

Equestrian Careers

Explore the latest opportunities for a career with horses.

By Sharon Biggs

With the equine industry growing by leaps and bounds every year, more career opportunities are available to jobseekers than ever before. Opportunities found in traditional career paths—trainers, instructors, farriers and veterinarians—have increased, but jobs usually found in the non-horsey sector are now making their way into the equine trades as well. Here are some trends for in-demand equine employment.

Help Wanted: Show Performers

Until recently, most equestrian entertainment shows were few and far between, but now performance riders are in demand thanks to the growing popularity of traveling productions, theme restaurants and parks. Many of these shows explore the relationship between man and horse, bringing artistic horsemanship to the masses and opening up a little-known realm in equine careers.

About the Author

Sharon Biggs is a frequent contributor to *Horse Illustrated* and a dressage instructor. She is the author of the soon-to-be-released *Advanced English Horsemanship* (Bow Tie Press) and *In One Arena* (Half Halt Press). The founder of the equestrian theater production *Cavalia*, Normand Latourelle, discovered vaulter Alethea Shelton and her partner Erik Martonivich through their website. The two had started up a business, Big Horse Productions, exhibiting their vaulting act in events such as *Equitana* and the National Western Stock Show. After watching them perform at the Stock Show, Normand asked the team if they'd like to be part of a new cutting-edge equestrian show. Four months later the two were on their way to Quebec to rehearse for *Cavalia*.

Magali Delgado, equestrian co-director for *Cavalia*, says that anyone interested in becoming a performance rider should develop a specialty or an original act. "But people also need to learn a little about theater and a little about dance. Ability in theater is as important as riding skills," Magali says.

Alethea had a theater background before she came to *Cavalia* and was an accomplished vaulter, but she had to learn trick riding, which she admits was very daunting in the beginning. "It was pretty scary at first, but the trainers gave me a really quiet horse, and now I love it. The hardest part of this job is having to perform every night regardless of how we feel. The physical side can take its toll, so we have to take care of ourselves. The best part of this job is getting to do the two things I love the most in the world: being around horses and vaulting. And to be part of such a great team and production is a dream come true for me."

Help Wanted: Equine Nutritionists

Today equine nutrition is more than a flake of hay and a scoop of oats. Gary Potter, Ph.D., professor of equine sciences at Texas A&M University says that there is a growing need for equine nutritionists because many people in the horse industry aren't properly educated about equine nutrition.

There are several types of nutritionists, Gary says, including those who work as feed industry representatives, consultants, extension specialists and scientists. "Academic equine nutritionists conduct research and educational programs on equine nutrition for students and the general public. Practicing equine nutritionists usually work as consultants or for feed companies. In either case they assess feeding programs on farms and formulate diets [to be used by] horse owners and trainers. Then there are a few equine nutritionists, me for example, who do all of that. I conduct research, teach, formulate diets for feed companies and develop feeding programs for trainers, owners and farm managers."

Feed industry representatives need a master's degree in equine nutrition; researchers, educators and consultants need a Ph.D. in equine nutrition and board certification from the American College of Animal Nutrition.

Help Wanted: Political Lobbyists

With more than seven million people involved in the horse industry, the needs of such a large group are often represented in government decisions. As with many other industries, equine lobbyists promote passage of legislation that impacts the equine sector.

As the national trade association representing the horse industry in Washington, D.C., the American Horse Council (AHC)

works daily to represent the industry's interests and investments. They communicate with Congress, federal agencies, the media and the industry itself on behalf of all horse-related interest groups. The AHC represents every aspect of the industry from owners, breeders, vets, farriers, breed registries and associations to horse shows, racetracks, rodeos, commercial suppliers and state horse councils.

Nicole Lamoureux is chief operating officer for the AHC. Her passion for horses and politics led her to a career with the AHC. She says the AHC is always looking for dedicated individuals who want to promote and protect the horse industry. "Staff members should be interested in federal government and politics, public relations and, of course, the horse industry," Nicole says.

