
Postal Service Workers

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Significant Points

- Employment of Postal Service workers is expected to experience little or no change overall because of greater efficiencies in the processing and sorting of mail.
- Keen competition is expected as the number of qualified applicants usually exceeds the number of job openings.
- Qualification is based on an examination.
- Applicants customarily wait 1 to 2 years or more after passing the examination before being hired.

Nature of the Work

Each week, the U.S. Postal Service delivers billions of pieces of mail, including letters, bills, advertisements, and packages through heat, snow, or rain. To do this in an efficient and timely manner, the Postal Service employs about 615,000 individuals who process, sort, and deliver mail and packages as well as provide customer services and supplies in post offices. Most Postal Service workers are clerks, mail carriers, or mail sorters, processors, and processing machine operators. Postal clerks wait on customers at post offices, whereas mail sorters, processors, and processing machine operators sort incoming and outgoing mail at post offices and mail processing centers. Mail carriers deliver mail to urban and rural residences and businesses throughout the United States.

Postal Service clerks, also known as window clerks, sell stamps, money orders, postal stationery, and mailing envelopes and boxes in post offices throughout the country. They also weigh packages to determine postage and check that packages are in satisfactory condition for mailing. These clerks register, certify, and insure mail and answer questions about postage rates, post office boxes, mailing restrictions, and other postal matters. Window clerks also help customers file claims for damaged packages.

Postal Service mail sorters, processors, and processing machine operators prepare incoming and outgoing mail for distribution at post offices and at mail processing centers. These workers are commonly referred to as mail handlers, distribution clerks, mail processors, or mail processing clerks. They load and unload postal trucks and move mail around a mail processing center with forklifts, small electric tractors, or hand-pushed carts. They also load and operate mail processing, sorting, and canceling machinery.

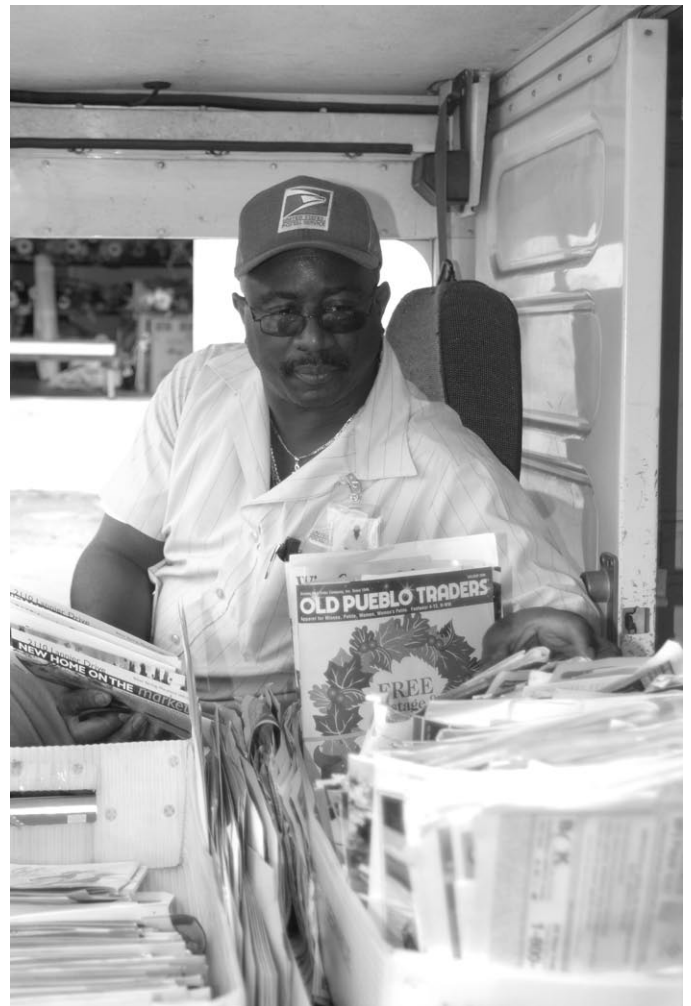
Postal Service mail carriers deliver mail, once it has been processed and sorted, to residences and businesses in cities, towns, and rural areas. Although carriers are classified by their type of route—either city or rural—duties of city and rural carriers are similar. Most travel established routes, delivering and collecting mail. Mail carriers start work at the post office early in the morning, when they arrange the mail in delivery sequence. Automated equipment has reduced the time that car-

riers need to sort the mail, causing them to spend more of their time delivering it.

Mail carriers cover their routes on foot, by vehicle, or a combination of both. On foot, they carry a heavy load of mail in a satchel or push it on a cart. In most urban and rural areas, they use a car or small truck. Although the Postal Service provides vehicles to city carriers, most rural carriers must use their own automobiles for whose use they are reimbursed. Deliveries are made house-to-house, to roadside mailboxes, and to large buildings such as offices or apartments, which generally have all of their tenants' mailboxes in one location.

