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'Timely, practical advice for
developing contacts and skills'

Jo Taylor, 4 Talent Manager at Channel 4



how to get a job in
television

**BUILD YOUR CAREER FROM RUNNER
TO SERIES PRODUCER**

Elsa Sharp

How to Get a Job in Television

Elsa Sharp

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Foreword

Peter Bazalgette

Nothing delights me more than assisting young people who really want to enter the TV industry, who closely watch and love the medium, who have researched some of the production companies which make the shows and have already managed to get some media experience while at college. Nothing irritates me more, on the other hand, than being introduced to the gormless offspring of acquaintances who have emerged from college with little to recommend them and, in the absence of any other ideas, ‘think I might go into TV.’

The previous paragraph may make me sound like an unsympathetic swine. But in fact I love helping ambitious graduates. I just want to see that they have already advertised their media ambitions in some practical way. Now that everyone can make their own content and distribute it on the likes of YouTube there are so many ways of demonstrating your interest in media.

The great thing about this book is that it is packed with pertinent advice from current practitioners – people who know what working in television today is all about. And it is, indeed, a great time to be entering our business. Let me explain why. When I went into television, in the 1970s, there were pretty well just two employers: the BBC and ITV. They made the shows and distributed them via the three channels they owned. In the BBC, if you behaved yourself, you could climb a corporate ladder and in four years you’d get your own office. To begin with it would have false curtains, but in six years you might even get real ones. Today, with tens of broadcasters owning hundreds of channels, with more than a thousand independent producers, not to mention new digital content houses, the choice and opportunities are far superior. And you have the chance to make decisions about your own career path rather than have them made for you by some remote personnel department. The fluid,

freelance world may seem perilous, but to resourceful, self-confident individuals it is a boon.

One characteristic, I'd suggest, that all content creators ought to have is the desire to entertain, to capture people's emotions. This holds true whether you work in news, sport, game shows, reality, documentary, drama or animation. You have something to say and you want people to listen.

And good luck – if you have the fortitude to knock on enough doors you will always succeed.

Peter Bazalgette

TV format creator and former independent producer

Preface

Welcome to *How To Get A Job In Television*, a careers guide to help you get a foothold and create a career path in television production. If you want to work in TV I hope this book will be an entertaining and useful guide.

I've been working in TV as a freelancer since 1994 and I'd like to give you an invaluable insight into the challenges of working in the industry and a few tips on how to get on using my own experience and talking to successful TV professionals. There is no other guide like this.

TV is a notoriously difficult industry to get into and to progress within, there is no set career path and more people want to be in TV than any other career.

This is where *How To Get A Job In Television* can help.

This book is aimed at graduates, people in other careers wanting a change, and new entrants, such as runners, junior researchers and researchers wishing to develop and further their careers in the industry.

My aim is to give everyone information that is usually only gained through experience and observation. This handbook is packed with useful tips and information that you would not otherwise be privy to. There are six chapters full of advice and anecdotes about finding a job and sustaining a career in TV. It explains how to find work experience, look for work, make and develop contacts, write a CV and get your first job. It outlines what's involved in different job roles and the skills required to do them, and how to progress and stay employed.

I reveal the essential skills required to be a researcher, assistant producer, producer, self-shooting producer/director, director and series producer and explain the different career routes and choices to make to reach these goals based on my own experience as a TV researcher, my knowledge as a series producer and a recruitment executive, and through interviews with those in the know.

A significant part of the book gives training advice to researchers: from how to find locations to dealing with difficult contributors. The researcher is a key role in television and the starting point for a career which could lead to producing and/or directing, executive producing and commissioning. The researcher is responsible for coming up with ideas, angles and stories, finding the content, characters, locations and setting up the programme and delivering the producer's vision and demands. Training and developing researching talent will create the programme makers of the future.

This guide draws on a range of sources from people working within the industry at every level to training bodies and HR executives within independent production companies. I've interviewed and profiled key TV executives: people who have forged successful TV careers, who reveal how they entered the industry, what qualities and attributes have helped them and what they consider to be essential key skills.

It includes contributions from across the board – runners, freelance researchers, managing directors of independent production companies and heads of creative talent. They have all been generous with their time and gave honest advice with candour.

This is not an academic text but it is packed with practical tips gained from hard earned experience. It is certainly something I wish I had been able to buy when I was starting out. There were no books, no access to the internet and no company websites back then!

You think you want to work in television? Well, here's where you make a start.

PROFILE

Richard Hopkins, managing director of Fever Media



In his three years as creative head of format entertainment at the BBC, Richard was responsible for developing, pitching and producing a number of hit shows including *Strictly Come Dancing* which has been sold to over 31 territories worldwide.

