

CAREERS IN PRINT

Everything you've ever held was made by someone.



Look around you. The cereal box on the kitchen table. The label on your drink bottle. The T-shirt you're wearing. The book on your shelf, the poster on your wall, the box every parcel turns up in. Someone made all of that — and there's a good chance they made it here in the UK.

The UK is the fifth largest producer of printed products in the world. It's a huge industry, and most people don't know it exists until someone tells them.

Print isn't just ink on paper any more. It's digital presses worth more than a house, colour management software, robotics on the finishing line, sustainable packaging design, and the people who plan, sell and run all of it.

If you're practical, or creative, or good with technology, or good with people, there's a job in here that fits.

An apprenticeship is how you get in.

An apprenticeship isn't school with a job attached. You're employed from your first day, doing real work for a real employer, on a real wage, with experienced people showing you how it's done. Your training happens alongside the job rather than instead of it.

At the end you're assessed by an independent expert on what you can actually do, and you come out with a qualification recognised across the industry. You don't need to have it all worked out first. Plenty of people arrive knowing nothing about print and find something they're good at.

WHAT ARE THE BENEFITS

You earn from day one. A proper wage, a contract, paid holiday and the same rights as everyone else on the payroll.

You don't pay for your training. Your employer and the government cover it between them. No student debt.

You can go a long way. Apprenticeships run from Level 2 right up to Level 7 — the same level as a master's degree. You can start at 16 and keep going as far as you want.

It pays off long term. People who complete a higher apprenticeship earn an estimated £150,000 more across their working life than those who stop at Level 3.

DIGITAL ARTWORKER

Every printed thing starts as a file. Before it goes anywhere near a press, someone has to check it and fix it — the colours, the fonts, the resolution, the logo that's three millimetres out of place. That's a digital artworker. If something's wrong, you're the one who catches it before ten thousand copies come off the press.

WHAT YOU'D DO

- Take design files and get them press-ready — checking formats, fixing resolution, making sure fonts and images are where they should be.
- Match colour. A brand's red has to be the same red on a carton, a poster and a shop display. You'd calibrate screens and presses to make sure it is.
- Optimise files so they run cleanly on the specific press they're heading for.
- Produce proofs, so everyone can see exactly what they're getting before the run starts.
- Catch the mistakes — the typo, the stretched logo, the missing bleed — while they're still cheap to fix.

WHAT YOU'LL NEED

You don't need to turn up knowing Adobe. You'll learn Photoshop, Illustrator and InDesign as you go, along with colour management and file preparation.

What helps from day one is a good eye, patience with small details, and staying calm when a job has to be out by four. If you've done any art, design or photography — at school, at college, or just on your own — tell us.

WHERE IT LEADS

Most people start as a junior artworker or studio assistant. From there you can go deeper: colour management and quality control are specialisms in their own right, and good colour people are hard to find and well paid. Or you can go wider, into print production, project management or art direction. Plenty of studio managers started out fixing other people's files.

HOW YOU GET IN

Print Technician apprenticeship, prepress pathway — Level 2 or 3, usually 24-30 months

PREPRESS TECHNICIAN

The file is finished, signed off and approved. Now someone has to turn it into something a press can actually run. That's prepress — the last stop before ink hits paper, and the last chance to catch anything wrong. Get it right and nobody notices. Get it wrong and it's ten thousand copies wrong.

WHAT YOU'D DO

- Check incoming files properly — formats, resolution, colour profiles, embedded fonts, bleed. Fix what needs fixing.
- Impose the job: arrange pages so they come off the press in the right order and the right way round, using as little paper as possible.
- Manage colour. Every press and every material reproduces colour differently. You'd profile and calibrate so a brand's red is the same red every time.
- Produce proofs and check them — errors, colour, quality — before anything goes to plate.
- Output to plate or to the digital press, and solve the problems that turn up on the way.

WHAT YOU'LL NEED

No prior software knowledge. You'll learn Acrobat, the Adobe suite, imposition software and colour management on the job.

What helps is curiosity about how things work, patience with detail, and liking the moment when a stubborn problem finally goes away. A lot of this job is puzzles.

WHERE IT LEADS

Most people start as a prepress assistant. With experience you can run a prepress department, or specialise — colour management is a genuine expertise and people who have it are sought after across the industry. Others move sideways into print production, planning or technical support for press manufacturers.

