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Television directors are responsible for getting authentic performances from actors and taking a story from the script to the small screen. However, every television director knows that part of what makes them successful is the fact they earn money from what they do well and continue to find employment. The question then arises, how do television directors find jobs that keep them in a wage day-in day-out? And who are the people that can help directors reach this goal? In this chapter, we will go into the business side of television directing, and give you some ideas on how directors pay their bills, maintain their professional identity and manage when times are tough.

#hardwork

Anyone will tell you that directing for television is very competitive, and only the most persistent and hard-working thrive. That said, small screens are really happening right now and around the world we are making lots of ground-breaking television. There are opportunities to find employment directing for television, although you may need to work your way up the ladder – perhaps starting out as a runner or an assistant then as a continuity person or an assistant director, or even through an attachment program, before graduating to the lofty position of ‘director’. Geoff Portmann was an editor for many years before he began directing television for an Australian public broadcasting network:

*Television has a schedule and every slot has to be filled in the schedule. It's a beast with a large appetite that needs to be fed. Because of this volume of content, it gives new directors opportunities – to make mistakes, develop their expertise and try things that are slightly left of centre.*



Geoff Portmann. Photo credit Erika Fish QUT Creative Industries

#findajob

So let's get to that first question: how do TV directors get work? Sometimes there are **on-going positions** available for directors with television networks and production companies. This means you are an employee with that company, earning a regular wage. Your employer takes tax and superannuation out of your wage for you and you may receive benefits, like being paid holiday and sick leave. One example of a director in full time employment is Peter Ireland. Peter lives in London and works for a global music video cable channel. Before he got the job, Peter unsuccessfully contacted 98 production companies seeking directing work. As part of his current role, he directs 'promos', which are like advertisements between programs that promote upcoming shows on the channel. But Peter didn't get the job by writing an application and going for a formal interview:

*When I couldn't find work as a director, I fell back on editing. Eventually, I got some work editing promos for the Creative Director [of the company I now work for]. I was editing all of the promos he'd shot for a good six months before one day I dropped it in there I was also a director... And he said, "Why not come and do some work for us?"... Then they offered me a senior position here, which was great!*



*Peter Ireland. Photo credit Timothy Baker.*

Peter freely admits he's been quite lucky. Typically, television directors will get work by **freelancing** and going from job to job, just like a 'guns for hire' in the Old West. Frequently, freelancing television directors are brought in for a defined amount of pre-production, production and post-production, and do not much control over the core narrative, tone and style of the show they direct. Freelancers get directing work from **crew networks** and by **word-of-mouth** – that is, directors find out by talking to others about when and where to find the next gig.

#knowyourbrand

Often, freelancing television directors will specialise in order to become known as a particular type of director. This can lead to being more consistently hired. Some directors become known for doing just commercials or just drama or just documentary films or just the pilots for big series.... Or they

may become known for their **brand** or **style** – edgy, high-brow, artistic, traditional, niche, glossy, bright, etc. So strategically it's worth asking early on, how do I want to be known as a director in the television industry? Regardless of your specialisation, many television directors who freelance are constantly having to negotiate new contracts and working conditions, and are operational concurrently on different phases of production across a few different television projects. The workload can be overwhelming, and it's a lot to manage!

Kim Farrant is a freelancing television director with experience in documentaries, commercials and drama for television. She has also directed feature films, and resides in Los Angeles, USA. Kim got into directing via acting, and has been working as a director for around twenty years. One of the first things she did to help coordinate her career was to meet her **agent**, who spotted her talent at the screening of her final year film at film school. Her agent helps her to negotiate all her contracts and gives her an idea of how much she should charge for her services on a show. They might also get involved with things like sorting out the length of shooting days and weeks. An agent will usually take ten percent of a director's earnings but in Kim's view, it's worth it:

*My agent gives me another viewpoint, and sets up meetings with other artists and producers so we can discuss ideas and opportunities.*



