

Postal Service Workers



Occupational Brief Title Codes:

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Occupational Subtitles:

- Carriers
- Flat Sorting Machine Operators
- Mail Handlers
- Postal Clerks
- Postal Inspectors
- Postmasters
- Rural Carriers
- Supervisors

Work Classification Based Related

D.O.T. Occupations:

- Advertising Material Distributors
- Bank Messengers
- Correspondence Clerks
- Court Clerks
- Meter Readers
- Police Clerks
- Proofreaders
- Title Searchers

Interests Based Related

G.O.E. Occupations:

- Bank Messengers
- Check Cashiers
- Counter Clerks
- Information Clerks
- Route Delivery Clerks
- Shipping Clerks
- Tellers
- Ticket Agents

Skills Based Related

O*NET Occupations:

- Counter and Rental Clerks
- Insurance Claim Clerks
- Library Assistants, Clerical
- Library Technicians
- Office Clerks, General
- Statement Clerks
- Weighers, Measurers, Checkers, and Samplers, Recordkeeping

Postal Service workers (ˈpost-al ˈser-vice ˈwork-ers) collect, sort, and deliver mail to individuals and businesses in the United States.

Work Performed

About 350 mail processing centers in the United States serve post offices in nearby towns and cities. Mail picked up from local collection boxes goes by truck to the nearest processing center for sorting. In these processing centers some postal service workers known as **mail handlers** unload sacks of incoming mail.

They separate letters, parcel post, magazines, and newspapers and take them to sorting and processing areas. Mail first undergoes a primary sorting into boxes designated for local mail, and for broad categories such as nearby states, distant states, and large cities like Boston or Los Angeles. Mail handlers may then load mail into automatic sorting machines or do canceling operations.

In some post offices **flat sorting machine operators** operate mechanical letter sorting machines. These workers read the addresses and punch the ZIP code for the address on each envelope or flat piece. The machine then drops the mail into the correct slots. This older method of letter sorting is being phased out. In many processing centers workers operate optical character readers (OCRs) and bar code sorters. Optical character readers “read” the zip code and imprint a bar code on the mail. Bar code sorters then scan the codes and sort the mail. This method is much faster than the older sorting method. To handle odd-sized letters and mail, workers sort them by hand.

Then mail handlers inspect, arrange, and label sacks of mail. They drive forklift trucks to move the sacks and bulk mail to the correct points for pickup and shipment to the appropriate destina-



Postal service workers collect, sort, and deliver mail.
Photo by Amy Elliott

tions. Mail handlers also rewrap parcels that become unsealed or damaged. Finally, from the sectional service center, the mail goes to local post offices for further sorting by delivery routes.

At local post offices **postal clerks** serve customers at a window or counter in the post office building. They sell stamps and money orders and answer questions. They insure, certify, and register mail and packages. They may help a customer file a claim for a damaged package. Postal clerks rent post office boxes, sell United States Savings Bonds, and process applications for passports.

Each morning **carriers** sort mail for their route by placing it in slots labeled with street names and numbers. Many carriers drive a mail truck to various points along their routes. As they cover their route to deliver the mail, they walk from house to house. Carriers also deliver mail to office buildings, and to apartment houses where mailboxes are in the lobby.

Carriers collect fees for C.O.D. and postage-due mail. They get receipts for express, registered, certified, and insured mail. When they complete their route, they return to the post office with mail they picked up from street letter boxes, homes, and business places. They turn in delivery receipts and money received.

Some carriers may have special duties. Some deliver only parcel post packages. Some put sorted bundles of mail in relay boxes on carriers' routes. Others pick up mail from street letter boxes or from mail drops in hotels and office buildings.

Rural carriers on suburban or rural routes may drive a post office truck, or they may drive their own car. They deposit mail in mailboxes. Rural carriers offer most of the services that are available at the post office. They sell stamps and money orders, and accept parcels, letters, and items to be registered, certified, or insured.