HOW YOU GET IN

Print Technician apprenticeship, prepress pathway — Level 3, usually around 30 months. Print Operative at Level 2 is an alternative starting point.

PRESS OPERATOR

This is the bit everyone pictures when they think of print. Presses the length of a lorry, running thousands of sheets an hour, and someone standing at the console making sure every one of them is right. That's you. When the job leaves the building, it leaves because you said it was good enough.

WHAT YOU'D DO

- Set up and run the press — offset, digital or flexo, depending on where you work and what they make.
- Load stock and ink, and get the machine dialled in before the run starts.
- Pull sheets while it's running and check them: colour, registration, quality. Adjust on the fly when something drifts.
- Diagnose problems fast. A stopped press costs real money, and the person who can find the fault quickest is the most valuable person on the floor.
- Keep the machine right — cleaning, lubricating, changing parts, spotting the wear before it becomes a breakdown.
- Work safely, and keep records of what ran, on what, and what happened.

WHAT YOU'LL NEED

No experience of presses. You'll be trained on the machines your employer runs.

It helps if you like machinery and want to know why things work. Most of this job is noticing — a shade slightly off, a noise that wasn't there yesterday.

Be straight with yourself about the practicalities: you'll be on your feet, lifting stock, and many print sites run shifts. Plenty of people prefer that to a desk, and shift work usually pays more.

WHERE IT LEADS

Start as an assistant or second operator, then take a press of your own. From there: bigger and more complex machines, shift leader, production supervisor, print production manager. Some go into technical support for press manufacturers, travelling to sites to fix machines other people can't.

HOW YOU GET IN

Print Technician apprenticeship, press pathway — Level 3, usually around 30 months. Print Operative at Level 2 is an alternative starting point.

QUALITY CONTROLLER

Somebody has to be the last person to say yes. Before a job goes out — a million cartons, a run of labels, a print job with a client's name all over it — someone checks it's right. And when something isn't right, someone works out why it happened, so it doesn't happen again on the next run.

RESPONSIBILITIES

- Check printed work against the spec — colour, registration, text, finish, the lot.
- Find the defects, and record exactly what and where. Patterns show up in the records long before anyone spots them on the floor.
- Work out the cause. A mark in the same place on every sheet isn't bad luck, it's a machine telling you something.
- Take it to the people who can fix it — press operators, prepress, production — and agree what changes.
- Use the kit: densitometers, spectrophotometers, viewing booths, measurement software. You'll be trained on all of it.
- Track quality over time so problems get designed out rather than caught over and over.

WHAT YOU'LL NEED

No previous experience. You'll learn the standards, the tolerances and the measuring equipment on the job.

What matters is a good eye and the confidence to use it. Sometimes you'll be the person stopping a job that everyone else wants to get out of the door, and you need to be able to hold that line politely.

Worth knowing: colour vision is checked for some quality roles, since a lot of the work is judging colour.

WHERE IT LEADS

Start as a quality inspector, then move up to quality controller and quality manager, running the function across a site. Some go further into technical roles — colour management, process improvement, standards and accreditation — or across into production management. Quality is also one of the easiest routes into a Level 5 or Level 6 apprenticeship later on.

HOW YOU GET IN

Lean Manufacturing Operative apprenticeship — Level 2. Some employers bring people into quality from a Print Operative or Print Technician apprenticeship instead.

PRINT FINISHER

Pick up something that felt expensive — a book with foil on the spine, a carton with a window cut into it, packaging that's soft to the touch. That feeling was added after the printing was done, by a finisher. It's the part of the process people actually notice, even when they don't know they're noticing it.

WHAT YOU'D DO

- Cut, fold, stitch and bind — turning flat printed sheets into books, brochures, catalogues and cartons.
- Run die-cutting machines that punch printed sheets into shapes: boxes, windows, tabs, anything that isn't a rectangle.
- Apply the finishes that change how something feels — lamination, foil blocking, embossing, spot UV, varnish.
- Set up and run the machines, then keep them running right. Folders and binders need setting precisely, and small errors multiply fast across a long run.
- Check the finished work before it's packed and sent. You're often the last person to handle it.

WHAT YOU'LL NEED

No experience needed. You'll be trained on whatever kit your employer runs — and it varies a lot between businesses.

It helps to be practical and good with your hands, and to care whether something's straight. A book with a crooked spine is a reprint.

This is physical work — on your feet, lifting stock, and often on shifts. Plenty of people much prefer that to sitting down.