*Kim Farrant. Photo credit James Dillon, QUT Creative Industries.*

Some directors also get a manager. A **manager** cannot negotiate contracts for a director like an agent does, but they can help guide the director's career. A manager generally takes another 10% of your earnings. A **mentor** is slightly different. They're someone who is genuinely interested in your vocational path and can give you advice but won't usually expect payment. Mentoring relationships develop over time and are along the lines of a friendship as well as a professional relationship. Some experienced television directors are open to mentoring new directors as they enter the industry, and for them it's about passing on their knowledge and passion to the next generation. Marc Munden is

an established television director who started out making documentaries and has gone on to do a lot of television drama series, mini-series and one-offs. Marc has had some very influential mentors and he is now is a mentor to younger directors himself:

*My first mentor is someone I respect enormously.... He always treated me like an adult [and taught me] to know my own mind amidst the clamour of television production.*



*Marc Munden on set. Photo credit Nick Wall, Origin Pictures.*

#playnice

Marc Munden has carved out a brand as a television director who ‘pushes the envelope’ and an auteur. Often Marc is involved with the productions he plans to direct from the development stage right the way through to post-production. He’s struggled to build his brand but he concedes that as a younger, emerging director he may have been uncompromising to the point of putting many people offside. Nowadays, he acknowledges that while it’s the quality of your past work and which will usually get you more work in the future, just being open to feedback, polite and reassuring can make television directors easier to work alongside and therefore more employable.

*It’s a director’s job to push it to the point where you’re being shut down and you have to not be afraid to be unpopular. But there’s no point in doing that just for the sake of getting your way. I think you can easily make bad mistakes that way. It’s about seeing the big picture... You need to listen to what the producer is saying and what the writer is saying. The real art is to take [their notes] on board, listen, really consider it and if it’s useful to integrate it into your vision.*

Indeed, getting on with and getting to know other people in the television industry are critical to the business side of directing. This means attending networking events, festivals and markets and meeting people – especially the people who might be able to hire you, such as producers,



commissioning editors, showrunners and executive producers. If you're developing your own television show – either one you have developed alone or one you've been working on in collaboration with a producer and/or a writer – you need to consider **pitching**, which is about directly selling a concept to potential investors and distributors. Often times, you only have a few minutes to grab an executive's attention and get them engaged in your idea. Remember, practice makes perfect, so try out your pitch on family and friends first to test how it goes.

#### #decisions

As a television director, you will be sent **scripts** to read and it is up to you to decide if you think they're any good and whether you want to direct. If you are interested, then you'll need to **communicate your vision** for a script to the people who own it (writers and producers generally) in order to seal the deal. Nothing is final until a contract is signed by both parties. Colin Schumacher is a television director based in Thailand who has worked extensively in long-running television drama series and soap operas. For him, convincing others he is the right person to direct a script is part of the job:

*It's important to have a passion for a point-of-view for how to tell a story which might be a little different and to be able substantiate your ideas in clear, economic language.... But don't wing it. Read the script carefully before you go into the meeting!*

When you are offered a script to direct, it can be a tricky decision to make. More commercially attractive projects will be seen by a large audience; more arthouse, non-commercial projects aren't likely to be as popular but usually get more critical praise and honours. Again, your agent, manager and mentors can probably advise you on your choices, but in the end it will be your call. Marc Munden says:

*I only ever picked projects I really wanted to do or thought I had something original to say about. I've never done jobbing TV. I've never made loads of money, but I think it's helped my career by doing things I believe in.*

Once the show has been made and is about to be broadcast on television directors need to give interviews. As part of the program's **publicity**, producers will ask journalists and news media outlets to write stories for the arts and entertainment sections of their publications. This is often included in a director's contract and it's good to be aware of how much publicity you are expected to do before signing on the dotted line. When Kim Farrant's star began to rise and she began doing a lot more publicity, she did a few smart things to take control of her image. She had a photographer take headshots of her for distribution that she liked. Additionally, Kim is careful to make notes before being interviewed by journalists so that she sticks to what she *does* and *does not* want to say.