AHC staff also give presentations, interviews and disseminate information about the industry.

In addition to the AHC, large breed associations, such as the American Quarter Horse Association, have lobbyists in Washington. Lobbyists need a college education or a background in equine health, public policy and public relations.

Help Wanted: Public Relations and Marketing

Today you'll find an incredible range of products for your horse, from shampoos and coat conditioners to dewormers and fly sprays. Behind each product's sales success are several individuals who had a hand in its development, including public relations officers, sales staff and marketers. One of the largest companies that provides such goods is Farnam Companies Inc., based in Phoenix, Ariz.

Anne Robertson, public relations director for Farnam, says there is a growing need for workers in the animal healthcare industry. "More and more people take careful and educated care and pay attention to their animal's health and well-being. Since they use products to protect and promote a good quality of life, there is a demand for effective, safe products."

At Farnam, marketing managers oversee the brands from start to finish and are responsible for launching new products into the marketplace. Support departments include advertising and creative services, public relations, customer service, purchasing and website. "We also have a strong new product development department that is always seeking new alliances and new solutions to what horse owners need," says Anne. She goes on to point out that such departments provide job opportunities for scientists, such as parasitologists, entomologists, DVMs, animal nutritionists and more.

While some in the animal healthcare industry need to have business degrees and MBAs, the background needed depends upon the job itself. For instance, Anne runs Farnam's public relations department and has a degree in journalism. It's also helpful to be a horse owner and rider, which gives employees a sense of familiarity with customers.

Help Wanted: Website Designers

Countless horse owners are logging on to the Internet every day to gain information, purchase equipment and even buy horses. Dreamhorse.com is one such site that offers Internet classified advertising to horse buyers and sellers. Janet Williamsen, owner and founder of Dreamhorse.com, had an idea of an equine classified ads website in 1998, and now, with millions of page views each month, Janet has had to hire computer savvy individuals.

"The key position in our business is the photo/web technician. This person must be familiar with image editing software, image scanning and transferring files over the Internet," Janet says. Graphic designers who can create banners and graphics are also needed, as are service technicians who can explain technical computer issues to customers. In addition, web/database programmers must create and maintain web-based programs and databases, and network technicians need to keep sites running efficiently. And with so much visitor traffic to its site, Dreamhorse.com has recently hired a sales person to sell banner advertising.

Computer software, hardware, networks and even office management is a must for those interested in working with equine websites. And as with many web-based businesses, employees are often able to work remotely with hours that are convenient to them, which is a bonus for busy horse people.

Help Wanted: Breed Association Staff

At last count there were about seven million horses in America, many of those belonging in some way to a breed association. The American Quarter Horse Association (AQHA) is the largest breed society in the world with 4.5 million horses and 350,000 members registered. And with over 160,000 new foals and six million customer service calls to handle each year, it's no wonder that the AQHA requires a staff of 320 employees, from entry level up to management.

The AQHA is extremely customer service oriented, to the point that every phone call is handled by a person rather than an

automated routing system. "This is important for us as we wouldn't be where we are today without our members," says AQHA manager of employee development Betty Berge. "All employees go through our customer service seminars."

Jobs at breed associations are many and varied. The AQHA has 85 workers in the registration department, including two managers and five supervisors. There is also a full-time crew that works at the heritage museum designing and changing education and interactive exhibits, giving tours to members and manning the gift shop.

Many associations hire journalists to write and edit membership publications as well. In addition, there are many other career opportunities at breed associations, including employee development, public relations, public policy, web design and language interpreters.

The AQHA trains many of its employees, but those looking for advanced positions should have a background/degree in animal science, marketing, journalism or web design.

Help Wanted: Animal Advocates

Animal welfare is still a large issue, and although there have been great strides in the way animals are treated, welfare is a progressive cause, says Andrew G. Lang, DVM, director of Equine Programs for the American Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Animals (ASPCA). "There is always room to learn more, to teach more, and to improve the way we relate to animals. Animals are still potential victims of horrendous cruelties and inexcusable neglect combined with weak laws, apathy and ignorance."

