Production Operator & Process Operator

Whether manufacturing luxury automobiles, household appliances or baby booties, factories rely on machines to process raw supplies into finished goods. Production operators are responsible for ensuring the equipment functions efficiently and that all procedures work correctly. Most have standard work weeks, although evening and weekend work is available in factories that operate long hours.

Duties

Production operators set up and adjust machines, and monitor them for unusual noises or movements. They may load supplies into machines either by hand or using hoists, replace molds and cutting surfaces, and act as a link in a chain that involves several manufacturing processes and other operators. They test and measure finished products, and record their activities and manufacturing levels. They may meet with co-workers, supervisors, engineers and managers to ensure that the results of their activities meet corporate standards and the expectations of consumers.

Types

There are two types of production operators: setters and operators, who are sometimes called tenders. Setters ready machines before production, making sure that they are in working order and that they perform to required specifications. They may replace worn-out parts and produce an initial test batch of products to measure quality. Operators and tenders run the machines and observe them during production. If they detect problems, they can stop processes and make minor repairs, or refer major problems to industrial mechanics for fixes. With advanced technology, some operators can handle two or more machines at the same time.

Specialties

Production operators are more commonly known by the type of machines or materials in which they specialize. Computer-controlled machine tool operators handle computer-controlled machines and may develop programs for running processes. Extruding machine operators focus on equipment that stretches plastic or metal into tubes, rods, wires and structural shapes. Cutting and press machine operators handle machines that cut or straighten materials, while furnace operators tend gas, oil and electric furnaces that refine metals. Model makers manage engravers, millers and jig borers to create working models of plastic or metal.

Careers

No formal education is required to become a production operator, although many employers prefer to hire those with a high school diploma. High school courses in shop, blueprint reading, algebra, trigonometry and computers are helpful. Most are trained on the job by more experienced workers or supervisors, although some community colleges and trade schools offer certificate programs. Salaries vary by specialty with the U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics showing averages of $34,220 per year, or $16.45 per hour, for all production occupations as of May 2011.
Extruding machines operators earned a mean $34,120 yearly, or $16.40 hourly; model makers averaged an annual $46,460, or $22.34 hourly; and computer operators made a mean $36,520 per year, or $17.56 per hour.