Besides delivering and collecting mail, carriers collect money for postage-due and COD (cash-on-delivery) fees and obtain signed receipts for registered, certified, and insured mail. If a customer is not home, the carrier leaves a notice that tells where special mail is being held. After completing their routes, carriers return to the post office with mail gathered from homes, businesses, and sometimes street collection boxes, and turn in the mail, receipts, and money collected during the day.

Some city carriers may have specialized duties such as delivering only parcels or picking up mail from mail collection boxes. In contrast to city carriers, rural carriers provide a wider range of postal services, in addition to delivering and picking up mail. For example, rural carriers may sell stamps and money orders and register, certify, and insure parcels and letters. All carriers, however, must be able to answer customers' questions



Postal Service workers examine addresses to ensure that mail gets delivered to the correct location.

about postal regulations and services and provide change-of-address cards and other postal forms when requested.

Work environment. Window clerks usually work in the public portion of post offices. They have a variety of duties and frequent contact with the public, but they rarely work at night. However, they may have to deal with upset customers, stand for long periods, and be held accountable for an assigned stock of stamps and funds. Depending on the size of the post office in which they work, they also may be required to sort mail.

Despite the use of automated equipment, the work of mail sorters, processors, and processing machine operators can be physically demanding. Workers may have to move heavy sacks of mail around a mail processing center. These workers usually are on their feet, reaching for sacks and trays of mail or placing packages and bundles into sacks and trays. Processing mail can be tiring and tedious. Many sorters, processors, and machine operators work at night or on weekends, because most large post offices process mail around the clock, and the largest volume of mail is sorted during the evening and night shifts. Workers can experience stress as they process mail under tight production deadlines and quotas.

Most carriers begin work early in the morning—those with routes in a business district can start as early as 4 a.m. Over-time hours are frequently required for urban carriers. Carriers spend most of their time outdoors, delivering mail in all kinds of weather. Though carriers face many natural hazards, such as extreme temperatures, wet and icy roads and sidewalks, and even dog bites, serious injuries are often due to the nature of the work, which requires repetitive movements, as well as constant lifting and bending. These types of repetitive injuries occur as various kinds of injuries to joints and muscles, as well as carpal tunnel syndrome.

Training, Other Qualifications, and Advancement

All applicants for Postal Service jobs are required to take a postal service examination. After passing the exam, it may take 1 to 2 years or longer before being hired as the number of applicants is generally much greater than the number of jobs that open up.

Education and training. There are no specific education requirements to become a Postal Service worker; however, all applicants must have a good command of the English language. Upon being hired, new Postal Service workers are trained on the job by experienced workers. Many post offices offer classroom instruction on safety and defensive driving. Workers receive additional instruction when new equipment or procedures are introduced. In these cases, workers usually are trained by another postal employee or a training specialist.

Other qualifications. Postal Service workers must be at least 18 years old. They must be U.S. citizens or have been granted permanent resident-alien status in the United States, and males must have registered with the Selective Service upon reaching age 18.

All applicants must pass a written examination that measures speed and accuracy at checking names and numbers and the ability to memorize mail distribution procedures. Jobseekers should contact the post office or mail processing center where they wish to work to determine when an exam will be given. Ap-

plicants' names are listed in order of their examination scores. Five points are added to the score of an honorably discharged veteran and 10 points are added to the score of a veteran who was wounded in combat or is disabled. When a vacancy occurs, the appointing officer chooses one of the top three applicants; the rest of the names remain on the list to be considered for future openings until their eligibility expires—usually 2 years after the examination date.

When accepted, applicants must pass a physical examination and drug test, and may be asked to show that they can lift and handle mail sacks weighing 70 pounds. Applicants for mail carrier positions must have a driver's license and a good driving record, and must receive a passing grade on a road test.

Postal clerks and mail carriers should be courteous and tactful when dealing with the public, especially when answering questions or receiving complaints. A good memory and the ability to read rapidly and accurately are important. Good interpersonal skills are important, particularly for mail clerks and mail carriers who deal closely with the public.

Advancement. Postal Service workers often begin on a part-time, flexible basis and become regular or full time in order of seniority, as vacancies occur. Full-time workers may bid for preferred assignments, such as the day shift or a high-level nonsupervisory position. Carriers can look forward to obtaining preferred routes as their seniority increases. Postal Service workers can advance to supervisory positions on a competitive basis.

Employment

The U.S. Postal Service employed 80,000 clerks; 338,000 mail carriers; and 198,000 mail sorters, processors, and processing machine operators in 2006. Most of them worked full time. Most postal clerks provide window service at post office branches. Many mail sorters, processors, and processing machine operators sort mail at major metropolitan post offices; others work at mail processing centers. The majority of mail carriers work in cities and suburbs, while the rest work in rural areas.

Postal Service workers are classified as casual, part-time flexible, part-time regular, or full time. Casuals are hired for 90 days at a time to help process and deliver mail during peak mailing or vacation periods. Part-time flexible workers do not have a regular work schedule or weekly guarantee of hours but are called as the need arises. Part-time regulars have a set work schedule of fewer than 40 hours per week, often replacing regular full-time workers on their scheduled day off. Full-time postal employees work a 40-hour week over a 5-day period.

