Chronicle Guidance Publications

Apparel Industry Workers

Occupational Brief Title Codes:
- D.O.T.: 78
- G.O.E.: 06
- S.O.C.: 51-60
- O*NET™: 51-60
- N.A.I.C.S.: 315
- H.O.C.: No Code

Occupational Subtitles:
- Assemblers
- Cutters
- Fashion Designers
- Hand Sewers
- Inspectors
- Markers
- Pattern Graders
- Patternmakers
- Pressers
- Production Managers
- Sewing Machine Operators
- Shop Tailors
- Spreaders

Work Classification Based Related D.O.T. Occupations:
- Canvas Repairers
- Dressmakers
- Fur Cutters
- Hand Weavers
- Sail Cutters
- Tailors

Interests Based Related G.O.E. Occupations:
- Carpet Weavers
- Hand Embroiderers
- Knitting Machine Operators
- Lace Machine Operators
- Sole Sewers
- Upholsterers

Skills Based Related O*NET Occupations:
- Extruding and Forming Machine Setters, Operators, and Tenders, Synthetic and Glass Fibers
- Laundry and Dry-Cleaning Workers
- Shoe and Leather Workers and Repairers
- Tailors, Dressmakers, and Custom Sewers
- Textile Cutting Machine Setters, Operators, and Tenders
- Upholsterers

Apparel industry workers (ap`par-el `in-dus-try `work-ers) transform fabrics produced by textile manufacturers into finished goods including shirts, dresses, pants, jackets, suits, and many others that fill the Nations' retail stores. By cutting and sewing fabrics or other materials, such as leather, rubberized fabrics, plastics, and furs, workers in this industry help to keep us warm, dry, and in style.

Before the invention of the sewing machine, it took fourteen hours and twenty-six minutes to make a shirt. Today, clothing factories can make a shirt in less than seven minutes. Apparel industry workers make coats, jackets, suits, pants, shirts, pajamas, ties, belts, dresses, blouses, skirts, lingerie, and underwear. From designer jeans to sheepskin-lined jackets to infant snowsuits, the apparel industry caters to every American family. It makes robes for high school graduates, uniforms for nurses and physicians, work clothes for farmers and ranchers, and jogging suits for health enthusiasts.

Apparel industry workers transform fabrics into finished goods. *Photo by CGP Staff*

Work Performed

Both skilled and semiskilled workers fill the ranks of this industry. The major operations in making garments are designing the garment, cutting the cloth, sewing the pieces together, pressing the completed garment, and managing overall production.

Design Room Workers

A garment design begins with ***fashion designers*** who create designs or adapt styles for new clothing for each season. Large apparel firms have their own designers. Small firms or those who make standard apparel may buy the designs or patterns. Fashion designers create garments planned for efficient production with the minimum of fabric and a maximum of style.

Shop tailors work from the designer's sketches to make a sample garment. They sew pieces of fabric together to make a garment according to the design. They also trim and shape edges of garments.

Patternmakers develop a master pattern of each design. Working with designers, and often using a computer, patternmakers make paper or fiberboard

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pattern pieces. In drawing and cutting the pattern pieces, they allow for pleats, tucks, and seams. They also cut and shape the pieces to minimize the number of sewing operations.

Pattern graders adapt a master pattern to make a wide range of sizes. To make patterns for different sizes, they enlarge or reduce the master pattern. In many shops, pattern graders use a computer for this operation.

Cutting Room Workers

Cutting room operations include four basic tasks. Large cutting departments have spreaders, markers, cutters, and assemblers.

Spreaders lay out and neatly pile layers of cloth on a cutting table. The number of layers depends on the kind, quality, and weight of the fabric. Almost all large firms have machine spreaders, which travel back and forth over the table to lay the cloth with exactness and precision.

Markers arrange pattern pieces lengthwise on the fabric to get the maximum number of pieces with the minimum of waste. For printed or patterned fabrics, markers arrange the pattern pieces on the material so that the overall print or weave in the finished garment matches at the seams. They chalk outlines of the pattern pieces on top of the lay. In some plants, computers determine the best placement of pattern pieces, and may produce paper markers the cutters can follow.