He had a key role in the success of *Strictly Come Dancing* as an international hit, winning the Rose D'Or, Broadcast Award 2005, RTS 2005, Tric Award 2005 and 2006, TV Quick 2005 and 2006 as well as selling it to ABC in the USA, where it has been nominated for several awards including an Emmy.

Fever was launched in April 2006 by Richard and Emmy-award-winning producer David Mortimer. They are two of the UK's most respected TV executives, show runners and entertainment format creators. In its first two years Fever had a raft of new commissions.

Production credits

April 2008 – at the time of writing (spring '09) Managing Director of Fever Media

Responsible for developing and executive producing:

Fortune: Million Pound Giveaway (ITV1), *The People's Quiz* (BBC1), *No Place Like Home* (ITV1), *Murder Most Famous* (BBC2), *Britain's Bravest* (five), *Find Me The Face* (BBC 3)

2003–2006 Creative Head of Format Entertainment

BBC Television

Strictly Come Dancing (BBC1), *Strictly Dance Fever* (BBC1), *It Takes Two* (BBC2), *Hard Spell* (BBC1), *Star Spell* (BBC1), *We'll Meet Again* (BBC1), *The House of Tiny Tearaways* (BBC3)

Executive Producer at BBC Entertainment

Mastermind, Junior Mastermind, The Weakest Link, National Lottery Jet Set, A Question Of Sport, Sudo-Q, Facing The Music, Restored To Glory, Traitor, The Sack Race, Come and Have A Go, Wright Around The World, Dear Father Christmas, The Generation Fame, Didn't They Do Well and Never Mind The Fullstops (BBC4)

2002–2003 Executive Producer, *Fame Academy* and *Comic Relief Does Fame Academy* Endemol UK

2002–2003 Executive Producer, *Fear Factor*. Endemol UK for Sky 1

2001–2002 Producer, *The Runner* (Pilot) ABC, Los Angeles

2001 Endemol UK Development Executive

2000–2001 Executive Producer, *Big Breakfast Planet 24*

2000 Live Series Producer, *Big Brother* (Series 1) Endemol UK

1999–2000 Series Producer, *11 O'Clock Show* Talkback

1999 Live Editor, *Big Breakfast Planet 24*

1988–1999 Series Producer, *Baby Baby Wall To Wall*

Planet 24 Senior Producer, Planet USA

Producer/Director, *Hotel Babylon* (BBC1), *The Big Breakfast*, *Gaytime*, *The Word* Planet 24

Various producer positions at radio stations: Kiss 100 (Emap), BBC Worldwide, Kiss FM (Pirate), Sky TV, Power FM, Sunshine Radio (France)

What does your job involve?

My day-to-day job is a combination of things; managing and controlling the finance of the company, working with the development team to come up with new ideas to pitch to various channels, and working with the production teams with ideas that have been commissioned to make them successful shows. I'm doing this both in the UK and in the US. It's a constant and very tricky process when you're running a small company, either because things aren't going as well as you want and you're struggling to create new business or things *are* going well and you're struggling to control new business.

How did you get into television?

I did work experience at Sky when it was a small company and at the same time I was working at Kiss FM which was a pirate radio station. I started working there during my university years and continued there afterwards. It was trying to win a legal license and I started doing a programme called *The Word*, which was a spoken word programme to give them a bit more credibility above and beyond just playing records.

I worked at a number of stations before finally going back to work on the by then legal Kiss. I became a producer on the day-time shows. I was looking for a breakfast presenter and I went to meet Chris Evans, who I used to listen to on GLR.

He said he would love to come and work at Kiss except he had just done a pilot show called *The Big Breakfast*. I then saw an advert for a researcher for the show in *The Guardian*. I applied and got Chris to write my reference. I got quite a good reference because we had become friends. I was interviewed and got the job. So I went from day-time producer at Kiss, a spoilt and easy job; spoilt by the record companies, and easy because it's producing music radio shows, which are significantly easier than television shows, to working night and day on *The Big Breakfast*, quite literally. But I learned to love it. I worked my way up through various roles, it was a sort of 'university of television' working on a big show like that because you move up quickly, you get to work on everything and you learn a lot quickly.

I worked as an AP on the features section of the show, as an AP on the outside broadcasts and as an AP on *Zig and Zag* in the studio, learning all sorts of aspects on that one show. I then worked as a producer.

What was your big break – meeting Chris Evans?

Yes. He used to invite an audience down to see his shows. I went to see it and I spoke to him afterwards. As soon as my wife Cecile started speaking he said, 'Oh, I really like your accent, why don't you come on my show?' She ended up doing little features on his show and we

ended up becoming friends. When that job opportunity came up on *The Big Breakfast* it helped. It wasn't nepotism as such. I didn't ring him up and say, 'Oh, can I have the job?' I applied for the job as anyone else would, but I put him down as a reference because he knew me.

