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Non-Flying Jobs in the Airlines

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Every airline flight is supported by a host of largely invisible but vitally important ground personnel. Their work helps make each flight safe — and you could be among their ranks.

Below we highlight some of these less-evident but well-paying jobs. Most require a high school diploma or General Educational Development (GED) credential. Expect substantial on-the job and in-house training as well as a pre-employment background check and periodic drug screening.

Flight dispatchers

Dispatchers ensure that all flights are conducted safely, efficiently and in accordance with government standards. They work with pilots to manage the airplane before, during and after flight. Dispatchers carry out preflight planning, anticipate and work around delays and generate the formal release needed before the airplane leaves the gate. They assure that the aircraft is airworthy and that there are no operational limitations that might interfere with a safe, efficient trip.

Once the aircraft is airborne, a dispatcher watches over the flight and coordinates diversions perhaps due to weather, mechanical problems, an ailing passenger or even an emergency.

Skilled dispatchers multitask well, handle lots of stress in a fast-paced setting, think on their feet, apply first-rate analytical skills and exercise sound judgment. Excellent communications skills are essential.

Many corporate charter and on-demand aircraft operators employ dispatchers as well.

By law, to be a dispatcher you must be 23 years old and hold a valid Dispatch Certificate issued by the FAA.

Your dispatcher training should teach you how to read and interpret aviation weather — including maps and weather graphics — and how to analyze routes, aircraft capabilities and emergencies to make sound decisions on the spot. Computer skills are essential.

Dispatchers often work shifts, sometimes including weekends and holidays. Pay ranges from about \$28,000 to \$90,000 and averages around \$48,000. Most positions include at least basic benefits such as health insurance and sometimes travel benefits.

Airframe and powerplant mechanics

If you like working with your hands and mind on some of the finest machinery ever built, then you might enjoy a career as an airframe and powerplant mechanic. Briefly, "A-and-Ps" are responsible for every aspect of an aircraft's mechanical, electrical and electronic well-being. A-and-Ps are in great demand, and most are respected for their knowledge and quality of workmanship.

Budding A-and-Ps must be at least 18, and able to read, speak, write and understand English. You need not be a U.S. citizen to be an A-and-P in the United States. If you reside outside the U.S. and cannot meet the English requirement, your certificate will be issued as "Valid Only Outside of the U.S."

Training can either be on-the-job training (OJT) or through an FAA-approved school. The OJT path requires 18 months of practical experience with either power plants or airframes, or 30 months of practical experience working on both at the same time.

The alternative is to attend an FAA-licensed vocational school that prepares you to pass oral, written and practical tests administered on behalf of the FAA.

A-and-Ps earn between \$35,000 and \$70,000 per year, averaging around \$52,000 plus benefits. Pay runs higher for mechanics with specific experience. For instance, qualified Sikorsky helicopter mechanics can earn upward of \$77,000 a year.

Repairman's certificate

A more focused certificate is offered called a Repairman's Certificate. To earn one, you must be recommended by a repair station, commercial operator, or air carrier. You must meet the same age and English requirements as above, and your employer must state that you are qualified to perform maintenance on specific aircraft or components. This means that you must hold a specific job requiring special qualifications with that station, operator, or carrier.

You must have either 18 months of practical experience in the particular job or complete formal training acceptable to the FAA. Pay for repairmen runs between \$30,000 and \$40,000 per year.

Airport management

Airports don't run themselves. Skilled and attentive people manage the billions of dollars of capital resources in place at the 650 airports in the U.S. served by airlines, not to mention the additional 5,300 public general aviation airports.

Runways and taxiways must be maintained, painted, properly lit, plowed when it snows and closely inspected several times a day to find and remove any debris that could severely damage aircraft and possibly even cause an accident. Terminal buildings must be neat and trim. Tenant relations are essential, because every piece of real estate on the airport usually is leased, including hangars, gates and buildings. Fuel farms must be serviced and kept safe.

Airport managers arbitrate tenant disputes, satisfy the owner of the airport (often the local municipality or county authority) and deal with regulators, particularly the FAA.

You will need solid problem-solving skills along with excellent verbal and written communications

capabilities.

At smaller airports, a high school diploma may suffice, but larger airports will require a bachelor's degree. Junior managers earn around \$50,000 annually, while more senior staffers earn in the \$80,000 range at larger airports, with a high end around \$110,000. Top executives at very large airports can earn considerably more, but those jobs are few and far between and occasionally politically inspired.

Passenger service agents

If you are a people-person, then you might be an ideal passenger agent. Agents are all about customer service: handling check-in, baggage, seat assignments, boarding and deplaning passengers. They deal with unhappy customers, so the job calls for a high degree of diplomacy, patience and creativity. Agents assure that special-assistance passengers such as children and senior citizens receive the help they need. These days, agents also represent a key component of airport security.

You will need a high school diploma or GED and basic computer skills sufficient to use the airline's computer system. Pay runs around \$25,000 to \$30,000 per year, often with extensive travel privileges.

In sum

Despite setbacks, people still need to travel and that need is projected to grow in coming years. If you have a basic education, some computer skills and work well with people, there could well be a job in commercial aviation for you.

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