Cutters follow marked outlines to cut out the garment pieces from lays spread on the cutting table. Lays may be as high as nine inches. Cutters usually use an electric knife to cut through all the layers at once. Many companies have computerized cutters. These cutters can cut through as many as 120 layers, and all the pieces are exact. A few firms use water-jet cutters. Some use laser cutters that cut only one layer at a time. In the few shops that make quality garments, cutters use shears or scissors to trim and cut garment pieces to make them exactly like the original pattern.

Assemblers collect and bundle pieces, along with linings, buttons, zippers, tapes, and trimmings, for the garments. They match pieces by color, size, and fabric design. They sometimes use chalk or thread to mark places for pockets, buttonholes, buttons, and other details. They ticket each bundle. Workers use the bundle tickets to keep track of their piecework earnings.

Sewing Room Workers

About half of all apparel industry workers are sewers. Most plants divide the work into many machine tasks and some handwork.

Sewing machine operators use different machines to do different tasks. They may sew shoulder seams, attach cuffs to sleeves, or hem blouses. Others make garment sections such as pockets, collars, or sleeves. Others join sections to the main parts of the garments.

Hand sewers work on quality dresses, suits, or coats with complex fit and drape. They may stitch hems or do fancy stitching. Many hand sewers do a single task. They may make buttonholes, baste lapels, or stitch linings.

At different stages of assembly, ***inspectors*** examine garments. They mark skipped stitches, poorly sewn seams, or other flaws. Workers correct these defects before passing the garment to the next operator.

Thread trimmers cut off loose threads, remove basting threads, and brush lint from the garments.

Pressing Room Workers

Pressers operate automatic pressing machines. Some pressing takes place while a garment is being assembled. Sometimes it is done on the finished garment. Pressers smooth parts such as collars, shoulder seams, or pockets. They do the final pressing and ironing of finished garments. They may run machines that press a dozen folded shirts at a time. Delicate garments get hand pressing. Workers use steam pressers or hand irons to flatten seams, shape garment parts, and finish garments.

Production Management

Production managers direct plant production. They oversee the entire manufacturing process. They know every process and what every machine can do. They know how to set up a series of steps to make garments the firm can sell within certain price ranges. To save on production costs, they do time-and-motion studies, analyze machines in use, develop work groups, and in some companies, negotiate with unions. They streamline tasks to eliminate waste motions. They make production more efficient and increase profits while maintaining and improving quality.

Some production managers may oversee a specific group of workers doing a particular stage of the production process. They may, for instance, oversee cutting room workers or sewing machine operators.

Working Conditions

Most manufacturing plants are new buildings with plenty of work space, good lighting, and air-conditioning. A few companies that have been in business for decades may have older buildings where space is limited. Some departments such as sewing and pressing rooms are noisy. Pattern making and spreading areas are quieter.

Sewing machine operators sit when they sew. The pace is swift, and many of these tasks are repetitive. Patternmakers and cutters are usually in a section separate from production departments. Since cutters and patternmakers stand most of the time, the work can be physically demanding.

Heavy machines and hot steam can make pressing hard work. Newer pressing machines require less effort

to run. Although there are no serious risks in this industry, operators must pay attention while operating equipment such as sewing machines, pressers, and automated cutters. Some workers must wear protective gear such as gloves.

In some stages of work in the apparel industry, emphasis is shifting from individual performance to teamwork. Workers organized into modules work together to produce garments. They share incentive earnings. Both groups and individuals in this industry are under pressure to improve performance while maintaining quality.

Hours and Earnings

Apparel industry workers work about 40 hours a week. Hours vary with the kind of garments produced. Workers in plants that make seasonal apparel, such as winter coats and children's snowsuits, may have layoffs in slack times. Consumer demands as well as changes in production methods also affect the number of working hours and the number of workers.

According to the Bureau of Labor Statistics, in 2002, apparel industry workers earned an average of $10.00 an hour. Pressers and sewers earned about $8.50 an hour, cutting room workers earned an average of $9.70 an hour, and tailors earned about $11.00 an hour. Patternmakers earned almost $13.00 an hour while designers earned the most, about $25.00 an hour. Many workers in this industry are on piecework. Earnings for these operators may vary with individual skill, speed, and accuracy, and availability of the work. Benefits may include paid holidays and vacations, health and life insurance, and for some, child care.