Did you have a game plan?

Not really because I'd never thought I wanted to work in the TV industry particularly, it just suddenly seemed like it wasn't a bad idea. I remember wanting to work on the music features just because I wanted to get free CDs! It was as trivial as that really!

What qualities have helped your succeed?

Being able to write. Human skills are very important for television, it's about getting on with your team, keeping your immediate boss happy, dealing with talent, creativity; all the time you've got to be thinking of better ways of doing something than any other show that's been on, or better ways of improving the show that you're producing. They might be tiny differences but cumulatively they'll make a show much better. Sometimes you notice how a show has changed hands and got worse, or better, and you're not quite sure what's changed but you can just feel the quality going out, and that's normally from the quality of a team, not just an individual.

What's been your best moment in TV so far?

Craig, the winner of *Big Brother 1*, coming out of the house when I was live series producer. I felt like that character in the *Truman Show*, controlling the show and if I stopped speaking the show would look really awful. You feel like you've really earned your money with that feeling! No one had experienced *Big Brother* before and Craig had been taken into the hearts of the nation. He came out without us really knowing what he was going to do. All the fireworks were going off in the background and he gave his £70,000 prize money to a Down's syndrome kid, which sounds like the most cheesily constructed reality TV moment, but it wasn't. It

was just something he did and was incredibly moving at the time. I tried to talk to Davina but I was so choked up I couldn't actually speak for a few seconds. Not only was the show concluding that I had contributed a massive amount to it but it concluded in a way that you couldn't have scripted. So that was bigger than the other moment.

What was the worst thing?

Being booted out of somewhere. It's never nice. It happened to me once, although I always claim I resigned. You feel at that moment that you'll never work again and it's incredibly upsetting. But you learn a lot from something like that happening. You learn more from some failures than you do from having no failures at all.

And *Fame Academy* not doing well. Before it went on air, we were all making up our jokes and tabloid headlines like, 'Oh, what a shame academy' and 'lame academy'. It became successful eventually but it started off dismally and got slated in the press because it was a BBC reality show. That was really tough, the tabloids being chucked at you all the time, it was immense. But you learn an awful lot from it, you realise the power of the tabloids. Once they don't like you it's an incredible upwards struggle, it's a growing experience really.

Chapter One

The bad, the good and the ugly and me

The bad: TV – are you tough enough?

I could start this book with a eulogy about how lucrative, fantastic and fun it is to work in TV. It is. But let's start with a few home truths. If you want to work in TV you need to know what you're getting into. It's not a career for the faint hearted.

Satirical BBC 4 TV show *Charlie Brooker's Screenwipe* makes a few well-placed observations. The episode, *A Career in Telly*, is biting funny with more than just a modicum of truth. It starts:

'Ooh, look it's you, a fresh faced nigh on foetal 21 year old finishing your media studies degree with an earnest documentary about a local homeless man called Billy. It's well received and you send your CV to 10 million different production companies and finally get a reply from a company offering you a job as a runner – but it's a start . . .' The letter the innocent young hopeful is holding says, 'Please be prepared to sell your soul'.

Sometimes your ideals, values, family and friends can go out the window in pursuit of a challenging career in TV.

'Television is full of very entertaining, very exciting and very fun interesting people,' says Kate Phillips, head of development at BBC Entertainment. Yes, some of the most clever, gifted, funny and creative individuals you'll ever meet work in TV but there are also some pretty horrendous people too. 'It's also full of egos, so if you're sensitive I really don't think you'll last that long,' she adds.

'The most difficult thing about working in TV is probably the team you find yourself working with,' says assistant producer Harjeet Chhoker. 'Despite what people say about TV, it is a very hard industry to work in, with long hours, stressful situations and some of the most

unglamorous situations you'll ever find yourself in; you'll be asked to do things you'll wish you didn't have to. Therefore, having a good team to work with is vital. You could be doing the worst programme in the world, but if you have a good team then it's not that bad. But there are times when you end up working for people who are rude, unreasonable, manipulative, discouraging, easily stressed and under pressure. You can work on the most resourced, big budgeted show, like *Big Brother*, and it can still be hell!

Jo Taylor, talent manager at Channel 4 agrees, 'It's a very selfish industry and it's very ruthless. It doesn't suffer fools gladly or tolerate weakness. If someone's not able to do their job properly it's so incestuous that it gets around the industry really quickly. It's a very superficial industry. If you have a hit, everyone wants to know you, if not...'

