

Dancers



Occupational Brief Title Codes:

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Occupational Subtitles:

- Choreographers
- Dance Instructors

Work Classification Based Related

D.O.T. Occupations:

- Actors and Actresses
- Dancing Instructors
- Singers
- Stage Directors

Interests Based Related

G.O.E. Occupations:

- Artist and Repertoire Managers
- Choreographers
- Dance Studio Managers
- Dancing Instructors

Skills Based Related

O*NET Occupations:

- Makeup Artists, Theatrical and Performance
- Models
- Professional Photographers
- Set Designers

Noteworthy Quote:

"It is important to recognize that dancers and choreographers serve the role of informing society of where it is going and what we need to pay attention to for our well-being. Artists develop their sensitivities as they must be able to translate these messages to society so they are understood."

– Marilynn Danitz, Past President, American Dance Guild, Choreographer/Artistic Director, High Frequency Wavelengths Dance Company, New York, New York

Dancers (danc-ers) perform alone, with partners, or with a group to entertain audiences. They may perform classical, modern, or acrobatic dances, coordinating body movements to musical accompaniment to tell a story, interpret ideas, express rhythm and sound, or express their own deep convictions or beliefs.

The body can perform such actions as rotating, bending, stretching, jumping, and turning. By varying these physical actions and using different dynamics, human beings can devise an infinite number of body movements. Out of the range of movements that the body is capable of performing, every culture emphasizes certain features in its dance styles.

It is not known when people first began to dance. However, for several reasons, many people feel that it is possible that dance developed along with the evolution of our species. Many animals perform dance-like movements in situations similar to human courtship and play.

The first formal dances were those of early tribes. They performed dances such as war dances, rain dances, or dances to celebrate events. Although dance has changed over the years, today's dance shares many common elements with these older tribal dances.

There are four primary elements involved in dancing. They are the use of space, the use of time, the use of the body's weight, and the use of energy flow. The use of space involves using patterns on the floor or the use of the shapes made by the body during the dance. The use of time involves speeding up or slowing down the dance through the use of tempo and rhythmic changes in order to produce the desired effect. The use of the body's weight means defying gravity in order to produce graceful movements by the body of the dancer through the use of strength. The use of energy flow involves the use of small or large movements or freely flowing motion.

There are two main kinds of dancing today. These two kinds of dance are dancing for participation and dancing for presentation. Many people today enjoy dancing as a form of recreation. This type of dancing does not require an audience. This is called dancing for participation. Dancing is also a form of art. Professional dancers, who entertain audiences, spend years of study and practice to learn this art. This is called dancing for presentation. This type of dancing is a profession that requires full-time effort. In dancing for presentation or professional dancing, the movements tend to be difficult and can require years of training.

Western dance has several main styles. The best known are ballet, ballroom, modern dance, jazz dance, and tap dance. The styles may overlap. A modern character dance, for instance, may be part of a ballet. Most dancers concentrate their efforts on one style. However, many professional dancers also learn other styles. They may perform in adaptations for musical comedies, opera, movies, videos, and commercials. Many sing and act, as well as dance.

Work Performed

Dancers may perform in a group, or with a partner. Other skilled dancers do solo work. Generally, they dance to music. They may be known by the kind of dancing they do, such as ballet or tap. Dancers perform in theatres, nightclubs, motion pictures, and on television.

In most dancing, performers execute movements with grace. In classical ballet, the movements are uniform, stylized, and precise. In other dancing, there is a movement sequence. However, the dancers may use some variation to give the performance individual style or flair. In some dancing, the performers may express the meaning of the dance with blunt, aggressive, awkward, slouching, or ungainly movements.

Ballet dancers perform dances that often tell a story or suggest a theme. The stylized and uniform technique demands strength, concentration, and body control. Only dancers with years of training can make this dancing seem effortless.

Modern dancers perform dances that depict a character or express a mood. Modern dancers have technical skills in ballet. However, the technique of modern dance is freer and more creative, and is marked by experimentation. Body posture and facial expressions help convey the theme of a modern dance.

Ethnic dance, a dance associated with a particular people and cultural heritage, expresses the unique outlook of an ethnic group. **Ethnic dancers** may perform the Flamenco of Spanish gypsies, African American dances, American Indian dances, or the hula dance of Hawaii. Two types of American ethnic dances include jazz and tap.

Jazz dancers combine ballet and modern dance with ethnic movements. Most dancers who work in musicals, nightclubs, dinner theatres, sports entertainment, movies, and on television have been trained in jazz dance. They often have singing and acting ability as well.

