

Special Effects Technician

A special effects (SFX) technician produces visual, pyrotechnic (explosive) or physical effects in order to create a particular impression or illusion in a film, television, stage or video production.

The Work

There are three main areas of work:

- **physical effects** – designing and making props, models, scenery, prosthetics and mechanically animated pieces
- **visual effects** – using animation software or other specialist computer generated imagery (CGI) to add, change or manipulate images after filming
- **pyrotechnic effects** – producing fires, smoke, explosions, lightning and firearm effects.

You could be:

- working with colleagues to determine special effects requirements
- using skills such as moulding, electronics, welding, joinery, drawing and painting
- creating props, for example collapsible furniture (for use in fight scenes) or prosthetics (body parts or silicon masks)
- using specialist software packages to create computer-generated aspects, such as scenery and characters
- overlaying visual effects onto film during the post-production process
- setting up explosions, battle scenes or rock concert fireworks
- keeping detailed logbooks of work done and methods used
- checking that health and safety procedures are being followed properly.

Pay

The figures below are only a guide. Actual salaries may vary, depending on:

- where you work
- the size of the company or organisation you work for
- the demand for the job.

Most special effects technicians are freelance. The Broadcasting Entertainment Cinematograph and Theatre Union (BECTU) website carries recommendations for freelance rates. The recommended minimum rates for a 11-hour day are:

- Special Effects Trainee £137.50
- Special Effects Assistant Technician £291.46
- Special Effects Technician £385.00
- Senior Special Effects Technician £451.00
- Special Effects Supervisor £828.19.

Conditions

- You would normally work on a freelance basis.
- You would work either indoors in a studio or outdoors on location.
- You might spend most of your time working at a computer if doing visual effects.
- You might have to do a lot of heavy lifting.
- You work flexible hours, often including evenings and weekends.
- You might have to travel abroad and spend overnights away from home.

Getting In

- There is no single route of entry. A degree is common but not essential.
- Entry is very competitive. Employers rarely advertise posts.
- You should make contacts in the field and send in showreels or portfolios which demonstrate your skills.
- Entrants come from a variety of training backgrounds: animation, engineering, art and design, computer science, product, spatial or industrial design.
- Practical skills such as drawing and using craft tools, and specialist knowledge of pyrotechnics, electronics or photography are more important than educational qualifications.
- There are a few permanent posts with large broadcasting companies, mostly in London.

What Does It Take

You need:

- imagination and creative flair
- initiative and resourcefulness
- artistic ability
- a sense of drama and timing
- the ability to work under pressure and meet deadlines
- the ability to accept criticism
- good practical skills
- adaptability
- a good awareness of health and safety issues.

Training

- Training is mainly on the job.
- New entrants train by shadowing experienced technicians. This allows them to build up their expertise to showcase to employers.
- The Association of British Theatre Technicians (ABTT) and some drama schools run short courses in specialist subjects such as aspects of pyrotechnics.

Getting On

- The [Joint Industry Special Effects Grading Scheme](#) provides a career structure for those involved in physical, pyrotechnic and visual special effects. The Joint Industry committee dictates the levels of

experience, training and responsibility required to hold the various job titles (grades) within the scheme. You can join the scheme as an SFX trainee and as your experience grows, you can apply for re-grading as technician, senior technician, and eventually, as supervisor.

- As you work your way through the grading system increasing your skills and experience, you will be able to earn higher fees.
- If you work for a large company, you might get promotion to visual effects designer.
- Technicians need to make sure they continually update their skills by searching out courses such as those run by the Institute of Explosive Engineers.
- Most SFX technicians work freelance for small specialist companies.

More Information

If you are aged 18 or over you may be interested in [The Network](#). The Network is held each year alongside the TV Festival in Edinburgh. If selected you would attend for four free days of masterclasses and workshops which will provide you with the skills, knowledge and contacts to start a career in TV. You can usually apply from January to May.