Not only do you need to be tough to work in TV, you need to be absolutely driven to succeed. It's an industry that's notoriously difficult to get into and you're competing against hundreds of other clamouring wannabes. Because it's perceived to be so glamorous many, many people want to work in TV.

'Before you set out you should know that the competition is extraordinary. There are many more candidates trying to get into the television industry than there are jobs,' says Julia Waring, head of creative talent at RDF Television. 'You need to be very realistic.'

Internet TV website Production Base is *the* online job network for TV production. It's the most popular and easily accessed website and most freelancers use it to find work. It's primarily a marketplace for hiring talent where freelancers can post their CVs and details of their availability for TV production companies to view. Production companies also use it to advertise jobs.

According to statistics from Production Base (2006) there are 70,000 researchers currently working in TV, but on any one day there may be 5,000 subscribing freelancers but only 250 jobs posted. In these recent lean times of recession 100 applicants could be chasing just one job and there are hardly any jobs advertised at all.

Getting into TV is hard; it is all about who you know. According to Skillset (the skills sector council for the creative industries in Britain) only 27 per cent of people working in the industry heard about their most recent job through a traditional recruitment route such as an advertisement; 70 per cent rely on contacts to get a foothold. 'Word of mouth is very important in this business,' says Richard Hopkins, of Fever Media, 'which makes it difficult for outsiders to break into. Few jobs are advertised, it's about contacts.'

'You get jobs by knowing people, not necessarily intimate friends but the last person you worked for may take you on or recommend you to somebody else. In fact, the pool of good talented people is very small. That's the real horrible truth of it,' says Julia Waring.

You get work by hearing of jobs – not easy if you don't know anyone, as people tend to work with people they've worked with before. But if you're hungry, tenacious and good enough, once you are in you can progress fast. If you get along with people you'll hear about work through them and will be recommended to others. 'If they like you then they'll work with you again,' says Daisy Goodwin, managing director of Silver River. 'If I like someone I would tend to give them lots of breaks.'

'If somebody does a really good job then you are more likely to ask them back again,' says Julia Waring. 'You are always going to go with someone who's been recommended strongly rather than a new person. You are always going to go with the familiar and ask the same people back again.'

But making contacts and being good does not always ensure continuous work in an increasingly competitive freelance market of shrinking budgets, uncertainty and cut backs. Good people can remain out of work for long periods too.

'The downside of working in television is the instability, insecurity and the knowledge that however right or however good you are, it might not be enough. It's seen as a labour of love,' says Moray Coulter, production and talent executive at ITV Productions. 'However committed you are that's not necessarily the thing that's going to make your career shine.'

TV is a mostly freelance industry. It's unusual to stay with one company and become a contracted member of staff. You'll probably be on a short contract with no job security, no sick or holiday pay. You might be unemployed for weeks between contracts or go from one burn-out job to another without respite.

'Changing teams all the time in a predominantly freelance community is quite a difficult discipline,' says Richard Hopkins. 'I don't suppose many people in most professions will change the people they work with as much as happens in television.' This can sometimes work to your advantage – if you find someone difficult to get along with then you don't have to work with them for very long but it's important to get along with everyone and fit in which is not always very easy.

As time goes on and you work in the same genre you'll probably come across and work with the same people time and time again. You'll work in new production companies where you know people from previous productions. They will become friends as well as colleagues; as you progress up the ladder you'll be in a position to pick your own teams, colleagues and associates. And if you impress your producer you might be taken from job to job with them.

It's either feast or famine being a freelancer. In recent years with personnel changes at different channels and a down turn in advertising, not to mention a global recession, there are more good people competing for the same jobs which means more freelancers are out of work than ever. 2007 was a particularly bad year. 'The industry was in a state of flux with controllers, heads of departments and commissioners changing and things being restructured,' said Michelle Matherson, talent executive at BBC Factual. Some freelancers worked regularly but for many it was grim and many left the industry. Things have become worse in the recession with cutbacks and budget cuts at all broadcasters.

I've been a freelancer in TV since 1994 and have worked for 15 different production companies – I've been invited back to several a few times and worked at Planet 24 on and off for over five years in

production. The longest I was out of work was three months. On average I might have a break of three to four weeks between productions. As a single woman in my 20s I didn't mind the long hours. To recuperate I'd take holidays after a stint on a production – despite the fear, between jobs, that I might never work again. This is a common feeling whatever level you are at.

Ruth Wrigley has had a successful career in television as a freelancer for over 20 years. She was the founding series editor on *The Big Breakfast*, the executive producer on the award winning first *Big Brother* and won a BAFTA for *How Do You Solve A Problem Like Maria?* She admits that in between jobs she experiences the same feeling of apprehension. 'I always think I'll never work again. That's what's so horrible about telly, it's like playing musical chairs. People work, work, work and suddenly they bring someone else in and the in crowd's the out crowd and vice versa.'