Much of the work of dancers consists of rehearsals. When they get a job or an assignment, they must first learn the movement sequence or the dances they will perform. They may spend weeks rehearsing before they perform before an audience or a camera.

Many dancers take dance classes daily throughout their career to keep physically fit. Many dancers also combine performance work with teaching, choreography, or both.

Dance instructors teach forms of dancing for professional, educational, or recreational purposes. They explain and demonstrate techniques and methods of moving the body to musical or rhythmic accompaniment. Instructors may work with children, adolescents, adults, or the elderly. They may teach in private dance studios, elementary or high schools, colleges or universities, or for recreational programs.

Choreographers create original dance sequences and routines, and develop new interpretations of existing dances. In order to achieve a desired effect, choreographers usually instruct performers at rehearsals. Oftentimes, choreographers are also involved in auditioning performers. Some even direct and arrange entire presentations.

Dancers must be able to receive verbal instructions and must be able to interpret the choreographer's ideas into movement. Much work today is developed based on an individual dancer's beliefs and life experiences. In this way, the dancer's personality is included in the dance. This

movement in the dance field has been largely incorporated into modern dance.

Working Conditions

Dancing is strenuous. Most performances take place at night or in the afternoon, so most rehearsals and practices are held during the day. Between rehearsals and performances, dancers often work long hours, including weekends and holidays. Travel is also required for road shows, especially musical productions and other family entertainment.

Dancing often requires sacrifice. The demands of practice, lessons, and auditions leave little time for recreation or leisure activities. The intense competition for jobs leaves little time for social pursuits.

Dances and rehearsals take place in a variety of locations. Dancers may work, at times, in modern, climate controlled environments. At other times, they may be required to rehearse or perform in older, uncomfortable settings that lack modern conveniences such as air conditioning.

Hours and Earnings

The normal workweek for dancers is thirty hours, which include rehearsals, matinees, and evening performances. Dancers may perform in nightclubs eight times or more a week. In a theater, their hours on stage may be few. However, they put in many more hours in practice or rehearsal. Those in ballet, modern, or opera dance companies work about thirty-six to forty weeks a year. Dancers on a one-hour television show may rehearse about five days or about thirty hours in order to prepare for the show.

Earnings vary greatly. In general, the earnings from dancing are low because employment is irregular. Dancers often add to their income by taking other temporary jobs or teaching dance. According to the Bureau of Labor Statistics, in 2002, dancers earned an average of about \$27,000 a year, while choreographers averaged around \$34,000 a year, and instructors averaged around \$30,000 a year. Individual earnings, however, ranged anywhere from under \$13,000 a year to well-over \$50,000 a year. Only a few well-known dancers and choreographers saw earnings ranging from \$80-100,000 a year or more.

Earnings for many professional dancers are regulated by a union. The producer of a show negotiates a contract with the necessary union to specify minimum salaries and hours of work among other provisions. Dancers covered by a union contract get some paid sick leave, paid vacations, and health and pension benefits provided by the union. Nonunion dancers often do not receive fringe benefits. Dancers on tour receive an additional allowance for room and board, as well as extra compensation for overtime.

Education and Training

Serious training for dancers usually begins at 10 to 12 years of age, although formal ballet training often begins

at 5 to 8 years of age with a private teacher or an independent ballet school. In their early teens, students should begin to focus their training on a particular style. They should also decide whether to pursue additional training through a dance company's school or a college dance program. Students who demonstrate potential may receive more intensive and advanced professional training. Leading dance school companies, for instance, often have summer programs from which they choose promising students for full-time training and study.

Many dancers have their first professional audition by the time they are 17 or 18. However, even after a dancer has turned professional, training and practice must continue throughout their career to remain fit and competitive. Dancers attend classes every day, and they spend many hours in rehearsals.

Formal post-secondary education is not a rigid requirement for dancers. In fact, ballet dancers who spend years in college may be at a disadvantage when they finally audition against dancers of seventeen or eighteen. However, a broad, general education can be extremely valuable. Courses in music, literature, history, drama, and the visual arts, for instance, build a dancer's skill in interpreting dramatic episodes, ideas, and feelings, and researching roles or parts. A college degree can also be helpful for dancers who retire at an early age, or otherwise decide to enter another related line of work, such as management or directing. In fact, although studio schools and local recreational programs usually require only performance experience, a college degree is required to teach dance in public schools or institutions of higher education.

More than 250 colleges and universities offer a bachelor's, master's, or doctoral degree for the study of dance—57 of which are accredited by the National Association of Schools of Dance. Most programs are offered through the school's department of music, theater, or fine arts.

