancers with years of practice working in the theater. Through their performance as dancers, they develop reputations that often lead to opportunities to choreograph productions.

Employment

Professional dancers and choreographers held about 40,000 jobs in 2006. Many others were between engagements, so that the total number of people available for work as dancers over the course of the year was greater. Dancers and choreographers worked in a variety of industries, such as private educational services, which includes dance studios and schools, as well as colleges and universities; food services and drinking establishments; performing arts companies, which include dance, theater, and opera companies; and amusement and recreation venues, such as casinos and theme parks. About 17 percent of dancers and choreographers were self-employed.

Most major cities serve as home to major dance companies; however, many smaller communities across the Nation also support home-grown, full-time professional dance companies.

Job Outlook

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Employment change. Employment of dancers and choreographers is expected to grow 6 percent during the 2006-16 decade, more slowly than the average for all occupations. The public's continued interest in dance will sustain large and mid-size dance companies, but funding from public and private organizations is not expected to keep pace with rising production costs. For many small organizations, the result will be fewer performances and more limited employment opportunities.

Job prospects. Because many people enjoy dance and would like to make their careers in dance, dancers and choreographers face intense competition for jobs. Only the most talented find regular employment. However, there are always some jobs available.

Although job openings will arise each year because dancers and choreographers retire or leave the occupation for other reasons, the number of applicants will continue to vastly exceed the number of job openings.

National dance companies likely will continue to provide jobs in this field. Opera companies and dance groups affiliated with television and motion pictures also will offer some opportunities. Moreover, the growing popularity of dance for recreational and fitness purposes has resulted in increased opportunities to teach dance, especially for older dancers who may be transitioning to another field. Finally, music video channels will provide opportunities for both dancers and choreographers.

Earnings

Median hourly earnings of dancers were \$9.55 in May 2006. The middle 50 percent earned between \$7.31 and \$17.50. The lowest 10 percent earned less than \$6.62, and the highest 10 percent earned more than \$25.75. Annual earnings data for dancers were not available, because of the wide variation in the number of hours worked by dancers and the short-term nature of many jobs—which may last for 1 day or 1 week—make it rare for dancers to have guaranteed employment that exceeds a few months. Median hourly earnings in the industries employing the largest number of dancers were as follows:

Theater companies and dinner theaters.....	\$15.28
Other schools and instruction.....	11.71
Other amusement and recreation industries.....	8.58
Drinking places (alcoholic beverages).....	7.76
Full-service restaurants.....	7.13

Projections data from the National Employment Matrix

Occupational Title	SOC Code	Employment, 2006	Projected employment, 2016	Change, 2006-2016	
				Number	Percent
Dancers and choreographers	27-2030	40,000	43,000	2,400	6
Dancers	27-2031	20,000	22,000	1,900	9
Choreographers.....	27-2032	20,000	21,000	500	2

NOTE: Data in this table are rounded. See the discussion of the employment projections table in the *Handbook* introductory chapter on *Occupational Information Included in the Handbook*.

Median annual earnings of salaried choreographers were \$34,660 in May 2006. The middle 50 percent earned between \$21,910 and \$49,810. The lowest 10 percent earned less than \$15,710, and the highest 10 percent earned more than \$64,070. Median annual earnings were \$34,460 in “other schools and instruction,” a North American Industry Classification System category that includes dance studios and schools.

Dancers who were on tour usually received an additional allowance for room and board, as well as extra compensation for overtime. Earnings from dancing are usually low because employment is irregular. Dancers often supplement their income by working as guest artists with other dance companies, teaching dance, or taking jobs unrelated to the field.

Earnings of dancers at many of the largest companies and in commercial settings are governed by union contracts. Dancers in the major opera ballet, classical ballet, and modern dance corps belong to the American Guild of Musical Artists, Inc. of the AFL-CIO; those who appear on live or videotaped television programs belong to the American Federation of Television and Radio Artists; those who perform in films and on television belong to the Screen Actors Guild; and those in musical theater are members of the Actors' Equity Association. The unions and producers sign basic agreements specifying minimum salary rates, hours of work, benefits, and other conditions of employment. However, the contract each dancer signs with the producer of the show may be more favorable than the basic agreement.

Most salaried dancers and choreographers covered by union contracts receive some paid sick leave and various health and pension benefits, including extended sick pay and family-leave benefits provided by their unions. Employers contribute toward these benefits. Dancers and choreographers not covered by union contracts usually do not enjoy such benefits.

Related Occupations

People who work in other performing arts occupations include actors, producers, and directors; and musicians, singers, and related workers. Those directly involved in the production of dance programs include set and exhibit designers; fashion designers; and barbers, cosmetologists, and other personal appearance workers. Like dancers, athletes, coaches, umpires, and related workers need strength, flexibility, and agility.

Sources of Additional Information

For general information about dance and a list of accredited college-level programs, contact:

► National Association of Schools of Dance, 11250 Roger Bacon Dr., Suite 21, Reston, VA 20190.

Internet: <http://nasd.arts-accredit.org>

For information about dance and dance companies, contact:

► Dance/USA, 1156 15th St.NW., Suite 820, Washington, DC 20005. Internet: <http://www.danceusa.org>