

Abattoir Operative

What is the work like?

Abattoir operatives work in slaughterhouses. These may be part of a larger site that processes meat and meat products for sale to retailers, and butchers. Abattoirs usually specialise in slaughtering sheep, cattle, pigs or poultry. Daily responsibilities vary depending on the type of abattoir, but may include:

- Unloading, herding and controlling the animals when they are first brought to the abattoir
- Stunning the animals using electrical equipment or a mechanical device called a captive bolt stunner
- Humanely killing the animals, quickly, cleanly and painlessly, while they are unconscious
- Moving the carcasses around the meat areas, without damaging the meat, and putting them onto a process line
- Washing and checking the carcasses for any signs of disease or damage
- Removing some of the inedible parts of the carcass, such as the hooves
- Removing the skins of sheep and cattle, without damaging them
- Removing internal organs immediately after slaughter, and separating edible organs, such as livers, from the waste
- Using tools such as knives and saws to break up, split and de-bone carcasses
- Overseeing automated pig-processing equipment
- Working on a process line, especially in a poultry slaughter and processing site
- Cleaning floors, tools and equipment to high standards
- Packing the meat into cartons and processing by-products
- Loading the meat and meat products onto refrigerated lorries to be taken to retail outlets

Abattoir operatives work alongside health and safety and quality control inspectors. A government approved vet also works on site to make sure the animals do not suffer and that the meat is fit for human consumption.

High standards of safety and cleanliness are essential in abattoirs. Operatives must follow strict procedures when storing the carcasses, handling the meat and disposing of waste products. This includes working quickly and efficiently. Strict health and safety rules must also be followed to avoid accidents caused by machinery or equipment.

Hours and environment

Abattoir operatives work around 35 to 40 hours a week. Starting times vary between 6.00 and 7.30am, and days usually end at around 3.30pm, depending on whether all work has been completed. They may work a shift system and part-time work is sometimes available.

They normally work inside, in areas that are clean and that conform to strict government guidelines. However, abattoirs can be cold (as parts of the building will be refrigerated), wet, from washing down and cleaning and some areas may contain strong odours.

Hours and environment continued...

The work involves a lot of standing and using potentially dangerous machinery and equipment that must be handled with care. Protective clothing is provided which consists of a hat, overalls, gloves, special protective aprons and rubber boots. Long hair must be tied back and in a hair net.

Salary and other benefits

These figures are only a guide, as actual rates of pay may vary, depending on the employer and where people live:

- Starting salaries for abattoir operatives may be around £12,000 a year
- The average salary for an experienced worker may be around £15,000 a year
- Very experienced abattoir workers may earn around £22,000 a year

Skills and personal qualities

An abattoir operative should:

- Be physically fit
- Be comfortable working with dead animals and waste products
- Be able to work well as part of a team
- Be able to work accurately and efficiently
- Follow regulations relating to animal slaughter
- Have an awareness of food hygiene regulations and health and safety issues

Interests

It is important for abattoir operatives to:

- Be interested in the butchery and processing of meat products
- Enjoy working with their hands

Getting involved

There are abattoirs throughout the UK, generally in rural areas. Over the last few years the number of abattoirs has declined. Abattoirs are now far larger in size and handle greater numbers of livestock than in the past.

Employment prospects are good as consumer demand for meat products remains high. Due to the nature of the work, some companies find it difficult to recruit.

Vacancies may be advertised directly with abattoirs, in Jobcentre Plus offices, in local newspapers and with local recruitment agencies.

Getting into the sector

Abattoir operatives involved in killing animals must be at least 18 and licensed by the Meat Hygiene Service (MHS), an agency of the Food Standards Agency (FSA).

There are no minimum entry qualifications for abattoir operatives. Some GCSEs/S grades in English and maths may be useful for people who want to progress to supervisory or management positions.