Many programs concentrate on modern dance, but some also offer courses in ballet and classical techniques, jazz, and culturally specific dances. Other courses may include dance composition, the history of dance, criticism, movement analysis, and dance education.

Unions

Unions negotiate collective bargaining agreements on wages, hours, working conditions, and other benefits. Dancers in some professional dance companies belong to the American Guild of Musical Artists (AFL-CIO). Dancers on television may belong to the American Federation of Television and Radio Artists. Those in stage musicals often belong to the Actors' Equity Association. Many in films belong to the Screen Actors Guild or the Screen Extras Guild. Those in nightclubs and variety shows may belong to the American Guild of Variety Artists. Performers may, however, sign individual contracts with special terms that are better than the minimums agreed upon by the union and the producer.

Personal Qualifications

Dancers need commitment, patience, perseverance, and self-discipline to stand the stress of hard work, rejection at auditions, and an uncertain job outlook. Since dancers perform as a part of a team with choreographers, other dancers, and accompanists or musicians, they must be able to work well with others.

Dancers need stamina in order to practice and perform and to follow the strenuous schedule often required. Agility, flexibility, coordination, grace, and a sense of rhythm are all important. Dancers should have creativity in order to express themselves through movement.

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, professional dancers and choreographers held about 37,000 positions at any one time. There were many others between engagements so that the total number of people working as dancers over the course of the year was greater.

Professional dancers worked for performing arts companies including dance, theater, and opera companies; for clubs, hotels, resorts, and food service and drinking establishments; for casinos, theme parks, or cruise ships; at fairs, carnivals, and parades; or in educational services for dance studios and schools, and colleges and universities. Nearly 1 out of every 5 dancers and choreographers were self-employed.

Dancers can work in television, videos, movies, sports entertainment, or live theatre. They may dance on television shows, in stage musicals, in music videos or concerts, or for sports events, awards shows, festivals, or industrial shows. Although New York City is the home of many major dance companies, most major cities have at least one full-time professional dance company.

Employment Outlook

The employment of dancers and choreographers is expected to increase about as fast as the national average for all occupations through the year 2012. Overall, the Bureau of Labor Statistics projects a growth rate of 13.3 percent in the employment of dancers and choreographers—that is an increase of nearly 5,000 jobs. Over the same period, an additional 23,000 jobs are expected to open due to replacement needs.

Continued public interest in dance will sustain large dance companies, but even at the best of times work is not always steady. The number of applicants will continue to vastly exceed the number of job openings. In fact, at any one time the number of unemployed dancers is about equal to the number of those employed. However, competition

among male dancers is less severe because there are fewer of them.

Adding to employment limitations, funding from public and private organizations, including the National Endowment for the Arts, is not expected to keep pace with rising production costs. This will result in fewer performances and slow employment growth among many small and mid-size groups who depend on this kind of support.

Because of the intense competition for jobs, only the most talented find regular employment. In general, the best opportunities will continue to be with national dance companies. Opera companies and dance groups affiliated with colleges and universities, and television and motion pictures will offer some employment. Music videos will also provide some jobs for dancers and choreographers. In addition, the growing popularity of dance has resulted in increased opportunities to teach dance.

Entry Methods

Many dancers begin by appearing in local performances. Social groups or clubs usually need talent for their shows. Dancers may also find opportunities to dance at local parades, fairs, and festivals.

Dancers should make every effort to audition for paid professional work. They can learn of these opportunities by reading trade magazines and by talking to other dancers. They should attend shows and get to know show people who may know of job leads or other opportunities. Many dancers register with a booking agent. Finding employment may mean moving to a city where the dance companies or other employers stage their shows.

Many dancers earn a spot in a Broadway chorus line, a line in a nightclub, or a dance group on television. Touring with a company may offer short-term employment.

Advancement

Advancement generally takes the form of a growing reputation, more frequent work, better roles, and higher pay. Very few dancers, however, reach the status of top billing with their name in lights. The physical demands of this work exact a heavy price. Most dancers stop performing before they are forty.

When dancers no longer dance, they may become teachers or coaches, choreographers, notators who write down the movements, music, costumes, background, and other details of a dance performance, or move into other technical, creative, or production positions. Some move into management positions such as company artistic directors, dance directors, tour managers, press agents, wardrobe supervisors, or other related work.

For Further Research

American Dance Guild, PO Box 2006, Lenox Hill Station, New York, NY 10021. Web site: www.americandanceguild.org

National Association of Schools of Dance, 11250 Roger Bacon Drive, Suite 21, Reston, VA 20190-5248. Web site: nasd.arts-accredit.org

National Dance Association, 1900 Association Dr., Reston, VA 20191. Web site: www.aahperd.org/nda

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