WHERE IT LEADS

Start as a finishing assistant, then run machines of your own. Senior finisher, lead finisher, finishing supervisor, production manager. Specialists in the more technical processes — die-cutting setup, foiling, complex binding — are in short supply and know it. Some move into packaging development, where the shape of the box is the thing being designed.

HOW YOU GET IN

Print Technician apprenticeship, postpress pathway — Level 3, usually around 30 months. Print Operative at Level 2 is an alternative starting point.

SIGNAGE TECHNICIAN

Every shop sign, every van with a company name down the side, every banner at a trade show, every set of graphics wrapping a building site hoarding — someone made and fitted all of it. Signage is print at a scale you can see from across the road, and the job doesn't end when it comes off the printer. You go out and put it up.

WHAT YOU'D DO

- Turn a design into something buildable — working out materials, sizes and fixings that will survive weather, sunlight and being walked past every day.
- Fabricate: cutting, routing, welding and assembling vinyl, acrylic, aluminium and timber into a finished sign.
- Run large-format printers to produce banners, graphics and vehicle wraps.
- Install. Fitting signs to buildings, wrapping vehicles, setting up exhibition stands — on site, often at height, sometimes out of hours so a shop can open as normal.
- Maintain and repair what's already out there, and talk to clients about what will actually work in their space.

WHAT YOU'LL NEED

No experience of the trade. You'll be taught fabrication, printing and installation on the job.

A driving licence becomes important quickly, since installation work means travelling to sites.

Be clear-eyed about the conditions: you'll work outdoors in bad weather and at height, and there's specific training for both. If that appeals rather than puts you off, this job has more variety than anything else in this brochure — you're somewhere different most weeks.

WHERE IT LEADS

Start as a trainee technician, then lead installations of your own. From there: senior or lead technician, project manager running large multi-site rollouts, or the design and estimating side. Signage also has more people who start their own business than anywhere else in print — the kit is affordable and the customers are local.

HOW YOU GET IN

Signage Technician apprenticeship — Level 3.

CARTON & PACKAGING OPERATIVE

Walk down any supermarket aisle. Nearly everything on the shelves is in a carton, and every one of those cartons was designed, printed, cut, folded and glued by someone. Packaging is the fastest-growing part of the print industry, partly because so much of what used to be plastic is being redesigned in card — and someone has to make all of it.

WHAT YOU'D DO

- Set up and run the machines that turn printed board into finished cartons: die-cutters, folder-gluers, and the presses that print the board in the first place.
- Work with the materials — paperboard, corrugated, coated and barrier boards — and know which one a job needs.
- Run die-cutting, where the board is cut and creased into a flat shape that folds up into a box.
- Fold and glue the blanks into their finished form, at speed and in the hundreds of thousands.
- Check quality throughout. A carton that's a millimetre out won't run on a customer's filling line, and food packaging has hygiene standards on top of everything else.
- Keep the machines maintained and running, and find the fault fast when they stop.

WHAT YOU'LL NEED

No prior experience. You'll be trained on the machines and the materials.

It suits people who like machinery, work accurately at pace, and want to see something finished at the end of a shift. Most carton plants run shifts, and the runs are long — this is manufacturing at real scale.

WHERE IT LEADS

Start as an operative, then take charge of a machine, then a shift. Beyond that: production supervisor, plant manager, or specialising in die-cutting setup, print or quality. The most interesting sideways move is into structural packaging design — working out how a box folds, protects its contents and uses the least board possible. That's a well-paid technical career and it starts on the shop floor.

HOW YOU GET IN

Print Technician apprenticeship, postpress pathway — Level 3. Print Operative at Level 2 is an alternative starting point.

PRINT PRODUCTION MANAGER

Every job in this brochure leads somewhere, and for a lot of people it leads here. A production manager runs the floor: what's printing, on which press, in what order, for which deadline, at what cost. When a job is late, or a machine goes down, or a client changes their mind on a Friday afternoon, you're the one who works out what happens next.

Most production managers started on a press or in prepress. Knowing how the work is actually done is the reason they're good at it.

WHAT YOU'D DO

- Plan the work — taking client requirements, deadlines and budgets and turning them into a realistic schedule across the machines and people you've got.
- Lead the team: press operators, finishers, prepress, quality. Hiring, training, and keeping people working well together.
- Manage the resources — equipment, materials, labour — so jobs run efficiently and stock isn't wasted.
- Own the quality and the deadline. If it goes out wrong or late, it's yours.
- Watch the money. Every job has a margin, and decisions you make on the floor decide whether it survives.
- Solve the problems, all day. Something always goes wrong, and the job is finding the least bad option quickly.

