

536275

ACCESS

WORKING FOR A FESTIVAL

Is there a way to guarantee access to a festival? Of course, there is, and it is a simple, tried and tested, age-old method. Get yourself a job within the festival organisation and you are IN!

Whether or not you get the full festival experience depends entirely on the job description and the work you have been asked to do. If you spend your day scanning tickets at the gate, you probably won't even hear much music, let alone see anything of that one final and legendary performance happening on the main stage half a mile away. As a sound engineer however, you are in a perfect spot to see the show. You can get hired for some positions fairly easily without any prior training, but for others you will need years of hard-fought experience. So, to help you decide the best career move in the live music industry and to help you gain easy access to such events, we have listed the main festival jobs.

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VOLUNTEER

Job description

You won't get paid, but you are an imperative part of the organisation. Thousands of festivals are unable to exist without volunteers who help with ticket control, tapping beer, or cleaning up the mess. It sounds more exciting than it actually is, but there are also festivals where volunteers help by supplying the dressing rooms or driving artists around. Some people see their volunteer work as a steppingstone to a better or more serious job, for others it is just a convenient way to attend a festival for "free".

Required skills

It helps if you are friendly, and willing to work hard, but no one should expect special skills from you. Even if you are given a bar job without possessing any beer tapping experience at all, there should be nothing to worry about. The simple truth is, as soon as you have survived serving a thirsty hundred-or-so customers in less than twenty minutes, you will be a master tapper in no time at all.

How to get a job?

Simply check the website of your favourite festival, chances are they are looking for volunteers.

Festival experience gained

Occasionally you will get lucky, work short shifts and will have plenty of time to enjoy the bands. Conversely, you might have to work so many hours that you don't even have the energy to go to the festival site when your shift ends. Urghh!

I used to volunteer at Left of the Dial and look at me now...



ALL AREAS

MERCHANT

Job description

Be it food or clothing, all sorts of produce is sold at festivals, so sales team staff is always needed. Sales positions vary from helping people find the correct sized band merchandise to shoving pizzas in a sweltering brick oven, or more's the point a portable version made from steel and housed in the back of a cramped VW camper.

Required skills

When your stand is stocked with err, let's say, tie-dyed robes, you will of course need to work your sales magic, but if you're running a popular pancake stand, the only real skill you will need, is to be able to accept food tokens with a friendly smile.

How to get a job?

There's more than one way to bake a cake: either you have something to offer and you try to secure a pitch alongside the other vendors, or you front up to one of the regular stall owners at a festival and explain to them that when they hire a star salesperson extraordinaire like yourself, they're going to double their turnover.

Festival experience gained

You will work long days (or nights) and whether or not you catch any of the bands performing depends entirely on the location of your stand.

MARKETING

Job description

If you are working for a small festival, you will be responsible for everything that has to do with promotion, if it is a larger festival, it will have an extensive marketing department with employees who are all specialised in different areas: social media, advertisements, press relations, artist infos/band biographies, managing posters and flyers. More experienced personnel make it their business to think about the image of the festival and set the tone with which potential ticket buyers are addressed and set up campaigns to reach the right target groups. In short, marketing staff ensure that all tickets for the festival are sold as quickly as possible.

Required skills

A solid marketing education will come in handy and some festivals specifically require relevant qualifications, but the best marketers are people who effortlessly know where to find their ticket buyers. If you have headliners of the calibre of Billie Eilish, it shouldn't be that hard, and anyone should be able to reach those fans. At smaller festivals without major names to build your campaign on, you will need to exercise imagination and creativity to attract people to your festival.

How to get a job?

If you have the time, energy and finances, complete a recognised marketing degree and try to get an internship at a festival. If you are confident you will succeed without official training... do some research and delve into some articles on marketing in general, check how other festivals try to sell their tickets and simply apply for a job.

Festival experience gained

In theory, your work is done when all tickets have been sold, but in reality during the festival you will have your hands full with informing visitors of last-minute adjustments, speaking to journalists, guiding photographers and relentlessly updating all social media channels. If it happens to be your job to post as many Instagram stories of performances as possible, then you'll probably see more of the festival than the average attendee!

PRODUCTION/TECHNICAL

Job description

Yet another oversimplified job description that in reality actually consists of innumerable different categories. In the most general of terms, you could say that it is your job to build the festival from the ground up and keep things running smoothly for the duration of the event. Essentially, the production team will take care of everything, from the power supply at the ticket desk to the towels in the dressing room. They will need to know the weight load capacity of both temporary and permanent roads feeding the stage areas, they also distribute dinner vouchers, and they make sure all artists are on stage at exactly the right time. Very important as no one wants to pull the plug on a headliner like Van Morrison who has been forced to run over the scheduled performance duration. Finally, specialised technical workers must ensure perfect light and sound.