Being a freelancer is precarious and there can be long periods of unemployment. 'I was once out of work for five weeks when I finished my first AP job,' says assistant producer Harjeet Chhokar. 'I went from being a very experienced researcher to being a very inexperienced AP. Companies wouldn't give me a job because they felt I needed more experience as an AP. Eventually a small company which was making a series for ITV2, which didn't have a big budget, took a chance on me and I was AP for the whole four-part series.'

It is also full of dilemmas – do you take the first job that comes along or do you wait for a show you really want to make that you might not necessarily be offered? The important thing to remember is that it's all about making strategic decisions, grasping opportunities as they arise and thinking about whether the project will suit you as an individual. 'Just be true to yourself, that's the thing,' says Ruth Wrigley.

It's important to hold your nerve if you do turn something down and to have faith that the right thing will turn up – eventually. But this unpredictability doesn't suit everybody.

The good

I've had the most incredible experiences in a career that has given me unique access to people and stories, and has allowed me to work with some of the most talented TV people in the country. I've produced several comedy game shows that have been fun to make and been hilarious to write and edit. I've worked with talented writers like Lucy Porter, Nick Hildred, Robin Ince, Phil Nice and Dave Cohen. I've cried with laughter filming a hidden camera show in towns and cities across Britain, making surprise hits on unsuspecting members of the public.

I've met and interviewed a wide range of celebrities from Simon Cowell, Ant and Dec to Michael Caine and Robbie Williams, as well as charity campaigners, obsessive collectors and experts of subjects I could never master.

TV allows you to enter worlds and to ask questions that people would like to ask but never get the opportunity. 'It brings privileged access,' says Moray Coulter. 'You've got a free path into other people's lives, other organisations' lives. You get a unique view of the world that not many other jobs do.'

'I love the fact that you get inside people's lives in a way that you could never do in any other job. It's amazing that you can ask people anything,' says Liz Mills, managing director of Top TV Academy, a training and recruitment agency. 'Because you wear the TV hat you can go behind the scenes and go to all sorts of places.'

TV is exciting and varied and it's never boring. 'Every day is different,' says Grant Mansfield, chairman RDF Media Group Content. 'No two days are the same. The truth about television is that it's enormous fun and collaborative, which I really like. People get well paid and what they make is watched by lots of people. People do work long hours and it is a ruthless industry but it gives you a grandstand view.'

'When I was working my way up it was three months in one place, six months in another, really good fun shifting and moving all the time. When you're doing a weekly live show the adrenalin

is pumping; you're aiming for one show and then working on the next one.'

TV is full of bright, inventive, inspiring people. It's irreverent and creative. And it is constantly stimulating – there is nothing like the buzz of coming up with ideas for a programme and seeing them go out on air for thousands of people to watch and talk about.

'Nothing, nothing beats seeing the final product and knowing all the tears, blood and sweat was worth it,' says Harjeet Chhokar. 'Some of the best times of my life have been whilst I have been working. I honestly think that it is a privilege to do what we do. I love working in TV and the thrill of seeing your show on the screen or hearing people talk about it is great.'

'You have to live every day of your working life determined to enjoy it. But never underestimate how easy it is to fail in television,' says Richard Hopkins. 'The fear of failure drives you and the absolute desire to get the next big hit is what drive you on, like a sad addiction!'

If you can cope well under pressure, are happy to sacrifice your friends and home life at times, weather the storms of freelancing, suffer constant rejection and compete for jobs with your former colleagues, television can be the most satisfying career.

It's interesting, entertaining and absorbing, giving you the most incredible and unique access to real stories of ordinary and extraordinary people, celebrities, experts, heroes and villains. It's also very well paid especially when you reach the top with salaries paid to executive producers in the six figure bracket with bonuses, company shares and a percentage of the formats and programmes they generate on top.

The ugly – how do you plot the right career path?

The right job doesn't always come along when it suits you – luck, chance and being available at the right time all have a major part to play. This could mean not working for a few weeks and waiting or taking something that's less appealing because you need to

financially. It's not always easy to turn down work because it's the wrong type of show or the wrong rate if you have rent or a mortgage to pay, but if you want to make a name in a certain genre you must have the nerve and the finances to hold out for the right job.

If you want to work on a certain type of programme or genre it's best to try to concentrate on being continuously employed in that field, but it can be difficult. You won't get a job without the right experience but how do you get that experience if no one is willing to take a risk on you?

Working in TV at any level isn't always easy and is never straightforward. If you do manage to pull off the impossible you might not always get the recognition you deserve or even a thank you – and someone else is always ready to claim the credit. You have to be calm under pressure, cheerful, tenacious and resourceful even when the going is tough and you're tired beyond belief.

