Railroad Jobs: A Highly Skilled & Compensated Workforce

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.

Quick Facts

- **Safe:** Freight rail is one of the safest industries in the U.S., with employee injury rates lower than trucking, airlines, agriculture, mining, manufacturing, construction and grocery stores. Per Class I railroad employee, the injury rate has dropped 59% since 2000.

- **High Compensation:** Freight rail employees are among the highest-paid in the nation. Employee compensation for U.S. Class I freight railroad employees, including benefits, averaged $143,000 in 2022. 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.

- **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.

- **Military Partner:** Railroads have been a vital partner in U.S. military operations for nearly 200 years. They have transported troops and supplies, hauled the raw materials for weapons and planes, and continue to actively hire veterans.

KEY TAKEAWAY

Freight rail employees are highly skilled professionals — who are among the best-compensated and safest workers in the nation — and railroads are actively hiring.
- **Union Representation:** Approximately 85% of Class I rail employees are unionized, and rail employees are represented by one or more of a dozen different labor unions. The Railway Labor Act governs collective bargaining between freight railroads and their employees. The gains in the most recent labor agreements are significant, including historic wage increases, best-in-class healthcare, and meaningful progress in creating more predictable, scheduled work shifts.

- **Actively Hiring:** The total Class I employment in August 2023 was 122,792, up 9.4% over January 2022.

### 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.