

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.

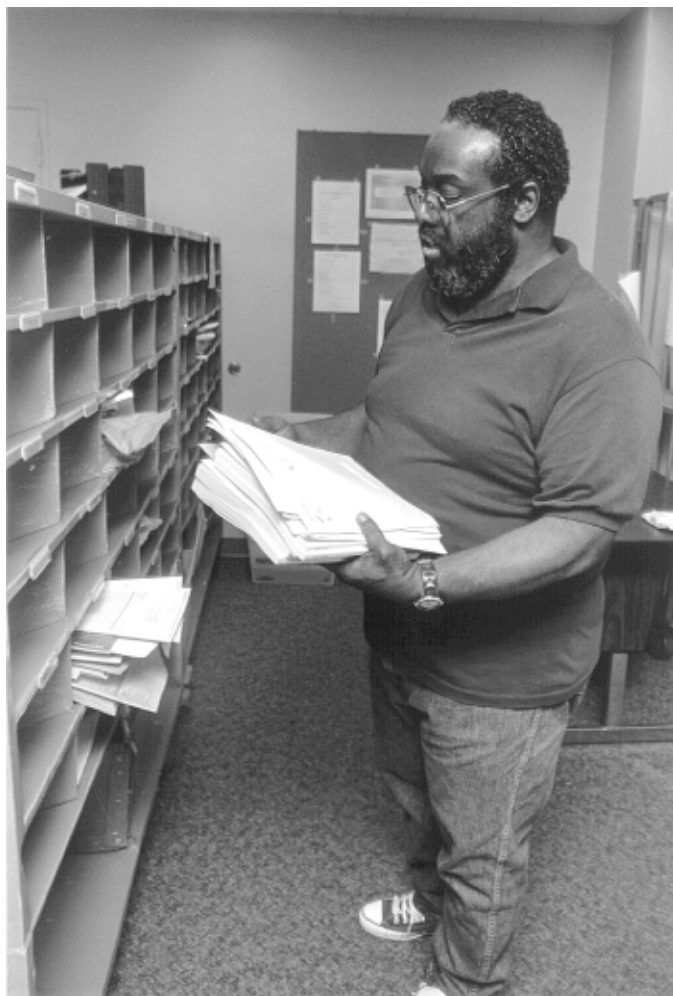
Nevertheless, in some locations, mail still is sorted using electronic letter-sorting machines. Workers who operate these machines push keys corresponding to the ZIP code of the local post office to which each letter will be delivered. The machine then drops the letter into the proper slot. Odd-sized 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.



Although some mail still is sorted by hand, machines are increasingly used to sort mail.

Working Conditions

Window clerks usually work in the public portion of clean, well-ventilated, and well lit buildings. 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.

The working conditions of other postal clerks can vary. In small post offices, workers may sort mail by hand. In large post offices and mail processing centers, chutes and conveyors move the mail, and machines do much of the sorting. Despite the use of automated equipment, the work of postal clerks can be physically demanding. These workers usually are on their feet, reaching for sacks and trays of mail or placing packages and bundles into sacks and trays.

Mail distribution clerks and mail processors can become tired and bored with the endless routine of moving and sorting mail. Many 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 ever-larger quantities of 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. Overtime hours are frequently required for urban carriers during peak delivery times, such as before the winter holidays. A carrier's schedule has its

advantages, however. Carriers who begin work early in the morning are through by early afternoon and spend most of the day on their own, relatively free from direct supervision. Carriers spend most of their time outdoors, delivering mail in all kinds of weather. Even those who drive often must walk periodically when making deliveries and must lift heavy sacks of parcel post items when loading their vehicles. In addition, carriers must be cautious of potential hazards on their routes. Wet and icy roads and sidewalks can be treacherous, and each year dogs attack numerous carriers.

Employment

The U.S. Postal Service employed 74,000 clerks; 324,000 mail carriers; and 289,000 mail sorters, processors, and processing-machine operators in 2000. Most of them worked full time. While some postal clerks provided window service, most processed mail. Many distribution clerks and mail processors sorted mail at major metropolitan post offices; others worked at mail-processing centers. The majority of mail carriers worked in cities and suburbs, while the rest worked 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 in 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.

Training, Other Qualifications, and Advancement

Postal Service workers must be at least 18 years old and U.S. citizens or have been granted permanent resident-alien status in the United States. Qualification is based on a written examination that measures speed and accuracy at checking names and numbers and the ability to memorize mail distribution procedures. 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 receive a passing grade on a road test.

