

People At Work

John Siskin's On The Job

I probably take more pictures of people working than any other subject. Since I am a commercial photographer this makes a lot of sense. I love taking shots of people actually working; they provide wonderful opportunities to see people involved in something they take seriously. You can often get shots where people really aren't paying attention to you, just doing what they do. Work shots really tell you about the subject. Work shots also give you great props and great backgrounds. In a work shot the subject generally knows what to do with his/her hands as he/she does it every day.

A good work shot should tell a story. It should tell you what the subject is doing and how that relates to the job. So while a shot of someone's face might be great for a portrait, a shot of a person framing a house tells a complete story. While you might take a great shot of somebody's hand, perhaps a shot that shows experience and time, with a work shot you want to show the same hands actually doing the job. So you might want the person to be holding a hammer or other tool.

A business might also hire me to shoot portraits of the executives, but when I can shoot people working the images are much more interesting. Work shots don't always have people, but they still tell a story. Although you could take a picture of someone holding a circular saw in the studio, if you put the picture against a work site the shot will be more interesting.



This shot shows how the surroundings and the tools can make a simple shot more dramatic.



In this shot, the close-up on the hands, and the work, makes the shot more interesting. The subject is distressing a beam.

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PERSONAL PROJECT: John Siskin

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The same things that can make a better portrait will help make a better work shot: angle, light, and three-dimensionality. The first thing that concerns me is angle. Generally I like to pick an angle where I look up at a person. This makes the subject look bigger and stronger, more monumental. Most of the time I want to be close to the subject when I make the shot. I don't want to flatten an image with a telephoto lens. Still there are times when you can't tell the story without using the surroundings. So it is really important to stay aware of everything that is happening around you, not just what you can see in the viewfinder. You need to do this for the image, and for your safety.

There is one really important thing about doing shots in a work environment: be safe! Be aware of where you are and take proper safety precautions. Don't ask anybody to do something they aren't comfortable with, and follow any safety procedures specified. The way I see it, if I can't come back in one piece with the camera, I don't go. I go where I can. I often use forklifts and cranes to get the shot. I will also use surrounding buildings when they offer a good angle. Since I wear glasses, I have a pair of prescription safety glasses I can use when shooting. I use a helmet whenever I am advised to, and have one in my car. There is no reason to take unnecessary risks.

A good work shot is dramatic, so I have to be aware of the light. I try to be on a work site early in the day when light comes in at a better angle and often has better color. While twilight can be great light, many construction sites and other work environments are empty at twilight. (When I shoot finished projects, however, I try to be there at twilight because of the color and quality of the light. But I don't depend on the sun; I always bring extra strobes.)

Most of the time, if people are actually working, the lighting is flash fill. I almost always shoot with a strobe, even when the entire project is outdoors. But if I am working on a facilities brochure or making a shot to match a layout, I may use six or more strobes to make a shot. Most of the time I use Norman 200B units because they are battery powered and have a good amount of power. Don't forget to look for dramatic light from the subject—anytime you can get fire in a picture, from a torch or an oven or some burning substance, the shot will be dramatic! I also look for the sun; often I use it behind the subject, and a strobe to open up the face.



The angle and the thin beam the subject is walking on make this shot compelling.



Look for good angles, but be sure your position is secure.



I used the sun behind the subject to give a glow to the shot. I used a strobe to light the front of the subject. Without the strobe this would be a silhouette.

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I use a wide-angle zoom almost exclusively for this kind of work. One reason is that I don't like to change lenses in a dusty environment. I also do it because when I am close to the work my shot will be more three-dimensional. Too often, people use a zoom lens to bring the subject closer when they should walk up to the subject. Remember, a wide-angle lens will do a better job of separating the subject and the background. So if I am shooting a bulldozer, I will stand as close as I can and use a wide-angle lens. This gives the shot a much more powerful look.



In this shot I am just a few feet from the bulldozer. I used a 28mm focal length with a full-frame camera.

I do a good deal of post-processing. There are a lot of things you can do at a shoot, but you can't always do everything. I like to leave a little room at the edges of my frame. I may want to straighten an image or even crop a horizontal image from one that began as a vertical shot. In addition to cropping, I do saturation, perspective, and whatever else seems useful. The idea is to make a shot the business can use, whether for web, print, or any other purpose. 🌀



In this shot I changed the color in post, putting in both red and magenta. I think this makes the image much more effective.

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John Siskin is a commercial and fine art photographer who specializes in making architectural images as well as product, macro, and portraiture photographs. He has taught photography for more than 20 years. He is currently teaching "An Introduction to Photographic Lighting" and "Portrait Lighting on Location and in the Studio" at BetterPhoto.com. His website is www.siskinphoto.com.

Author's Note

I would like to thank Terry Beeler & Son General Contractor, Inc. You can see more of my construction photography on their website at: www.beelerbuildsembetter.com.

Toolbox

For these shots I used a Kodak Professional DCS PRO 14n with a Nikkor 18-35mm lens and a Tokina AT-X 28-70mm lens. I also used Norman 200B strobes. Since these shots are outside, I had the strobe on a bracket and a reflector with a glass dome diffuser. I also kept a set of barn doors on the light to give me a little more control.