Supervisors oversee workers who distribute and deliver the mail. They make assignments and make sure the service at public windows is satisfactory. They see that the records are correct and current. They measure the carriers' mail, check the time they take to cover their route, count the number of deliveries on a route, and figure how much time mail sorting should take. A review of each carrier takes place about once a year.

Postmasters oversee all the workers in a post office. They prepare detailed reports of post office activities. Postmasters may hire, train, and evaluate performance of employees and prepare work schedules. They may also perform other post office duties, depending on the size of the post office. Post offices are classified by the size of the town or city and the volume of mail processed and revenue generated.

Postal inspectors are federal law enforcement officers. They see that post offices obey laws and observe

regulations. They investigate criminal activities such as theft and misuse of the mail. When there is a question of mismanagement or fraud, inspectors conduct management or financial audits. These agents have statutory powers of arrest and the authority to carry firearms.

Working Conditions

Mail handlers work both indoors and outdoors. They load, unload, and move sacks of mail and packages weighing up to seventy pounds. They may stand for long periods of time loading and unloading mail from automated mail processing equipment. They may use hand trucks or drive a forklift. Carriers stand while they sort their mail. They walk and drive in all kinds of traffic, weather, and have to deal with pets. Their mail bag may weigh up to thirty-five pounds. All Postal Service workers do considerable standing, walking, lifting, stretching, and reaching.

Although duties vary, much of the work is routine. Carriers must cover their route each day regardless of the volume of mail. However, they are relatively free from direct supervision.

Hours and Earnings

Full-time Postal Service workers have a forty-hour week. Overtime may be required at holiday seasons, at tax deadlines, or at other times when the mail is heavy. Some workers work at night or on weekends because most large post offices process mail twenty-four hours a day. Many carriers start work very early in the morning and finish their day early in the afternoon.

According to the Bureau of Labor Statistics, in the year 2000, carriers earned an average of \$38,420 a year. Rural carriers are reimbursed for mileage put on their own vehicles while delivering mail. Postal clerks earned an average of \$39,010 a year. Flat sorting machine operators and all other postal service workers earned an average of \$32,080 a year. Supervisors and postmasters tend to earn the most of all workers.

Most employees who work the night shift, between 6:00 p.m. and 6:00 a.m., earn 10 percent more than the base pay and 25 percent more if they work on Sunday. Postal Service workers also receive overtime pay (at the rate of one and a half times the base hourly straight time rate) if they work more than eight hours a day or more than forty hours a week. They get cash awards for money-saving or laborsaving ideas, or for superior work.

Postal Service workers have good job security and fringe benefits. Paid vacations range from thirteen days a year for workers with up to three years of employment to twenty-six days a year for people with more than fifteen years of service. Postal Service workers get retirement

benefits, workers' compensation, sick leave, and insurance and health plans. Other benefits include cost of living adjustments (COLA), a uniform allowance, and ten paid holidays.

Education and Training

The Postal Service has no exact educational requirements for post office workers. Job seekers must pass a competitive examination to get on a list of those eligible for jobs. Most new Postal Service workers are at least high school graduates. Many have one, two, or four years of college. The written examination for clerks and carriers assesses the ability of job seekers to learn and do the work. The examination, for most jobs, checks an applicant's vocabulary and reading skills. It covers name and number checking for speed and accuracy, and also memory skills. Machine operators must be able to type.

Supervisors, other skilled workers, or local training centers train new employees. Training may take only a few days or it may take weeks. Many post offices offer classroom instruction. When the Postal Service introduces new equipment or new procedures, employees receive special training.

Licensing, Certification, Unions and Professional Societies

Many Postal Service workers are union members. Unions bargain on wages, benefits, hours, and working conditions. The American Postal Workers Union represented about 300,000 individuals. The National Rural Letter Carriers' Association represented about 85,000 workers. The membership of the National Association of Letter Carriers is about 300,000. The National Postal Mail Handlers Union had about 50,000 members.

