Why Study Venue and Entertainment Technology?

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An Industry Overview

People are drawn to the field of venue and entertainment technology for a variety of reasons. Some like being paid to be creative, while others enjoy having access to the state-of-the-art electronics that have become tools of the trade. Some are looking for the thrill of seeing their designs constructed as staged events, and others just can't picture themselves spending all day in an office, instead opting for a more dynamic workplace.

Whatever their reasons are, those now entering the field are stepping into a growth industry with a need for qualified employees. In a 2013 industry report, InfoComm found that audio visual technology generated $78 billion dollars globally in 2012, and projects that revenues will reach $115 billion in 2015 ("The Growing Audiovisual..."). During the ten years between 2003 and 2013, the number of audio and video equipment technicians employed in the United States increased by 50%, supplying over 56,000 jobs nationwide ("Occupational Employment and Wages, May 2013 Audio and Video Equipment Technicians"). Those technicians earned an average hourly wage of $22.03 in 2013, up more than 30% from ten years prior ("Occupational Employment and Wages, May 2003 Audio and Video Equipment Technicians").

With so many job openings at entry-level positions, you may be curious about how these professionals are spending their days. What jobs do they actually hold?

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The United States Department of Labor describes the duties of an Audio and Video Equipment Technician as follows:

> "Set up, or set up and operate audio and video equipment including microphones, sound speakers, video screens, projectors, video monitors, recording equipment, connecting wires and cables, sound and mixing boards, and related electronic equipment for concerts, sports events, meetings and conventions, presentations, and news conferences. May also set up and operate associated spotlights and other custom lighting systems." ("Occupational Employment and Wages, May 2013 Audio and Video Equipment Technicians")

This is an accurate but limited description of day to day responsibilities. InfoComm states that the three largest consumers of audiovisual goods and services are "corporations, educational institutions and government agencies ("The Growing Audiovisual Industry")," and if we pause to consider why these types of organizations are the top consumers, we arrive at the truth about what drives the field of venue and entertainment technology.

Corporations, educational institutions, and government agencies have a persistent need to communicate ideas to large audiences. The success of marketing campaigns, lectures, and internal training initiatives hinges on a mass transmission of critical information.

Whether the venue is a tiny boardroom, a nightclub, or an ad hoc theatre in a hotel ballroom, there's a team of professionals dedicated to effective communications. Can the presenter be heard clearly by the audience? Do the visual aids display properly? What can be done to enhance the message using available technology? The equipment used during every event becomes a resource for a craftsperson to mold these dynamic experiences.

Is Education Necessary?

The huge influx of new employees over the last decade has placed the industry in a difficult position. With very few pre-employment opportunities in the major disciplines of venue technology, recruiters for major companies sought to keep pace with demand by tapping a variety of tangentially related hiring pools. Film school graduates are often hired because of a perceived aptitude for video technology. Grads from studio recording programs have been pressed into service as live sound engineers. Theatre majors are frequently assumed to possess knowledge of stage lighting, while hobbyists and weekend DJs have been welcomed because of a willingness to learn.

Faced with large knowledge gaps between day-one employees and the master craftsperson featured in contract proposals and glossy marketing brochures, the industry rapidly came to rely upon "on-the-job" training, supplemented with brief seminars built to address the subject areas of greatest need. To be fair, these systems have kept the industry running, and supported some very talented individuals who eventually succeeded in mastering every aspect of the craft.

The deficiency of the model is this: happenstance plays far too large a role in an individual's ultimate success. As a complete novice, the employee has very little input as to which venues or types of entertainment technology they'll encounter during the first two years of employment. Often, employers will place their new

hires in locations where inexperience can do the least amount of damage, thereby depriving them of opportunities to learn the necessary skills for advancement.

Advancement is a worthwhile goal. The average hourly wage of a specialized audio engineer working in the amusement parks industry is 28.5% higher than the national average for all jobs ("Occupational Employment and Wages, May 2013 Sound Engineering Technicians") ("Table B-3") . An audio engineer working in the spectator sports industry earns 39% more than the national average ("Occupational Employment and Wages, May 2013 Sound Engineering Technicians") ("Table B-3"). How many hundreds of aspiring audio engineers have become disillusioned and left the industry entirely due to a perceived lack of opportunity?