WHAT YOU'LL NEED

Experience first. Most people reach this role after several years on production, often having done an apprenticeship at Level 2 or 3 and progressed from there.

Then it's about people. The technical knowledge gets you taken seriously; the ability to have a difficult conversation calmly is what makes the job work.

WHERE IT LEADS

Senior production manager, operations manager, production director. Some move into general management or run their own businesses. Apprenticeships don't stop here either — leadership and management standards run up to Level 7, the same level as a master's degree, and plenty of people who started at 16 on a press are now studying at that level with their employer paying for it.

HOW YOU GET IN

Not straight from school. Start with Print Operative (Level 2) or Print Technician (Level 3), then progress through Team Leader (Level 3), Operations Manager (Level 5) or Process Leader (Level 4) as your responsibility grows.

PRODUCTION PLANNER

A print business might have forty jobs in the building at once, all needing different presses, different paper, different finishing, all promised for different days. Someone has to work out the order they run in. That's planning — and it's the job that decides whether the whole factory has a good week or a bad one.

If the rest of this brochure hasn't appealed because you don't fancy working on machines, read this page. Planning is an office role, and it's one of the most important in the building.

WHAT YOU'D DO

- Take incoming orders and work out exactly what each one needs: quantity, stock, press, finishing, delivery date.
- Build the schedule — the running order across every machine, for the week ahead and the day ahead.
- Book the materials so the right paper and ink arrive before the job does, without the business sitting on stock it doesn't need.
- Rework the plan when reality intervenes. A machine breaks, a delivery is late, a client doubles their order — you find a new way through and tell everyone what's changed.
- Keep an eye on cost and capacity, so presses aren't standing idle and jobs aren't being run on machines that are wrong for them.

WHAT YOU'LL NEED

Strong organisational and time management skills.
Attention to detail and problem-solving abilities.
Proficiency in project management software and tools.
Effective communication and collaboration skills.
An understanding of print production processes and equipment.
Ability to work under pressure and meet deadlines.

WHERE IT LEADS

Start as a planning assistant or scheduler, then own the plan for a site. From there: senior planner, production management, or across into estimating, purchasing and supply chain. Planners understand how a business actually makes money, which is why so many end up in operations and general management.

WHY CHOOSE THIS CAREER

Supply Chain Practitioner apprenticeship. Some people come into planning from a production apprenticeship instead, having learned the shop floor first.

OPERATIONS MANAGER

This is the top of the ladder in most print businesses. A production manager runs the floor; an operations manager runs the site — production, quality, maintenance, logistics, budgets, people. You're not scheduling individual jobs any more. You're deciding how the whole operation works, where the money goes, and what the business should be able to do next year that it can't do now.

Almost everyone who does this job started somewhere else in this brochure.

WHAT YOU'D DO

- Lead the managers who lead the teams — production, quality, maintenance, logistics. Set the targets, and make sure the people are in place to hit them.
- Own the numbers. Output, waste, on-time delivery, cost per job. You'll know which ones matter and what's driving them.
- Improve the process. Most operations managers spend real time on continuous improvement — finding where time, material and money leak out of the system, and closing the gaps.
- Make the investment decisions, or build the case for them. Whether a new press pays for itself is your argument to make.
- Handle the things nobody planned for: a major breakdown, a lost customer, a shortage in the supply chain.

WHAT YOU'LL NEED

Years of experience, and it's normally earned rather than recruited. Most operations managers came up through production and know the work from the inside.

Beyond that it's judgement and people. You'll be managing managers, holding uncomfortable conversations, and making decisions on incomplete information. Nobody expects you to arrive able to do that — it's built over time, and it's what the higher-level apprenticeships are for.

WHERE IT LEADS

General manager, operations director, managing director. Some move out of print into wider manufacturing or supply chain, because the skills carry. And the training doesn't stop: leadership standards run to Level 7, the same level as a master's degree, funded by your employer.

HOW YOU GET IN

Not directly. The usual route is Print Operative (Level 2) or Print Technician (Level 3), then Team Leader (Level 3), then Operations Manager (Level 5) — and Senior Leader at Level 7 beyond that.

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