Education and Training

Although people without a high school diploma or experience may get a production job in the apparel industry, employers prefer high school graduates. Students who want to go to work right after high school should take either technical or business subjects.

New workers such as spreaders or pressers may take only a few days to learn a job. Power machine operators may take up to six months to become skilled. Most workers start as helpers or assistants to skilled workers.

In the future, as machinery in the industry continues to become more complex, apparel workers will need more training especially in computers and electronics. The trend toward cross-training of operators will increase the time they need to learn different machines.

Skilled workers, such as patternmakers or cutters, spend several years learning their craft. Large plants may have apprenticeships that last four years or longer.

Unions and Professional Societies

The apparel industry has a very low unionization rate. Only about 10 percent of the people employed in the industry are employed under a union contract. Unions negotiate contracts with employers. These contracts deal with wages, hours, vacation and holiday pay, seniority, health insurance, and pensions. In 2004, UNITE (Union of Needletrades Industrial and Textile Employees) and HERE (Hotel Employees and Restaurant Employees International Union) merged forming UNITE HERE. The union represents more than 440,000 active members and more than 400,000 retirees throughout North America.

The American Apparel and Footwear Association (AAFA) was formed in 2000 through the merger of the American Apparel Manufacturers Association (AAMA) and the Footwear Industries of America (FIA). AAFA is the leading national trade association representing apparel, footwear, and other sewn products companies.

Personal Qualifications

Sewing machine operators must be able to work at a steady, rapid pace. They must be able to tolerate the repetitive nature of the work, while performing tasks consistently and precisely.

Patternmakers must be able to look at a sketch or model and judge the sizes, shapes, and number of pattern pieces the garment will require. They should have a knowledge of fabrics and their characteristics. Cutting room workers should have a concept of shapes and space in order to assemble colors and shapes into patterns.

Occupations can be adapted for workers with disabilities. Persons should contact their school or employment counselors, their state office of vocational rehabilitation, or their state department of labor to explore fully their individual needs and requirements as well as the requirements of the occupation.

Where Employed

According to the Bureau of Labor Statistics, in 2002, there were almost one million production workers in the apparel industry. Most jobs are found in eight States: Alabama, California, Georgia, New York, North Carolina, Pennsylvania, Tennessee, and Texas. The industry had about 24,000 establishments, with employment concentrated in large firms. Three out of four jobs are in establishments with 50 or more workers

Employment Outlook

According to the Bureau of Labor Statistics, employment in the apparel industry is expected to decline rapidly through the year 2012. The movement of plants from the United States to countries with a cheap labor force is reducing the demand for apparel workers in the United States.

Greater productivity made possible by labor-saving machinery is also reducing the need for these workers. Some job openings will arise as experienced workers transfer to other industries, retire, or leave the workforce.

Entry Methods

Job seekers can apply for work at a state employment office. Some answer newspaper ads or apply at an apparel factory. Companies prefer to hire skilled machine sewers, but they do hire new workers and train them on the job under the guidance of section leaders or skilled workers. New workers start by sewing simple seams.

Beginners in cutting rooms start as assemblers or spreaders. Experienced assemblers and spreaders may start to learn cutting. Pressers can learn this work in a short time.

It takes several years to become a skilled patternmaker. Pattern graders are former workers from cutting rooms or other departments.

Advancement

Pattern graders and cutters sometimes advance to patternmaking jobs. Assemblers may become spreaders. After some years on the job they may become markers or cutters. Pressers can move on to more difficult tasks and become finish pressers.

Advancement for sewing room workers consists of higher piecework earnings from higher output. Some become section heads.

For Further Research

The American Apparel and Footwear Association, 1601 N. Kent Street, Suite 1200, Arlington, VA 22209. Web site: www.americanapparel.com

UNITE HERE, 275 7th Avenue, New York, NY 10001-6708. Web site: www.unitehere.org

Acknowledgments

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