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Non-Pilot Jobs in Aviation: FAA and ICAO

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One of the most common misconceptions about aviation is that everyone in it is a pilot or a flight attendant. But while these employee groups are certainly among the most visible people working in the industry, they represent just the tip of the aviation iceberg. You can play a part in this very dynamic industry without investing in flying lessons or receiving flight-attendant training at an airline.

Perhaps the largest employer in U.S. aviation is the Federal Aviation Administration. With a staff numbering about 45,000 people, the FAA's mission is "to provide the safest, most efficient aerospace system in the world."

The FAA employment web page lists 38 occupational specialties that do not call for pilot skills. We survey some of the most interesting positions here. Please note that all positions require U.S. citizenship, and some may require medical certification and/or a security clearance.

Air Traffic Control Specialists

Fully 33,000 people, or 75 percent of all FAA employees, are part of the agency's Air Traffic Organization. These people are air traffic controllers and associated staff. Most Air Traffic Control Specialists are not pilots, and they do not need to be.

Controller jobs are among the most sought-after billets within the FAA. The FAA has launched a major recruiting and training drive to replace aging controllers, who must legally retire at 56 years of age. Pay begins at \$33,100 a year, and rises as the new controller completes successive phases of training. Senior controllers can earn more than \$100,000 annually. There is also a comprehensive benefits package and near-total job security.

Although the pre-employment testing and initial training are rigorous, many controllers call it "the best job in aviation."

An out-of-this-world job

Working toward the development of space transportation as a commercial enterprise is the modern-day equivalent of pioneering the worldwide airline system back in the 1930s. Aerospace engineers and transportation industry analysts with the FAA's Office of Commercial Space Transportation license and regulate commercial space launches, reentries and the operation of launch and reentry sites.

Positions of this order call for a unique set of engineering skills. But the pay is high, starting at \$44,827 and going as high as \$125,943, again with a full benefits package.

Airway Transportation Systems Specialists

Back on earth again, Airway Transportation Systems Specialists are the unsung heroes of the U.S. air transportation system. Airway specialists maintain an incredibly diverse and complex suite of electronics including radars, computers, data and voice communication systems, navigational aids, airport lighting, back-up power and much more.

If you enjoy working outdoors this might be a great position for you, since equipment sites might be on airports, in open fields or even atop remote mountains. If you enjoy travel, you could traverse the United States installing and maintaining new equipment. You will also gain the satisfaction of knowing you are making a real contribution to aviation safety, every day.

You do not need an engineering degree for these positions. To the FAA, an ideal candidate has experience as a technician, mechanic, computer or telecommunications specialist. In particular, the FAA looks for practical knowledge of electronic theory and a variety of power systems. It helps a lot to have good math skills and an understanding of electronics and computer principles. Military or trade-school electronics training will be invaluable on the job.

Salaries range from \$33,100 to \$60,000 per year, again plus benefits.

Contract Specialists

If your mind runs more toward the legal than the technical, consider a position as a Contract Specialist. Contract Specialists solicit, negotiate, award and administer contracts ranging from simple to complex, from beginning to end. These vital agreements directly support the U.S. National Airspace System and FAA operations. Contract specialists are also responsible for complying with applicable law and FAA policy.

Tasks include price and cost analysis, negotiating contract modifications, handling award protests and contract disputes, services and other contracts. Pay runs between \$47,300 and \$73,300 per year.

Emergency Planners

Emergency Planners analyze and advise policies regarding emergency readiness and operational plans and procedures. They develop such things as facility fire and evacuation plans. They also act as technical advisors for disaster exercise scenarios, training, and disaster response procedures. After an exercise, planners review the results and amend policies and procedures based on lessons learned. Beyond disaster recovery, planners monitor and administer plans for disaster prevention.

Interestingly, planners administer the Public Access Defibrillation Program (meaning those heart defibrillators you see in public places such as airports). Their tasks include equipment monitoring, annual exercise development and execution, and associated training programs.

These responsible positions command a high salary: \$70,566 to \$109,401 per year.

ICAO positions

The International Civil Aviation Organization (ICAO) is an arm of the United Nations dedicated to increasing the safety and security of international civil aviation. ICAO addresses basic issues ranging from air navigation and capacity to environmental concerns, and plays a major role in standardizing aviation procedures so that they are the same everywhere in the world.

ICAO positions are primarily located in Montreal. These jobs' attractions include a diverse working environment, six weeks of annual leave, exemption from U.S. and Canadian taxes, and reimbursement of educational expenses for dependent children.

All of the jobs we've described should reinforce the message that you don't need to be a pilot to participate in making the air transportation system the safest means of travel ever devised.

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