Job Outlook

Employment of Postal Service workers is expected to experience little or no change through 2016. Still, many jobs will become available for mail clerks and carriers, which are expected to add workers, and because of the need to replace those who retire or leave the occupation.

Employment change. The stable employment overall of Postal Service mail carriers and Postal Service clerks will be offset by declines in Postal Service mail sorters, processors, and processing machine operators, which will cause overall employment of Postal Service workers to decline 2 percent over the

Projections data from the National Employment Matrix

Occupational Title	SOC Code	Employment, 2006	Projected employment, 2016	Change, 2006-16	
				Number	Percent
Postal service workers.....	43-5050	615,000	603,000	-12,000	-2
Postal service clerks.....	43-5051	80,000	80,000	900	1
Postal service mail carriers.....	43-5052	338,000	341,000	3,500	1
Postal service mail sorters, processors, and processing machine operators.....	43-5053	198,000	181,000	-17,000	-8

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*.

2006-2016 period. An increasing population, the greater use of third class, or bulk, mail by businesses, and more electronic shopping will generate more business for the Postal Service. However, demand will be moderated by the fact that people are sending out fewer pieces of first class mail because of the growing use of electronic communication.

These changes will affect Postal Service occupations in different ways. Efforts by the Postal Service to provide better service and meet the needs of a growing population will increase the demand for Postal Service clerks. However, the declining use of first class mail as the use of electronic communication grows will hold growth in this occupation to a minimum.

Employment of mail sorters, processors, and processing machine operators is expected to decline moderately because of the increasing use of automated materials handling equipment and optical character readers, barcode sorters, and other automated sorting equipment. In addition, companies that mail in bulk have an economic incentive to presort the mail before it arrives at the Post Office to qualify for a reduction in the price.

Employment of mail carriers is expected to grow, but only about 1 percent through 2016. As the population continues to rise, the need for mail carriers will grow. In addition, businesses are using the mail more to deliver advertising, which is making up for the reduced use of first class mail. Also, the Postal Service is moving toward more centralized mail delivery, such as the use of cluster mailboxes, to cut down on the number of door-to-door deliveries. The best employment opportunities for mail carriers are expected to be in less urbanized areas as the number of addresses to which mail must be delivered continues to grow, especially in fast growing rural areas. However, increased use of the "delivery point sequencing" system, which allows machines to sort mail directly by the order of delivery, should reduce the amount of time that carriers spend sorting their mail, allowing them to spend more time on the streets delivering mail. This will mitigate the demand for more mail carriers.

Job prospects. Those seeking jobs as Postal Service workers can expect to encounter keen competition. The number of applicants usually exceeds the number of job openings because of the occupation's low entry requirements and attractive wages and benefits.

The role of the Postal Service as a government-approved monopoly continues to be a topic of debate. However, in 2003 the Presidential Commission on Postal Services and in 2006 the Congress both rejected the idea of privatizing the United

States Postal Service. Employment and schedules in the Postal Service fluctuate with the demand for its services. When mail volume is high, full-time employees work overtime, part-time workers get additional hours, and casual workers may be hired. When mail volume is low, overtime is curtailed, part-timers work fewer hours, and casual workers are discharged.

Earnings

Median annual earnings of Postal Service mail carriers were \$44,350 in May 2006. The middle 50 percent earned between \$40,290 and \$48,400. The lowest 10 percent had earnings of less than \$34,810, while the top 10 percent earned more than \$50,830. Rural mail carriers are reimbursed for mileage put on their own vehicles while delivering mail.

Median annual earnings of Postal Service clerks were \$44,800 in 2006. The middle 50 percent earned between \$41,720 and \$47,890. The lowest 10 percent had earnings of less than \$38,980, while the top 10 percent earned more than \$49,750.

Median annual earnings of Postal Service mail sorters, processors, and processing machine operators were \$43,900 in 2006. The middle 50 percent earned between \$40,350 and \$47,440. The lowest 10 percent had earnings of less than \$25,770, while the top 10 percent earned more than \$49,570.

Postal Service workers enjoy a variety of employer-provided benefits similar to those enjoyed by Federal Government workers. The American Postal Workers Union, the National Association of Letter Carriers, the National Postal Mail Handlers Union, and the National Rural Letter Carriers Association together represent most of these workers.

Related Occupations

Other occupations with duties similar to those of Postal Service clerks include cashiers; counter and rental clerks; file clerks; and shipping, receiving, and traffic clerks. Others with duties related to those of Postal Service mail carriers include couriers and messengers, and truck drivers and driver/sales workers. Occupations whose duties are related to those of Postal Service mail sorters, processors, and processing machine operators include inspectors, testers, sorters, samplers, and weighers, and material moving occupations.

Sources of Additional Information

Local post offices and State employment service offices can supply details about entrance examinations and specific employment opportunities for Postal Service workers.