The Postal Service is the only federal agency whose employment policies are governed by a process of collective bargaining. Labor contract negotiations affecting all bargaining unit personnel, are administered by the Human Resources Group of the U.S. Postal Service.

Personal Qualifications

Postal Service applicants as a rule must be eighteen years of age. High school graduates, however, may begin work at sixteen in nonhazardous work or in work in which they do not drive a car or truck. All job candidates must pass a drug screening and physical examination. Some applicants who apply for electronic sorting jobs may be asked to take a machine aptitude test. Mail handlers must be able to lift and handle mail sacks weighing up to seventy pounds.

All applicants must be citizens of the United States or have been granted permanent resident alien status in the

United States. Males born after December 31, 1959, must be registered with the Selective Service System. Candidates for carrier positions must have a driver's license, a good driving record, and a passing grade on a road test.

Potential Postal Service workers should be able to work cooperatively with others. They should have a good memory and the ability to read typewritten and printed material rapidly and accurately.

Occupations can be adapted for workers with disabilities. Persons should contact their school or employment counselors, their state office of vocational rehabilitation, or their state department of labor to explore fully their individual needs and requirements as well as the requirements of the occupation.

Where Employed

According to the Bureau of Labor Statistics, in 2000, the Postal Service employed about 74,000 postal clerks, 324,000 carriers, and 289,000 sorters and machine operators. About 85 percent of them were full-time workers.

Postal Service workers serve in every city, town, and village—and in almost every rural region—in the United States. They may work in or out of thousands of small, medium, and large post offices. Most postal clerks offer window service and sort mail at local post offices. Many mail handlers work in large sectional centers throughout the United States.

Employment Outlook

Although a greater number of households and business growth are causing an increase in mail volume, the employment rate is expected to decline through the year 2010. Other delivery services such as United Parcel Service and Federal Express are competing with the U.S. Postal Service. FAX machines and E-mail now carry messages formerly sent by mail, however, Internet shopping has increased parcel shipping.

Automation is changing many traditional jobs of Postal Service workers. Presorting, computer forwarding, the ZIP Code system, optical character readers, bar code sorters, and flat sorting machines that process large envelopes, magazines, and circulars are replacing work once done manually.

Competition is keen. The number of applicants far exceeds the number of openings in many regions. Those who pass the examination customarily wait a year or more before hiring. Few workers leave this job for other fields of work. They tend to hold on to their jobs until they retire.

Entry Methods

Job seekers should apply at a post office or mail

processing center. They should ask for the announcement for the job they want. An announcement lists job duties, pay, time and place of the examination, and forms applicants must fill out. Not all examinations are written.

The names of people who take the examination and get a grade of 70 or more go on an eligibility list. Veterans get preference for employment. Those with a ten-point or greater compensable service-connected disability are placed at the top of the hiring list, in the order of their scores.

A passing score does not necessarily mean a job. An interval of a year or more may pass before candidates may be called for an interview. When a job opens, the Postal Service chooses one person from the top three names. The names of those not chosen remain on the list for two years from the examination date.

Advancement

New workers usually start as part-time flexible schedule employees. They work as clerks, letter carriers, or mail handlers in place of absent or sick employees. They may become full-time workers as they earn seniority and as vacancies occur.

Postal clerks may bid for preferred assignments. Carriers may bid for preferred routes as they acquire seniority. They may also use seniority to transfer to another post office. Both clerks and carriers may advance to supervisory positions. Postal Service workers may serve in any job in the post office. A few may become postmasters.

For Further Research

Artek Publications, Inc., 3474 Ebba Street, White Bear, MN 55110.

Getting a Job in the Post Office. Dick Gahler. 128 pages. \$12.00. Study guide for the entrance examination for employment with the U.S. Postal Service.

National Association of Letter Carriers, Information Center, 100 Indiana Avenue, N.W., Washington, DC 20001.

Carrying the Mail. 8 pages. Free. Career brochure on employment, working conditions, requirements, and wages of letter carriers.

Acknowledgments

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