Required skills

In general terms, as a member of the production team, you must have all the qualities that are commonly requested in any job advertisement: (pro)active, decisive, helpful, flexible, driven, resistant to stress, accurate, orderly, patient, social, resourceful and always in a good mood. A preference for making neat looking schedules and some knowledge of Excel are also essential. If working as a sound or lighting technician, you have to be skilled and knowledgeable with mixing desks and know your way around a seemingly impossible number of buttons and faders and know exactly how to use them and when to adjust them.

How to get a job?

Of course for technical professions there are many specialised training courses. If you have completed one, you should have no problem finding a job because there is a serious shortage of good technical people. For a more general production job, gain as much experience as possible near any stage; it seriously helps if you can name all equipment and know globally which plug goes where. Offer bands your organisational skills to get you into a festival. If you have things under control, you will stand out and with a bit of luck you will be offered that job.

Festival experience gained

The production time of a festival starts long before the visitors or artists arrive and only ends when the last items of lost property are returned to the rightful owners - usually weeks after the festival! The difficulty levels do vary. You could be assigned to be a stage manager and spend a few hours each day in the bright sun next to a stage pointing artists in the right direction, but you could also be the production employee who receives a call in the middle of the night and asked to go find a store that sells something unsexy like an emergency generator. →

536275

TALENT BUYER/HEAD OF PROGRAMMING

Job description

Quite simply, you decide which artists play at the festival. Seems like the easiest job on earth, right? I mean, is there anybody out there who cannot name a few dozen great bands? In reality, it often turns out to be considerably more complicated. Artists aren't always available on your festival dates and you have a budget to consider too. And it's not all about personal preferences, you should always ask yourself whether potential ticket buyers will like the artists as much as you do. So, you spend days deliberating and pondering, negotiating fees, and you try to logically fit everything into a timetable to create a perfectly balanced line-up that'll make people come running to your festival site.

Required skills

Above all, you must have a great set of ears. You should be able to estimate approximately, or even calculate accurately, how many festival goers an artist will attract, and as a result, what their market value is. It is just not possible to hear all new music that is released each week, so you need to have a large network of people pointing you to the right artists.

How to get a job?

Talent buyer jobs are scarce and it's certainly not easy to get a job at a renowned festival. Bring bands to your local pub or community centre and try to get a feeling for what works and what doesn't. Build a network through those bands and keep your fingers crossed that someone thinks of you when a position becomes available at a festival somewhere. In short, build up a good reputation.

Festival experience gained

In the backstage, you might be jumped on by booking agents and tour managers who will want to sell you mediocre bands for the next edition of the festival. Not much fun at all. However, the chances are high that you will find yourself contented and walking around the festival site in the happy knowledge that all those artists performing would never have been there without you. (OK, the promotion and production staff were also indispensable links in the process, but still, your work is done, you should be proud.)

FESTIVAL DIRECTOR

Job description

A festival director doesn't operate much differently to what any other company director does on average. You manage all the different departments and ensure that they can all do their job as well as possible. Sometimes that means making hundreds of decisions a day and meddling with everything and everyone, other days it is wiser to let people do their thing and just sit and gaze out of the window whilst hatching your next masterpiece.

Required skills

You need to know just enough about everything to be able to carry a conversation about it without going into too much detail. You don't have to understand how to tweak Instagram ads, or which sound system works best, as long as you can understand and nod when one of your employees tells you about it. Financial knowledge is also useful, but fortunately you can leave the really complicated stuff to an accountant. But by far the most important thing is to always have your staff's back. If the festival is a success, then it is to their credit, if everything goes wrong, well err, you take the blame.

How to get a job?

Some knowledge of the live industry is useful, directors often grow from other functions within a festival. If you do not have the patience for that, it's simple, just start your own festival. Experience is gained quickly enough and if people like your work, you can probably make the switch to another event.

Festival experience gained

If your festival is not struck by disaster and adversity, you can walk around the festival site for hours, smiling, giving compliments to everyone who is working hard. If something goes seriously wrong, you have to fix your hair quickly, speak to the press and steer your staff into calmer waters.

ARTISTS & ENTOURAGE

Job description

As an artist you offer entertainment for all festival goers. If you are part of the entourage, it is your job to ensure that the artist can do this as well as possible.

Required skills

The required skills of an artist should be obvious. But if you are part of the entourage, then you have to excel at something: organising things, hairdressing, speaking words of encouragement, or lugging stuff around. Both the artist and the entourage are the whole reason there is a festival in the first place, but never forget, modesty is the colour of virtue!

How to get a job?

Make really good music, or hang out with someone who does.

Festival experience gained

Experiencing a (well-attended) festival with a wildly enthusiastic audience directly from the stage is an unforgettable experience, so you will have a great time for at least an hour. How well you enjoy the rest of the festival depends on many factors. Sometimes you have to go straight to the next show so everything goes by in a whirlwind, or there will be times when you stay and hang out in the green room or backstage and have a good time enjoying the festival hospitality. If so, it is quite essential you and your entourage can get along well with the other artists, and of course festival staff. But it is a two-way street and quite imperative the festival takes care of its artists. If you only get a can of coke and a bruised banana, you will experience the festival entirely differently from when you are welcomed with open arms, and a wide-open bar! ☺