Average Pay for Audio Engineers Across Varius Industries

Industry	Percent of industry employment	Hourly mean wage	Annual mean wage
Sound Recording Industries	17.94	$23.00	$47,840
Motion Picture and Video Industries	0.66	$23.97	$49,860
Performing Arts Companies	0.89	$24.47	$50,900
Radio and Television Broadcasting	0.86	$30.01	$62,420
Amusement Parks and Arcades	0.12	$33.64	$69,970
Motion Picture and Video Industries	1.02	$36.48	$75,870
Spectator Sports	1.02	$36.48	$75,870

("Occupational Employment and Wages, May 2013 Sound Engineering Technicians")

It is this predicament that lends the best argument for the pre-employment study of venue and event technology. If a job seeker is interested in a career beyond the entry level, there may be substantial benefit to surveying the technologies and techniques most frequently used by professionals in the field. When the responsibility for professional development is left to the employer, there is a risk that the employee will be trapped in a cycle where inexperience begets diminished opportunities. When a new employee arrives with a robust skillset, they may be able to jump to the front of the line, building a resume years faster than colleagues who rely solely on their employer's goodwill.

A second benefit to the study of venue and entertainment technology reaches beyond the technical skills that a student ultimately takes to the workplace. No contemporary program can teach someone how to use the equipment that will dominate the industry in ten years' time. Instead, the ability to learn and adapt technology is the best future-proofing skill that anyone can offer. Understanding one's own learning process is an essential tool for career growth, and longevity within the industry.

The opportunity to experiment with technology—and to make mistakes without consequence—allows students to rehearse the very act of learning. Some students may find that they're visual learners, while others may be more tactile. What matters is that they learn the combination of product manuals, demos, and practical applications that allows them to understand how new tools can be used to advance the goal of efficient communication, and how to command that technology confidently. Being able to develop these skills in a safe environment leads to an increased perception of competence when asked to do the same by an employer.

While the lack of a professional certification in venue and entertainment technology may not be a barrier to entering the industry, the overall preparedness and proficiency accrued by participating in such a program can greatly influence the career development of an entrant during the early stages of employment, and continue to have positive effects long after he or she becomes established.
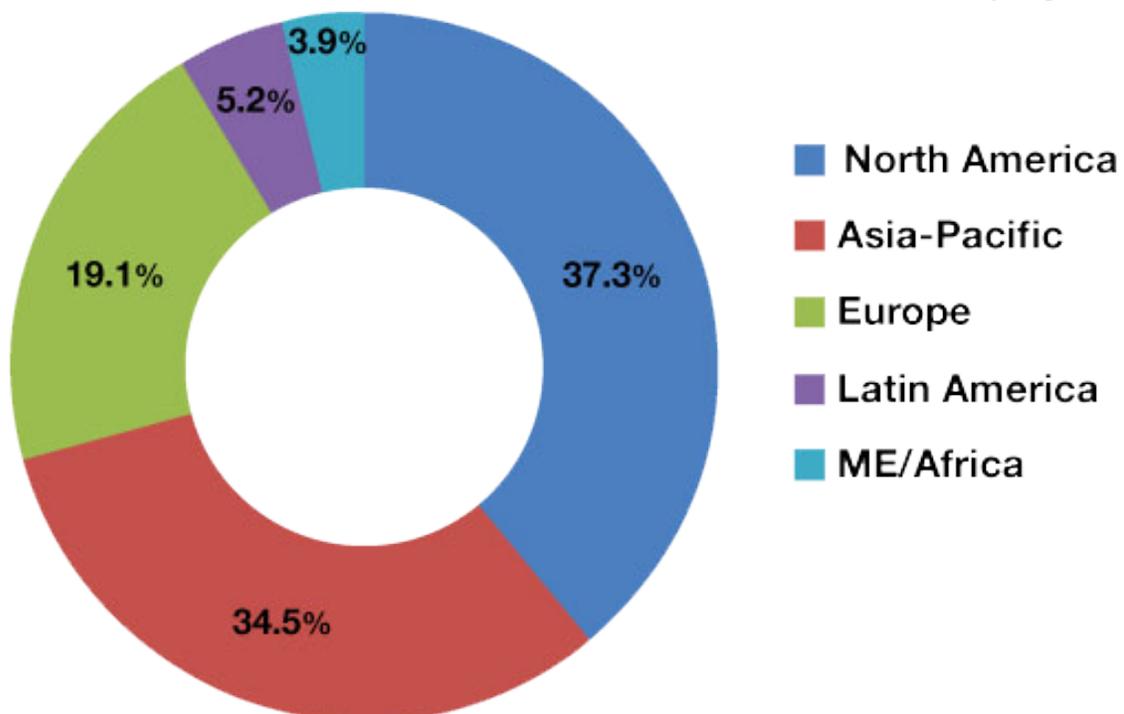
What Are the Benefits of Becoming a Professional Working with Venue and Entertainment Technology?

