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Office Clerks, General

(O*NET 43-9061.00)

Significant Points

- Although most jobs are entry level, applicants with previous office experience, computer skills, and sound communication abilities may have an advantage.
- Plentiful job opportunities will stem from employment growth, the large size of the occupation, and high replacement needs.

Nature of the Work

Rather than performing a single specialized task, the daily responsibilities of general office clerks change with the needs of the specific job and the employer. Whereas some clerks spend their days filing or typing, others enter data at a computer terminal. They can also be called upon to operate photocopiers, fax machines, and other office equipment; prepare mailings; proofread copies; and answer telephones and deliver messages.

The specific duties assigned to a clerk vary significantly, depending upon the type of office in which a clerk works. An office clerk in a doctor's office, for example, would not perform the same tasks as a clerk in a large financial institution or in the office of an auto-parts wholesaler. Although they may sort checks, keep payroll records, take inventory, and access information, clerks also perform duties unique to their employer, such as organizing medications, making transparencies for a presentation, or filling orders received by fax machine.

The specific duties assigned to a clerk also vary by level of experience. Whereas inexperienced employees make photocopies, stuff envelopes, or record inquiries, experienced clerks usually are given additional responsibilities. For example, they may maintain financial or other records, set up spreadsheets, verify statistical



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reports for accuracy and completeness, handle and adjust customer complaints, work with vendors, make travel arrangements, take inventory of equipment and supplies, answer questions on departmental services and functions, or help prepare invoices or budgetary requests. Senior office clerks may be expected to monitor and direct the work of lower level clerks.

Working Conditions

For the most part, general office clerks work in comfortable office settings. Those on full-time schedules usually work a standard 40-hour week; however, some work shifts or overtime during busy periods. About 1 in 4 clerks work part time, and about 1 in 10 work on a temporary basis.

Employment

General office clerks held about 2.7 million jobs in 2000. Most are employed in relatively small businesses. Although they work in every sector of the economy, more than 60 percent worked in the services or wholesale and retail trade industries.

Training, Other Qualifications, and Advancement

Although most office clerk jobs are entry-level administrative support positions, some previous office or business experience may be needed. Employers usually require a high school diploma, and some require typing, basic computer skills, and other general office skills. Familiarity with computer word-processing software and applications is becoming increasingly important.

Training for this occupation is available through business education programs offered in high schools, community and junior colleges, and postsecondary vocational schools. Courses in word processing, other computer applications, and office practices are particularly helpful.

Because general office clerks usually work with other office staff, they should be cooperative and able to work as part of a team. Employers prefer individuals who are able to perform a variety of tasks and satisfy the needs of the many departments within a company. In addition, applicants should have good communication skills, be detail-oriented, and adaptable.

General office clerks who exhibit strong communication, interpersonal, and analytical skills may be promoted to supervisory positions. Others may move into different, more senior clerical or administrative jobs, such as receptionist, secretary, or administrative assistant. After gaining some work experience or specialized skills, many workers transfer to jobs with higher pay or greater advancement potential. Advancement to professional occupations within an establishment normally requires additional formal education, such as a college degree.

Job Outlook

Employment of general office clerks is expected to grow about as fast as the average for all occupations through the year 2010. Employment growth, the large size of the occupation, and high replacement needs should result in plentiful job opportunities for general office clerks in many industries. Furthermore, growth in part-time and temporary clerical positions will lead to a large number of job openings. Prospects should be brightest for those who have knowledge of basic computer applications and office machinery, such as fax machines and copiers. Job opportunities will also be most favorable for those with good writing and communication skills. As general clerical duties continue to be consolidated and the ability to perform multiple tasks becomes increasingly necessary, employers will seek well-rounded individuals with highly developed communication skills.

The employment outlook for general office clerks will be affected by the increasing use of computers, expanding office automation, and the consolidation of clerical tasks. Automation has led to productivity gains, allowing a wide variety of duties to be performed by few office workers. However, automation also has led to a consolidation of clerical staffs and a diversification of job responsibilities. This consolidation increases the demand for general office clerks, because they perform a variety of clerical tasks. It will become increasingly common within small businesses to find a single general office clerk in charge of all clerical work.

Job opportunities may vary from year to year, because the strength of the economy affects demand for general office clerks. Companies tend to hire more when the economy is strong. Industries least likely to be affected by economic fluctuation tend to be the most stable places for employment.

Earnings

Median annual earnings of general office clerks were \$21,130 in 2000; the middle 50 percent earned between \$16,710 and \$26,670 annually. Ten percent earned less than \$13,650, and 10 percent more than \$33,050. Median annual salaries in the industries employing the largest numbers of general office clerks in 2000 are shown below:

State government	\$24,830
Local government	24,100
Commercial banks	22,320
Hospitals	22,310
Elementary and secondary schools	21,560
Offices and clinics of medical doctors	20,440
Colleges and universities	20,220
Personnel supply services	19,510

Related Occupations

The duties of general office clerks can include a combination of bookkeeping, typing, office machine operation, and filing. Other office and administrative support workers who perform similar duties include information and record clerks, and secretaries and administrative assistants. Nonclerical entry-level workers include cashiers, medical assistants, and food and beverage serving and related workers.

Sources of Additional Information

State employment service offices and agencies can provide information about job openings for general office clerks.

Postal Service Workers

(O*NET 43-5051.00, 43-5052.00, 43-5053.00)

Significant Points

- Qualification is based on an examination.
- Employment is expected to decline slightly.
- Keen competition is expected because the number of qualified applicants should continue to exceed the number of job openings.

Nature of the Work

Each week, the U.S. Postal Service delivers billions of pieces of mail, including letters, bills, advertisements, and packages. To do this in an efficient and timely manner, the Postal Service employs about 860,000 individuals. Most Postal Service workers are postal

clerks or mail carriers. Postal clerks include a wide variety of workers such as window clerks, distribution clerks, and mail processors. Window clerks wait on customers at post offices, whereas distribution clerks and mail processors sort mail. Mail carriers deliver mail to urban and rural residences and businesses throughout the United States.

Postal clerks, who typically are classified by job duties, perform a variety of functions in the Nation's post offices. Those who work as window or counter clerks, for example, sell stamps, money orders, postal stationary, and mailing envelopes and boxes. 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 and counter clerks also help customers file claims for damaged packages.

Distribution clerks sort local mail for delivery to individual customers. Other clerks, known as mail processors, operate optical character readers (OCRs) and barcode sorters to arrange mail according to destination. OCRs "read" the ZIP code and spray a barcode onto the mail. Barcode sorters then scan the code and sort the mail. Because this is significantly faster than older sorting methods, it is becoming the standard sorting technology in mail processing centers.

Nevertheless, in some locations, mail still is sorted using electronic letter-sorting machines. Workers who operate these machines push keys corresponding to the ZIP code of the local post office to which each letter will be delivered. The machine then drops the letter into the proper slot. Odd-sized letters, magazines, and newspapers still are sorted by hand. In small post offices, some workers perform all of the functions listed above.

Once the mail has been processed and sorted, it is ready to be delivered by mail carriers. 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. Recently, automated equipment has reduced the time that carriers need to sort the mail, allowing them to spend more time delivering mail.

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. Deliveries are made house-to-house, to roadside mailboxes, and to large buildings such as offices or apartments, which generally have all the mailboxes at 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 street collection boxes, homes, and businesses and turn in the mail, receipts, and money collected during the day.

The duties of some city carriers can be specialized, with some delivering only parcel post, whereas others pick 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 about postal regulations and services and provide change-of-address cards and other postal forms when requested.