With more broadcast TV channels than ever and advertising revenue being diluted between these and internet websites, budgets are getting tighter, schedules and teams are getting smaller, making it harder for those who are making the programme, forcing them to do a job that would have been shared between two or three people. It is quite common for producer directors to shoot, direct, produce, do the sound and even edit their own programmes. In the past they would have had the support of a cameraman, soundman, researcher and editor.

When you start working in TV it can be extremely stressful, delivering seemingly impossible programmes to unworkable deadlines, schedules and budgets.

'TV can be a nightmare, where you can find yourself still at work at 4am, not having slept or eaten and you can't remember the last time you saw your friends or family,' says Harjeet Chokker. 'It's full of egos and quite nasty people who are not afraid to shout and make others cry. This is when you have to remember that TV is a great industry to work in'.

You have to be mentally and physically tough, confident and focused. 'You've got to be able to work well under pressure because

inevitably there is going to be a deadline at some point when a show is going to go on air, whether it is pre-recorded or live, there's an enormous pressure to reach the deadline,' says Richard Hopkins.

You need to be resilient and resourceful in the face of a constant stream of dilemmas and conundrums. 'Something is going to go wrong, you're going to lose a location or the talent's going to pull out. It's always fire fighting in TV,' says Richard Drew. 'You need to be someone who's going to be positive and expect that things are going to go a little bit wrong. You need to find a way of overcoming those problems and solving those challenges and not be someone who's going to lose their head or get annoyed or moody.'

You need to have a contingency plan and a cool head. You need to be committed in order to immerse yourself in your production to the exclusion of everything else. 'You've got to have an instinct for getting on with people, for knowing what makes a good story, for working really hard and not getting too pushy. You've got to be dedicated to hard work and absolutely love telly,' says Liz Mills.

It's gruellingly tiring as most jobs are stressful, demanding and all consuming. 'Quite often it is long hours,' says Richard Hopkins. When in production, you have to be prepared to work weekends, late nights and early mornings (even through the night if you are working on a daily or live show) and do what it takes to deliver the programme. You might not see your friends and family until the show is over because even if you do have the time you're too exhausted to go out.

'You have to put your personal and social life on the backburner,' says Richard Drew. 'When I was show running I had to give up concert tickets, missed birthdays, all kinds of things. You shouldn't get yourself exploited, you shouldn't have to work 24/7, but you need to be able to put in the time when needed to get the show done.'

'When you're in your 20s you are prepared to undergo a lot of discomfort, big demands, no social life, to give in to your work,' says Moray Coulter. 'By the time you're 30 you're wanting a bit of your own life back, maybe you're having a family, maybe you're seeing

more of your friends, maybe you want a hobby. People drop out as it's so unforgiving. You have to give your all.'

TV is a young person's game or someone with boundless energy, commitment and enthusiasm. TV can be exploitative and some of the jobs you'll do as a runner are menial when you start. 'You have to do a lot of rubbish when you're a runner,' says Kate Phillips of BBC Entertainment. You're on the lowest rung of the ladder, a chauffeur, gofer, getter of lunch and in some cases barely on the minimum wage. The pay is low, though you can progress very quickly if you're good and get noticed. 'The worst thing about telly when you start is the hours, but if you're good you'll move up fast.'

Dealing with the talent

As well as off screen talent there's the on screen talent – presenters, celebrities, actors, reality show contestants and contributors. They're essential to your programme but often they can be difficult, unco-operative, prone to tantrums and a nightmare to work with. Often they'll have their own agenda and ideas which may not be the same as yours; you have to manage that difficult relationship.

I've seen presenters square up to producers, swear at them and threaten to walk out just before a live show, refuse to ask questions, attend interviews and create havoc because they refuse to wear something. I've seen presenters reduce producers to tears, have them fired or vilified. They can seem incredibly confident and funny on screen but some may just repeat what they hear on talk-back verbatim. As the producer you have to be on the ball knowing all the questions, the running order, the content and the timing of the interview. You'll be juggling the team, the schedule, the budget as well as the talent and content. So you need to be focused and strong.