One of the greatest benefits to industry professionals is the extreme portability of their skillset. While the highest rates of employment for technicians exist in the communication capitals of New York and Los Angeles, large pockets exist around every metropolitan area in the United States.

Chicago, Atlanta, Las Vegas, Boston, Washington DC, Philadelphia, Houston, and St. Louis, each supported over 1000 technicians in 2013 ("Occupational Employment and Wages, May 2013 Audio and Video Equipment Technicians"). The ability to relocate without jeopardizing the utility of one's professional skillset is an advantage that should not be underestimated. Furthermore, the uniqueness of each project, the variety of work, and the complexity of task, make on-location human oversight indispensable. This contributes to long term job security, in addition to providing immunity to outsourcing.

That isn't to say that there aren't also opportunities abroad. North America is the single largest market according to InfoComm, but more than half of global end-user spending occurs between the European and Asian markets ("The Growing Audiovisual..."). Add to this fledgling markets in Latin America and the Middle East worth over $6 billion, and the picture of a universally relevant skillset becomes clear. If one is so inclined, one could attain a body of work spanning continents.

Pro-AV Market by Region as of 2014

- North America — 37.3%
- Asia-Pacific — 34.5%
- Europe — 19.1%
- Latin America — 5.2%
- ME/Africa — 3.9%

("The Growing Audiovisual...")

Beyond geographic portability, working professionals also enjoy flexibility in the nature of their employment. Many, seeking stability, sign on to full-time positions with guaranteed hours throughout the calendar year. Others, looking to maximize their hourly wage, become freelancers and negotiate rates separately for each project. This is made possible by the myriad venues in each city. An academic institution or hospital may require technicians on a regular daytime schedule, while a production company catering to the convention market may balance 24- hour operations during the height of the season by "going dark" during the holidays. The continuum of predictability within the market allows professionals to ply their trade in a manner consistent with their own needs. There are positions available for those seeking paid leave and 401K contributions from employers, and ample opportunity for those who wish to condense their working year into eight months so they can travel during the remainder.

Finally, it should be noted that a thorough understanding of the technical aspects of venue operation has been a starting point for many careers in sales and management. Wherever a $78 billion industry exists, there is a necessary infrastructure working to earn that revenue. Many technicians have parlayed their knowledge into a position where they consult with clients or supervise the equipment and personnel arriving at a venue to execute a planned event. Not all technicians make lateral moves within the industry, but those that do frequently find their technical background to be a major asset. Who better to oversee a large operation than someone who understands the business down to the component level?

In Summary

The field of venue and entertainment technology blossoms with opportunity. The market is growing worldwide, and in the United States, technicians are employed by the thousands in every major city. Those best poised to take advantage of these opportunities are individuals who enter the job market with relevant skills and who provide immediate utility to their employers. The need for qualified employees is such that well-trained individuals can experience rapid advancement and enjoy flexibility in their geographic location and terms of employment.

For young, tech-savvy professionals seeking a career path, venue and entertainment technology warrants serious consideration. This is especially true when enthusiasm is enriched by pre-employment training in entertainment technology.

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About the Author

Noah DeBoy is a 10-year veteran of the hospitality venue management and corporate event production industry. He has overseen the design and execution of hundreds of staged events while working as a regional technical director based in the eastern United States. Noah also spearheaded a business expansion to the Middle East, which brought the first true "in-house" venue management services to luxury hotel venues in the cities of Dubai, Abu-Dhabi, and Doha. In doing so, he became primarily responsible for the development of a technical training curriculum tailored to the needs of non-western employees.

Upon returning to the United States, Noah accepted the position of senior project manager with the the world's largest hospitality venue event technology provider, while continuing to work as an instructional designer and corporate trainer, responsible for developing the skills of technical specialists throughout North America. He currently works as a technical director for SenovvA, where he remains an active proponent of technical education. Noah holds a B.A. in Music Production and Management from the Individual Studies Program at the University of Maryland.