Trainee Finder is ScreenSkills flagship new entrant programme which offers paid work placements across a range of roles in film and TV. Recruitment will usually begin around September of the year before placement. Find out more and apply online by visiting the [Film Trainee Finder website](#).

Contacts

4 Careers

Website: careers.channel4.com/4skills

X: @Channel4Skills

Facebook: www.facebook.com/Channel4Skills

Association of British Theatre Technicians (ABTT)

Tel: 07443 380076

Email: admin@abtt.org.uk

Website: www.abtt.org.uk

X: @theabtt

Facebook: www.facebook.com/TheABTT

BECTU Scotland (Broadcasting Entertainment Cinematograph and Theatre Union)

Tel: 0141 370 1590

Email: info@bectu.org.uk

Website: www.bectu.org.uk

Website (2): careersmart.org.uk

X: @bectu

Facebook: www.facebook.com/BECTUOfficial

Edinburgh TV Festival

Website: www.thetvfestival.com

Facebook: www.facebook.com/edinburghtvfest

ScreenSkills

Tel: 020 7713 9800

Email: info@screenskills.com

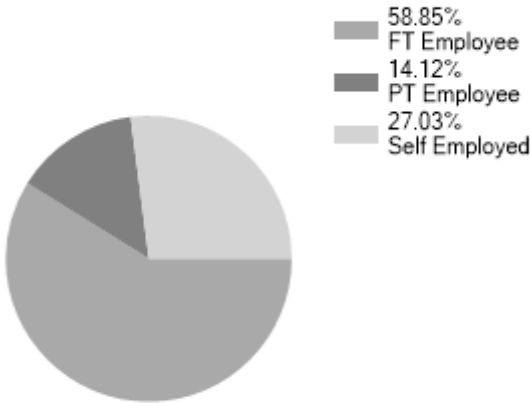
Website: www.screenskills.com

X: @UKScreenSkills

Facebook: www.facebook.com/UKScreenSkills

Statistics

Employment Status UK %

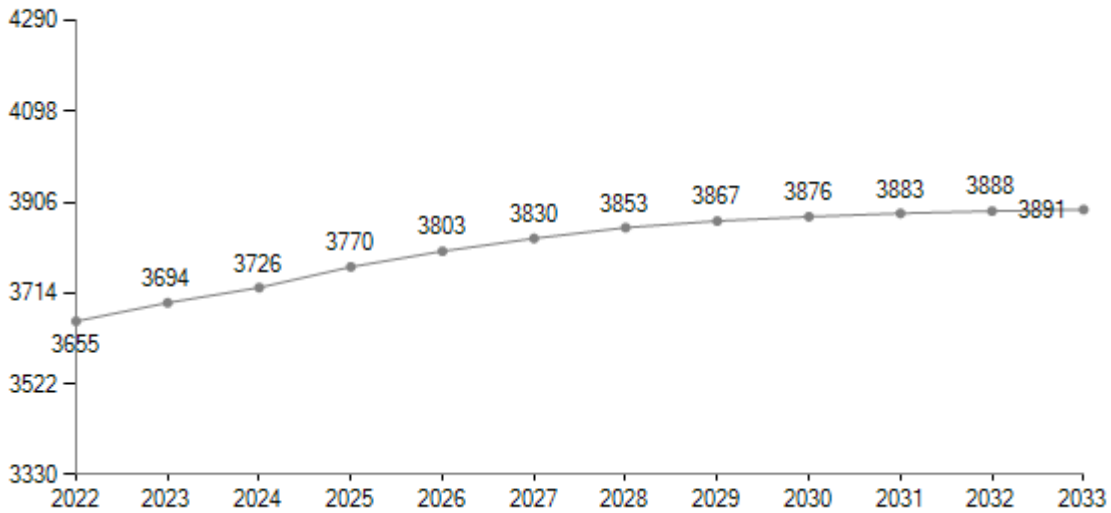


Past Unemployment - Scotland

No Claimant statistics available for Scotland.

LMI data powered by [LMI for All](#)

Predicted Employment in Scotland



LMI data powered by [Lightcast](#)