I've had to:

- Brief a notorious sex pest presenter and then ignore his advances when he 'accidentally' brushed against my breast
- Silently take a tirade of abuse from a furious celebrity after a colleague failed to book them a cab

- Ask a shamed boxer who had been knocked out within 59 seconds of entering a ring to punch his way out of a giant paper bag
- Find hilarious contributors with extreme and usual hobbies/pets by phone and put them on a live studio breakfast show without meeting them first
- Find and vet (on the phone), test and produce a live five-minute item with new inventions and insane and eccentric inventors
- Persuade a pregnant mother of four disabled sons to come onto a daytime relationship show to discuss whether she would have an abortion if she was carrying another son with disabilities
- Find and then persuade the bereaved owner of a stuffed dead dog to drive down from Leeds to London overnight to appear on a show the next morning to celebrate their pet's life by performing a live tribute funeral
- Within a year of being in TV step in to direct a shoot I had set up when the director was fired and then edit the films I had shot for that week's transmission – with no experience of either
- Persuade an angry celebrity whose fee and travel expenses had been reduced to those his agent had agreed to go on air
- Calmly brief a late celebrity during make up, while the show was being transmitted live, to agree to and understand five different items before delivering them on air
- Find a double decker bus for filming an interview for the next day for free (no easy task when no bus company will release a vehicle from service – let alone for free)
- Direct and produce an item with a group of grumpy, naked, smelly and unco-operative poets without showing any dangly bits
- Found my job description had changed overnight and had to fight the world's press at film premieres to get access to and interview celebrities for next day's transmission (with no training or experience)
- Find factually accurate stories, with credible witnesses, which had the potential for dramatic reconstruction that could work as

12-minute films for a paranormal series, which hadn't been covered in the four previous series

- Answer the unreasonable demands of a bullying executive producer when I was in hospital with my mother who was having chemotherapy
- Create, produce, script, format and find talent for a 13-part travel gameshow in six weeks before six weeks of filming started with two teams filming around the world
- Devise, shoot and create the format for a 10-part gameshow with 200 films in six weeks then work for three weeks from 6am until midnight recording the studio shows
- Format, create and set up a 90-minute Saturday night gameshow pilot with 100 contestants filming around the country with a 20-foot egg in six weeks!

And me – how did I get my first break in TV?

I read history and English at the University of Sussex at a time when media studies degrees were pretty rare. It never occurred to me to train for or seek a job in TV. It seemed such an impossible task with no easily discernable career path and just six places a year on the BBC researcher trainee scheme to which thousands applied but for which only people from Oxbridge seemed to be accepted. I didn't have the confidence then to even try. I fell into television by accident.

I left university and worked as a journalist on a trade magazine before doing a post graduate qualification in journalism and freelancing for the music press. I believe that the skills I learned as a journalist were invaluable if not essential for a job as a TV researcher, as you use the same investigative and writing skills when putting together a brief, script, writing a list of questions, doing interviews or looking for new ideas and stories.

I got my first break in TV through word of mouth. I applied for a job as a music researcher on an entertainment show called *Big City*, a topical entertainment show made by Wall To Wall Television for

Carlton/ITV. Anna Richardson, a colleague from my journalism post grad course, told me that they were looking for a music specialist. She told me what she had been asked in the interview. I thought, 'I know that! I could do that!' and after several interviews with Nicola Gooch, the series producer and the executive producer, I was given a junior researcher position with a six week probationary period. The fact that I was a music specialist enabled me to make a shortcut into TV production, bypassing the usual first TV entry job – the runner. I was unusual in this respect but by no means unique. It is possible to go straight in as a researcher if you have a unique specialism and transferable skills to offer.

I was never given a clear brief or job description and I had no idea what I should be doing but I figured it out quite quickly. Using my experience as a journalist I found stories and came up with ideas, found and booked contributors, bands and celebrities, researched subjects and wrote interviews, briefs and scripts. I also found unusual (and free) locations, had to recce, set up and go on all the shoots – doing everything from writing the call sheet and arranging travel, parking, and lunch to finding any props, and supporting the edit by obtaining and clearing stills, music and clips.

These were all things I learnt as I went along, delivering what was asked of me – sometimes when I didn't have a clue where to look and didn't dare ask for fear of looking stupid!

It was fun and exciting but also frightening because it was constantly challenging. Although I was organised and planned ahead, I was always being asked for things at the last minute (and for free). Also, celebrities, bands, locations, contributors and stories could fall down at the last minute – as they always do. The schedule couldn't change with the show on air every week, so I'd have to find replacements at the last minute and rewrite and plan everything to fill our shoot day and the show.

It was stimulating but stressful. Failure was not an option. All the other researchers were all more experienced and more confident than I. I felt that I could be asked to leave at any time, but I worked

hard and was promoted to researcher after my six week probationary period and worked on the show for eight months until it finished its run. I never lost this fear of failure. It gave me an unrelenting desire to deliver and achieve results and so I was employed continuously.

Before this first job came to an end I heard by word of mouth of a new Saturday night ITV 1 entertainment show. Planet 24 had a terrible reputation as the TV equivalent of a sweat shop – the hours were long and gruelling and it was based in the Docklands, miles away from anywhere and difficult to get to. Former employees warned me against applying but my boss, Nicola Gooch, said that it was the best training ground in TV I could wish for. I'd make contacts, learn new skills and gain invaluable experience; that if I could survive there I could work anywhere.