The new Diploma in Manufacturing and Product Design (MPD) may be relevant for this area of work. The Diploma in MPD is available at Levels 1-3 and it is expected that an individual will progress into work after completing Level 2 or 3. For more information, please visit www.manufacturingdiploma.co.uk

N/SVQs in food manufacture are offered by some colleges and training providers. Qualifications may be available in meat and poultry processing skills at Level 2 and specialist meat and poultry skills at Level 3.

It is possible to enter this career through a food manufacture Apprenticeship.

Apprenticeships and Advanced Apprenticeships provide structured training with an employer. As an apprentice you must be paid at least £80 per week - £95 per week from August 2009. A recent survey found that the average wage for apprentices was £170 a week. If you are not ready for an Apprenticeship, Entry to Employment (e2e) will help to prepare you. If you are aged 14-16, you may be able to get started through a Young Apprenticeship. To find out more, see the Apprenticeship page on this website; contact your local Connexions service or visit www.apprenticeships.org.uk

There are different arrangements for Apprenticeships in Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland. For further information contact Careers Scotland www.careers-scotland.org.uk Careers Wales www.careerswales.com and for Northern Ireland contact COIU www.delni.gov.uk

The industry welcomes candidates with work experience, especially those who have a background in food production or butchery.

Individuals should be physically fit enough to work with machinery.

Training

Training is on the job and covers:

- Food safety procedures
- Health and safety
- Lifting and carrying techniques
- Teamwork
- Using tools and machinery
- Specialist techniques like skinning and eviscerating (removing internal organs)

Training continued...

Awarding organisations may offer on the job qualifications through approved centres. These qualifications include:

- N/SVQ Level 2 in food manufacture (meat and poultry processing skills)
- N/SVQ Level 3 in food manufacture (specialist meat and poultry skills)

Successful completion of these courses can lead to membership of The Worshipful Company of Butchers' Guild.

Working towards qualifications may involve attending a college or training centre on day release. Alternatively, a tutor or assessor from an approved training centre may visit workplaces to provide training and to monitor candidates' development. There are approved centres offering the above qualifications throughout the UK. Further details can be found on the websites of the training providers listed above.

Getting on

Supervisory and management positions are available. With training and experience, it may be possible for an abattoir operative to move into training.

There are also opportunities to move into quality control, product development and related areas such as food marketing.

Related jobs

- Butcher
- Food Processing Operative
- Health and Safety Inspector
- Industrial Cleaner
- Meat Hygiene Inspector
- Meat Process Worker
- Quality Control Inspector

Further reading

Leaflets from the Meat Training Council

Magazines/journals

Meat and Poultry News
Meat Trades Journal
(Some may be priced)

Alternate titles

Slaughterman/woman

Further information

City & Guilds

1 Giltspur Street
London EC1A 9DD
020 7294 2800
www.cityandguilds.com

Food and Drink Qualifications

PO Box 141
Winterhill House
Snowdon Drive
Milton Keynes MK6 1YY
01908 231062
www.fdq.org.uk

Improve Ltd

Ground Floor
Providence House
2 Innovation Close
Heslington
York YO10 5ZF
0845 644 0448
www.improveltd.co.uk

Scottish Meat Training

8-10 Needless Road
Perth PH2 0JW
01738 637785
www.meattraining.net

Department for Environment Food and Rural Affairs (Defra)

Customer Contact Unit
Eastbury House
30-34 Albert Embankment
London SE1 7TL
0845 933 5577
www.defra.gov.uk

Food Standards Agency

Aviation House
125 Kingsway
London WC2B 6NH
020 7276 8000
www.food.gov.uk

Meat Training Council (MTC)

PO Box 141
Winterhill House
Snowdon Drive
Milton Keynes MK6 1YY
01908 231062
www.meattraining.org.uk

The Worshipful Company of Butchers

Butchers' Hall
87 Bartholomew Close
London EC1A 7EB
020 7600 4106
www.butchershall.com