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Training, Other Qualifications, and Advancement

Nearly all ophthalmic laboratory technicians learn their skills on the job. Employers filling trainee jobs prefer applicants who are high school graduates. Courses in science, mathematics, and computers are valuable; manual dexterity and the ability to do precision work are essential.

Technician trainees producing lenses by hand start on simple tasks, such as marking or blocking lenses for grinding, and then progress to grinding, cutting, edging, and beveling lenses, and, finally, to assembling the eyeglasses. Depending on individual aptitude, it may take up to 6 months to become proficient in all phases of the work.

Technicians using automated systems will find computer skills valuable. Training is completed on the job and varies in duration, depending on the type of machinery and the worker’s aptitude.

A very small number of ophthalmic laboratory technicians learn their trade in the Armed Forces or in the few programs in optical technology offered by vocational-technical institutes or trade schools. These programs have classes in optical theory, surfacing and lens finishing, and the reading and applying of prescriptions. Programs vary in length from 6 months to 1 year and award certificates or diplomas.

Ophthalmic laboratory technicians can become supervisors and managers. Some become dispensing opticians, although further education or training generally is required in that occupation.

Job Outlook

Overall employment of ophthalmic laboratory technicians is expected to grow more slowly than the average for all occupations through the year 2012, reflecting the increasing use of automated machinery. Most job openings will arise from the need to replace technicians who transfer to other occupations or who leave the labor force. Only a limited number of job openings will be created each year, because the occupation is small.

Demographic trends make it likely that many more Americans will need vision care in the years ahead. Not only will the population grow, but also, the proportion of middle-aged and older adults is projected to increase rapidly. Middle age is a time when many people use corrective lenses for the first time, and elderly persons usually require more vision care than others.

Fashion also influences demand. Frames come in a variety of styles and colors, encouraging people to buy more than one pair. Demand is expected to grow as well in response to the availability of new technologies that improve the quality and look of corrective lenses, such as antireflective coatings and bifocal lenses without the line that is visible in traditional bifocals.

Earnings

Median hourly earnings of ophthalmic laboratory technicians were $10.46 in 2002. The middle 50 percent earned between $8.73 and $13.05 an hour. The lowest 10 percent earned less than $7.56, and the highest 10 percent earned more than $16.40 an hour. In 2002, median hourly earnings of ophthalmic laboratory technicians were $10.68 in medical equipment and supplies manufacturing and $10.15 in health and personal care stores.

Related Occupations

Workers in other precision production occupations include dental laboratory technicians; opticians, dispensing; orthotists and prosthetists; and precision instrument and equipment repairers.

Sources of Additional Information

For a list of accredited programs in ophthalmic laboratory technology, contact:
➤ Commission on Opticianry Accreditation, P.O. Box 3073, Merrifield, VA 22116-3073.

State employment service offices can provide information about job openings for ophthalmic laboratory technicians.