

Freight Rail Jobs

Key Takeaway: As an essential component of the economy, railroading is one of the safest industries and provides a dynamic work environment and some of the best-compensated jobs in the country. Thanks to a commitment to safety and training, union representation and veteran support, many railroaders choose this career for the long haul.

The industry attracts employees from a wide range of backgrounds — from high school graduates to those holding graduate degrees — to help safely transport the raw materials, products and finished goods that sustain the nation's economy and people.

Railroads provide the opportunity to build lifelong careers in fields such as engineering and dispatching, law enforcement, information technology and industrial development. And with a strong track record of hiring America's veterans, rail companies are military-friendly employers. Because of high wages and benefits, technical training and professional growth opportunities, freight rail employees often stay in the industry for their entire careers. In fact, many have family railroad legacies that stretch back generations. Railroads also continue to aggressively hire. The total Class I employment in December 2023 was 122,343.

Highly compensated.

Freight rail employees are among the highest-paid in the nation. The average freight rail employee earns 52% more than the average U.S. employee. In 2022, Class I freight rail employee compensation, including benefits, averaged about \$143,000 per year. Railroad jobs range from locomotive engineers, train dispatchers and maintenance professionals to law enforcement, IT and industrial development experts.

Railroad retirees are covered by the Railroad Retirement System, which is separate from social security and is funded by railroads and their employees. In 2021, nearly 500,000 beneficiaries received \$13.4 billion in benefits from Railroad Retirement.



Source: Bureau of Economic Analysis. Compensation is for 2022 and includes wages and benefits. [Download Chart.](#)

Safer than most other industries.

Railroads are safe and continue to get safer. The Bureau of Labor Statistics reviews workplace injuries annually across different sectors. Year after year, railroads consistently outperform other transportation modes (including trucks, water transportation, and airlines) and most other major industries (including agriculture, mining, manufacturing, and construction). In fact, the Class I railroad employee injury rate per hour worked is lower than the rate for grocery and department stores. ([Chart](#))

Supported by technology.

Advanced training centers with simulators and virtual reality enable employees to practice real-life skills in a safe, rigorous and controlled environment, while innovations like remote control locomotives and high-definition cameras allow employees to perform their jobs effectively from a distance where possible, [keeping them out of harm's way](#).

Represented by unions.

Approximately 85% of Class I rail employees are unionized, and rail employees are represented by one or more of a dozen different labor unions. In their [last round of negotiations](#), employees received historic wage increases and maintained best-in-class healthcare and meaningful progress was made in creating more predictable, scheduled work shifts and time-off policies.

Military Partner

America's freight railroads have a history of [hiring veterans](#), acknowledging their valuable skills such as dedication, discipline, teamwork and safety adherence. Railroads emphasize on-the-job training, offering lifelong, skilled careers without the need for a college degree.

5 Surprising Railroad Jobs

- **Fuelmaster:** Railroads are the most fuel-efficient way to move freight over land. Railroad engineers are trained in smart driving techniques and fuel management systems — anticipating terrain, coasting and reduced braking — that minimize fuel consumption and air pollution.
- **Simulations Developer:** The first rail operations simulation program was developed by two young railroad workers, who turned their favorite hobby into a virtual training program that teaches employees to maneuver locomotives, operate switches, and sort cars onto different tracks depending on their destination.
- **Police Officer:** Railroad police forces date back to 1849 when they were set up to maintain order in railroad towns and to investigate the losses of freight and luggage. Two famous railroad police officers, Allen Pinkerton and Wyatt Earp were hired to investigate train robberies. Today, railroad police officers still protect the rail network by investigating cases of theft and vandalism and patrolling rail yards, depots and railroad property.
- **Beer Conductor:** In a rail yard outside of Chicago, temperatures can get so cold that a product like beer can freeze. Using remote control devices or manually switching out cars, train conductors keep the beer cars in motion so cans and bottles don't freeze. It's no small feat — especially in the months leading up to Cinco de Mayo when there are often 80 cars of beer in the yard at once.
- **Avalanche Control:** In mountainous states with heavy snow accumulation, avalanches are a common occurrence. Railroads operating in this rugged terrain have avalanche teams that use data from mountaintop weather stations and US Army 105mm howitzer guns mounted on Hirail cars to routinely shoot the mountains near railroad tracks to trigger controlled avalanches and prevent larger dangers.