Jobseekers should contact the post office or mail processing center where they wish to work to determine when an exam will be given. Applicants' names are listed in order of their examination scores. Five points are added to the score of an honorably discharged veteran and 10 points 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.

Relatively few people become postal clerks or mail carriers as their first job, because of keen competition and the customary waiting period of 1 to 2 years or more after passing the examination. It is not surprising, therefore, that most entrants transfer from other occupations.

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.

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 also are vital, because mail distribution clerks work closely with other postal workers, frequently under the tension and strain of meeting dispatch or transportation deadlines and quotas.

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, or to high-level jobs, such as carrier technician. Postal Service workers can advance to supervisory positions on a competitive basis.

Job Outlook

Employment of Postal Service workers is expected to decline slightly through 2010. However, many jobs still will become available because of the need to replace those who retire or leave the occupation. Those seeking jobs as Postal Service workers can expect to encounter keen competition, because the number of applicants will continue to exceed the number of openings.

Although efforts by the U.S. Postal Service to provide better service will increase the number of window clerks, the demand for such clerks will be offset by the use of electronic communications technologies and private delivery companies. Employment of distribution clerks and mail processors is expected to decline because of the increasing use of automated materials handling equipment and optical character readers, barcode sorters, and other automated sorting equipment. The expected decline in mail volume also may have a negative impact on the employment of distribution clerks and mail processors.

Several factors are expected to influence demand for mail carriers. The competition from alternative delivery systems and new forms of electronic communication could drastically affect the total volume of mail handled. The Postal Service expects mail volume to increase through 2002, and then decrease through 2010. Most of the decrease is expected to come from first-class and standard mail. The Postal Service expects an increase in package deliveries due to the rising number of purchases made through the Internet by businesses and consumers and to partnerships the Postal Service has made with its competitors. Although total mail volume is projected to decrease, perhaps significantly, the number of addresses to which mail must be delivered will continue to increase. 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 carriers spend sorting their mail, allowing them more time to handle these longer routes. In addition, the Postal Service is moving toward more centralized mail delivery, such as the increased use of cluster boxes, to cut down on the number of door-to-door deliveries. These trends are expected to increase carrier productivity, causing slow employment growth.

Currently the role of the Postal Service as a government-approved monopoly is a topic of debate. Any legislative changes that would privatize or deregulate the U.S. Postal Service may affect employment of all its workers. Employment and schedules in the Postal Service fluctuate with the demand for its services. When mail volume is high, full-time workers work overtime, part-time workers work 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 mail carriers were \$38,420 in 2000. The middle 50 percent earned between \$33,620 and \$41,930. The lowest 10 percent had earnings of less than \$26,140, while the top

10 percent earned over \$44,040. Rural mail carriers are reimbursed for mileage put on their own vehicles while delivering mail.

Median annual earnings of Postal Service clerks were \$39,010 in 2000. The middle 50 percent earned between \$36,140 and \$41,870. The lowest 10 percent had earnings of less than \$31,980, while the top 10 percent earned more than \$43,590.

Median annual earnings of mail sorters, processors, and processing-machine operators were \$32,080 in 2000. The middle 50 percent earned between \$22,560 and \$39,300. The lowest 10 percent had earnings of less than \$18,940, while the top 10 percent earned more than \$42,570.

Postal Service workers enjoy a variety of employer-provided benefits similar to those enjoyed by Federal Government workers. The American Postal Workers Union or the National Association of Letter Carriers, both of which are affiliated with the AFL-CIO, represent most of these workers.

Related Occupations

Other occupations with duties similar to those of postal clerks include cashiers; counter and rental clerks; file clerks; and shipping, receiving, and traffic clerks. Others with duties related to those of mail carriers include couriers and messengers and truckdrivers and driver/sales workers. Occupations whose duties are related to those of 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.

Secretaries and Administrative Assistants

(O*NET 43-6011.00, 43-6012.00, 43-6013.00, 43-6014.00)

Significant Points

- Increasing office automation and organizational restructuring will lead to slow growth in overall employment of secretaries and administrative assistants.
- Job openings will stem primarily from the need to replace workers who transfer to other occupations or leave this very large occupation for other reasons each year.
- Opportunities should be best for skilled and experienced secretaries.

Nature of the Work

As technology continues to expand in offices across the Nation, the role of the office professional has greatly evolved. Office automation and organizational restructuring have led secretaries and administrative assistants to assume a wider range of new responsibilities once reserved for managerial and professional staff. Many secretaries and administrative assistants now provide training and orientation for new staff, conduct research on the Internet, and operate and troubleshoot new office technologies. In the midst of these changes, however, their core responsibilities have remained much the same, although changed from manual to electronic—