
Couriers and Messengers

(O*NET 43-5021.00)

Significant Points

- Most jobs do not require more than a high school diploma.
- Employment is expected to have little to no change, reflecting the more widespread use of electronic information-handling technologies such as e-mail and fax.

Nature of the Work

Couriers and messengers move and distribute information, documents, and small packages for businesses, institutions, and government agencies. They pick up and deliver letters, important business documents, or packages that need to be sent or received quickly within a local area. Couriers and messengers use trucks and vans for larger deliveries, such as legal caseloads and conference materials. By sending an item by courier or messenger, the sender ensures that it reaches its destination the same day or even within the hour. Couriers and messengers also deliver items that the sender is unwilling to entrust to other means of delivery, such as important legal or financial documents, passports, airline tickets, or medical samples to be tested.

Couriers and messengers receive their instructions either in person—by reporting to their office—or by telephone, two-way radio, or wireless data service. Then they pick up the item and carry it to its destination. After each pickup or delivery, they check in with their dispatcher to receive instructions. Sometimes the dispatcher will contact them while they are between stops and reroute them to pick up a new delivery. Consequently, most couriers and messengers spend much of their time



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outdoors or in their vehicle. They usually maintain records of deliveries and often obtain signatures from the people receiving the items.

Most couriers and messengers deliver items within a limited geographic area, such as a city or metropolitan area. Mail or overnight delivery service is the preferred delivery method for items that need to go longer distances. Some couriers and messengers carry items only for their employer, often a law firm, bank, medical laboratory, or financial institution. Others may act as part of an organization's internal mail system and carry items mainly within the organization's buildings or entirely within one building. Many couriers and messengers work for messenger or courier services; for a fee, they pick up items from anyone and deliver them to specified destinations within a local area. Most are paid on a commission basis.

Couriers and messengers reach their destination by several methods. Many drive vans or cars or ride motorcycles. A few travel by foot, especially in urban areas or when making deliveries nearby. In congested urban areas, messengers often use bicycles to make deliveries. Messenger or courier services usually employ the bicycle messengers.

Work environment. Couriers and messengers spend most of their time alone, making deliveries, and usually are not closely supervised. Those who deliver by bicycle must be physically fit and must cope with all weather conditions and the hazards of heavy traffic. Car, van, and truck couriers must sometimes carry heavy loads, either manually or with the aid of a hand truck. They also have to deal with difficult parking situations, traffic jams, and road construction. The pressure of making as many deliveries as possible to increase one's earnings can be stressful and may lead to unsafe driving or bicycling practices. The typical workweek is Monday through Friday; however, evening and weekend hours are common.

Training, Other Qualifications, and Advancement

Most couriers and messengers train on the job. Communication skills, a good driving record, and good sense of direction are helpful.

Education and training. Most courier and messenger jobs do not require workers to have more than a high school diploma. Couriers and messengers usually learn as they work, training with an experienced worker for a short time.

Other qualifications. Couriers and messengers need a good knowledge of the area in which they travel and a good sense of direction. Employers also prefer to hire people who are familiar with computers and other electronic office and business equipment. In addition, good oral and written communication skills are important because communicating with customers and dispatchers is an integral part of some courier and messenger jobs.

Those who work as independent contractors for a messenger or delivery service may be required to have a valid driver's license, a registered and inspected vehicle, a good driving record, and insurance coverage. Many couriers and messengers, who are employees rather than independent contractors, also are required to provide and maintain their own vehicle. Although some companies have spare bicycles or mopeds that their riders may rent for a short period, almost all two-wheeled couriers own their own bicycle, moped, or motorcycle.

Advancement. Couriers and messengers have limited advancement opportunities. However, one avenue for advance-

Projections data from the National Employment Matrix

Occupational Title	SOC Code	Employment, 2006	Projected employment, 2016	Change, 2006-16	
				Number	Percent
Couriers and messengers.....	43-5021	134,000	134,000	-200	0

NOTE: Data in this table are rounded. See the discussion of the employment projections table in the *Handbook* introductory chapter on *Occupational Information Included in the Handbook*.

ment is to learn dispatching or to take service requests by phone.

Some independent contractors become master contractors. Master contractors organize routes for multiple independent contractors through courier agencies.

Employment

Couriers and messengers together held about 134,000 jobs in 2006. About 25 percent were employed in the couriers and messengers industry; 15 percent worked in health care; and 9 percent worked in legal services. About 19 percent were self-employed independent contractors; they provide their own vehicles and, to a certain extent, set their own schedules. However, they are like employees in some respects, because they often contract with one company.

Job Outlook

Employment of couriers and messengers should have little to no change through 2016, despite an increasing volume of parcels, business documents, and other materials to be delivered. The need to replace workers who leave the occupation will create some job openings.

Employment change. Employment in this occupation is expected to remain unchanged during the 2006-16 decade. Employment will be unchanged because of the more widespread use of electronic information-handling technologies such as e-mail and fax. Electronic transmission of many documents, forms, and other materials is replacing items that had been hand delivered. Many legal and financial documents, which formerly were delivered by hand because they required a handwritten signature, can now be delivered electronically with online signatures. However, for items that are unable to be sent electronically—such as blueprints and other oversized materials, securities, and passports—couriers and messengers will still be needed. They still will also be required by medical and dental laboratories to pick up and deliver medical samples, specimens, and other materials.

Job prospects. Despite the lack of job growth, some job opportunities will arise out of the need to replace couriers and messengers who leave the occupation. Demand for couriers and messengers may be particularly strong in certain activities, like transporting donor organs for hospitals.

Earnings

Median annual earnings of couriers and messengers in May 2006 were \$21,540. The middle 50 percent earned between \$17,430 and \$27,080. The lowest 10 percent earned less than \$14,870, and the highest 10 percent earned more than \$34,510. Median annual earnings in the industries employing the largest numbers of couriers and messengers in May 2006 were:

Medical and diagnostic laboratories	\$23,020
Depository credit intermediation	20,680
Couriers.....	20,650
Legal services.....	20,610
Local messengers and local delivery	19,560

Couriers employed by a courier service usually receive the same benefits as most other workers. If uniforms are required, employers generally provide them or offer an allowance to purchase them. Most independent contractors do not receive benefits, but usually have higher earnings.

Related Occupations

Messengers and couriers deliver letters, parcels, and other items. They also keep accurate records of their work. Others who do similar work are Postal Service workers; truck drivers and driver/sales workers; shipping, receiving, and traffic clerks; and cargo and freight agents.

Sources of Additional Information

Local employers and local offices of the State employment service can provide additional information about job opportunities. People interested in courier and messenger jobs also may contact messenger and courier services, mail-order firms, banks, printing and publishing firms, utility companies, retail stores, or other large companies.

Information on careers as couriers and messengers is available from:

➤ Messengers and Couriers Association of the Americas, 1156 15th St. NW., Suite 900, Washington, DC 20005.