So I decided to apply. I had a challenging interview with the series editor who sat with his feet on the desk, watching TV and typing at the same time as firing questions at me about what suggestions I had for guests, VTs, studio items and new ideas. I was offered the job the same day. I started the week after finishing at Wall To Wall Television.

Where have I worked?

I've worked in production making shows for all broadcasters, programme development and recruitment. I've worked on live studio shows as live pre-recorded shows, on location and across entertainment and factual entertainment genres.

I worked for the TV production company Planet 24 (a now defunct indie but pioneers and creators of defining and groundbreaking TV programmes *The Word*, *The Big Breakfast* and *Survivor*) between 1997 and 2002. I had five different roles on *The Big Breakfast* from producing and directing celebrity VT packages and producing the live show to features editor.

As well as working on *The Big Breakfast* in several different roles I have worked as a researcher, assistant producer, producer and series producer. I've series produced six different entertainment shows for

Endemol, BBC Entertainment, RDF Media and Prospect Pictures amongst others.

For the last five years I've worked in programme development for RDF Media, Fox and Celador Productions and my credits include *Rock School* (Channel 4), *Brand New You* (five), *Who's Had What Done* (ITV), *The Tim Lovejoy Show* (Sky One), *Turn Back Your Body Clock* (Channel 4) and *World of Compulsive Hoarders* (Channel 4).

I've also worked in programme recruitment which is where the inspiration for this book came from. In 2005 I became head of talent at Zig Zag Productions, hiring and spotting creative talent, nurturing and promoting runners, mentoring the trainee on the Channel 4 researcher scheme and helping freelancers find work when their contracts with the company ended.

Since 2007 I've worked on a freelance basis crewing up shows and finding creative talent up to senior level for the BBC, Objective Productions, Impossible Pictures and North One amongst others. This role involves finding, matching and nurturing key talent to specific programme briefs and giving freelancers help and advice to help them achieve their potential.

So, if you're still with me and you think you've got what it takes read on because I'll show you how you start . . .

PROFILE

Andrew O'Connor, chief executive officer, Objective Productions

Andrew has had a varied career in theatre, in television as an actor, writer, producer and director, and executive producer. In 1997 he retired from performing to concentrate on running his television production company, Objective Productions.

As a performer, Andrew began his career as a child actor in BBC TV



series, *Canal Children*. Later he appeared regularly as a comedian and presenter in TV programmes such as *Copycats*, *Live from the Palladium* and *The Alphabet Game*. Andrew also toured extensively as a live performer, first as a magician and then as a stand up comedian. As an actor he played lead roles in the musicals *Barnum*, *Me and My Girl* and *Billy*.

As a writer/producer he has created/co-created over fifty TV series including: *The Quick Trick Show*, Derren Brown's TV series and specials, *The Real Hustle* and *Peep Show*.

Andrew's TV shows have been nominated for national and international awards and have won two BAFTAs, a Golden Rose, a Silver Rose, a South Bank Show Award, three RTS Awards and four British Comedy Awards.

Programme credits

2007—at the time of writing (spring '09)

Comedy Sketchbook Series (BBC), *Derren Brown Mind Control* (USA) (Sci Fi Channel), *Mike Strutter 2* (MTV), *The Real Hustle* series 3, 4 (BBC), *Return of 'Allo, 'Allo* (BBC), *Star Stories* series 2, 3 (Channel 4), *The Peter Serafinowicz Show* (BBC), *Convention Crashers* (C4), *Derren Brown: The System* (C4), *Derren Brown Trick or Treat* series 2 (C4), *Comedy Live Presents* (C4), *The People Watchers* (BBC), *The Real Hustle Las Vegas* series 5 (BBC3), *Peep Show* series 5 (C4), *You've Got The Answer* (BBC pilot), *Kevin Bishop* series 1 (C4).

2006 Credits on co-productions

Indestructibles (BBC), *50 Greatest Television Dramas* (C4), *The Real Blue Nuns* (C4), *What the Pythons Did Next* (C4), *The Fame List* (C4).

2003–2006 executive producer

Derren Brown Russian Roulette (C4), *Greatest Magic Tricks in the Universe . . . Ever* (five), *Magick* (Channel 4), *Psychic Secrets Revealed* (five), *Secrets of Magic* series 1, 2 (BBC), *Comedy Heroes* 1, 2 (five), *Derren Brown Trick of The Mind* series 1, 2, 3 (C4), *4 Go Dating*, also co-creator (C4), *50 Worst Decisions* (Sky), *Best Unseen Ads* (Sky),