#### #unemployed

No matter how talented, experienced, well-known or personable you are there can be periods when work is thin on the ground. There could be many reasons why directors earn less. Sometimes the producer and commissioning editor a director normally works with moves on, and with them goes the relationship that secures regular employment. National and global economic forces can influence the level of investment in television production, which may result in less programming being made. During the development phase, television directors can also be waiting for producers to secure finance before they get paid. It might be that a director takes time out of the game for family or personal reasons. So, what do you do when you don't have work, or are in between jobs with limited cash coming in?

China Moo-Young is a director in demand, especially on primetime, high-end television drama. You might think she's always managed to get graft directing a project, but that hasn't always been the case.

*I was out of work a while back for quite a while and I got flexible part-time jobs not in the industry so that I could earn money whilst continuing to read scripts, pitch on jobs, do meetings and develop my own projects.... I always use the time to my advantage – see as many films as I can, go to art galleries, read, do research, meet with actors, writers, etc. I think all experiences can enrich you as a director – particularly rejection! They sharpen your decision making, your resolve and your appreciation of work when you do finally get it.*



*China Moo-Young on set. Photo credit Laurence Cendrowicz.*

Although there's a case for specialisation, there may also be an advantage for television directors to have a range of skills. Sometimes directors branch out from what they are known for and try out new formats and mediums, which can mean new opportunities to create revenue as a director and keep their work fresh and exciting. Geoff Portmann has made a career directing studio-based situational comedy, but found he often supported his directing income by also producing and writing, and now teaches at a film school. In between projects, Kim Farrant runs workshops and coaches other directors. She also got into making commercials as a way to supplement her earnings:

*I took some of my short films I'd made in film school and recut them and added narration and graphics and made them look like commercials. So I had a reel that looked like I'd made commercials – although I openly admitted they were mocked – and it showed people I could make commercials. With that, I got picked up by a big commercials agency and had another way to make money while I was developing other projects.*

#eyeontheprize

There is money to be made from becoming a television director, particularly directors who consistently find gigs, but you need to be ready to work hard, open to learning new things and love what you're doing. Some very successful directors go on to form their own production companies, which are in turn bought up by bigger media corporations for a profit. But the more you get involved in the business side of television, the less likely you are going to have the time to be a hands-on director. So be clear on what you prefer!

#### CHECKLIST

- Register your films you have directed which are likely to be broadcast, screened or streamed anywhere around the world with collecting agencies in order to collect royalties
- Gather specialists around you as you go that can help you with managing your career – an accountant, lawyer, agent, superannuation officer and manager. Sometimes you can develop a mentor relationship with an experienced director who can give you career advice from time to time.
- Sign up for crew networks and recruiters and be specific and targeted about the type of directing you do.
- If you're freelancing and don't have an agent, you need to set up a system of how you are going to invoice for payments. Become aware of taxation laws in your territory – sometimes you will need to include sales tax on top of your fee. Also, you will have to pay tax at the end of the financial year, so you need to put part of your pay aside to cover that!
- Join directing guilds and associations in your country. Often, there are cheaper rates for students. Sometime directing guilds coordinate attachments, so that new television directors are placed on set with experienced directors from whom they can learn.
- Sign up for newsletters from government film funders, film schools, community film networks, agents, broadcasters and festivals, and follow these organisations and other directors whose work you like online and on social media.
- Create your own social media presence, website or video-sharing channel with information about you as a director, and possibly include clips or a showreel that highlight the "best bits" of your work so far.
- Get along to mixers, networking evenings and events for media and film industry professionals. Think about having a business card or a flyer with your contact details and a link to examples of your work on it.
- Submit your finished films for competitions and awards: if you get nominated or win, it can help you get more work directing TV!