Lydia Gray, DVM, an executive director of the Hooved Animal Humane Society (HAHS), says that without a doubt animal welfare organizations require more employees, but not every organization can afford them. Therefore a worker in this industry needs to be a jack-of-all trades and have skills in humane investigation, horse training, law enforcement, bookkeeping and writing. And as the animal welfare industry is largely volunteer based, organizational and people skills are also needed.

Dr. Lang says that there is no specific way to train for a job in animal welfare. "People join the humane movement by many paths," he says. "Communication and people skills are often as important as knowledge of animals and handling skills. Many of the ASPCA's humane law enforcement agents had previous careers in law enforcement. A few served with mounted units." Executive directors often have degrees in animal science, and some top positions require degrees in veterinary medicine, communication and/or business.

Help Wanted: Saddle Fitters

In the United Kingdom, it's standard practice to purchase a saddle through a saddle fitter, but in the United States this is a relatively new concept. In the past few years riders have realized how important a well-fitted saddle is to their horse's health and riding goals, therefore the demand for good fitters is quickly on the rise. So much so that British-trained saddler Gene Freeze started the Master Saddlers Association based in Woodbine, Md., which teaches English methods of fitting saddles to Americans.

One of Gene's graduates, Marji McFadden of Glendale, Ariz., says that saddle fitters offer fit evaluations, on-site flocking adjustments and off-site complete wool change-outs, billet re-stitching and replacement, and sales of saddles and fittings.

"Saddle fitters need to be detail-oriented and patient," Marji says. "Problems with saddles are often difficult to detect, so looking at details, being thorough in exploring solutions, and exercising patience are crucial attributes."

Help Wanted: Nonprofit Staff

As services for the horse industry increase, so does the need for nonprofit organizations. These can include trail access advocates and breed and discipline organizations. Kandee Haertel is executive director for the Equestrian Land Conservation Resource (ELCR), an organization that helps people with trail planning and construction details and preserving lands traditionally used by equestrians. ELCR also helps create equestrian friendly development, and offers advice on working with public, private and nonprofit land managers. "ELCR provides case studies, how-to, legal, statutory and equestrian conservation news through our website, conference participation, publications and media outreach campaigns," Kandee says. "Most nonprofits are run much the same way as a traditional office, so workers are needed to fill roles from executive director right down to clerical workers."

Those interested in a job with a nonprofit organization should hone their skills in customer service, computer software and fund-raising.

Help Wanted: Equine Science Teachers

A degree in horses, could it be possible? Yes it is. In fact, equine science courses are so popular that in the last 10 years enrollment in the program at Colorado State University's College of Agricultural Sciences at Fort Collins has risen to over 400 students. In addition, the college has more undergraduate students in equine sciences than in any other major. With such a huge number of students to educate, Jim Heird, director of equine sciences, teaching and outreach, says teachers who are not only educated in the sciences but also have a grasp of the growing equine industry are in need at many universities and junior colleges around the country. "The best equine sciences instructors are those who have a broad understanding of the sciences and are also excellent horsemen."

Equine science professors teach about the horse and its systems as well as horsemanship skills. Classes include equine evaluation, packing and outfitting, equitation, equine production and equine disease management. In addition to teaching, those with expertise in nutrition or reproduction are also sought after for research positions, particularly at major universities.

"Anyone interested in becoming an educator should find a vacant position and study the desired qualifications as this can oftentimes provide direction for both education and desired qualifications," Jim says. "I would also recommend contacting an individual who is currently a professor of equine sciences at a university to discuss the characteristics and skills that are currently required in their respective position."

The type of schooling professors need is dependent upon the position. A doctorate degree is preferred for a university, but not always required. Junior colleges or community colleges often require a master's degree, and riding instructors often only require a bachelors degree.

Even if you don't think a career with horses is possible simply because you aren't a gifted riding teacher, or an expert trainer, or medically minded, there are countless avenues you can take that will lead you to fulfillment in the horse industry.

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