

Rail Traffic Controller

You sit in a control center and decide where every train on your territory goes next.

TYPICAL PAY

\$78,000

a year, full time

PAY RANGE

\$59k to \$110k

starting to experienced

TIME TO QUALIFY

1 to 5 years

after high school

DEMAND

Limited

job outlook

LICENCE NEEDED

No

anyone can do it

WHERE YOU WORK

Railroad control centers, transit operations centers, commuter rail...

How you get there

- 1 High school diploma** Grade 12
 That is the formal requirement. You must be 18, pass a background check and a drug test.
- 2 Get into the railroad** 0 to 3 years
 Most controllers come from operating jobs first, usually conductor. Some roads and transit agencies hire straight off the street into dispatcher training.
- 3 Dispatcher training program** 3 to 6 months
 Several months of classroom work on operating rules, signal systems and the software, mixed with sitting beside a working controller.
- 4 Qualify on a territory** Weeks per territory
 You are tested on the specific stretch of railroad you will control: every siding, every grade, every rule that applies there.
- 5 Work the desk** Ongoing
 You start on the quieter territories and the worst shifts, and move up as seniority and openings allow.

Pros and cons

- + Serious pay with no college debt
- + A federal railroad pension that is better than Social Security
- + Indoor, seated work with a union contract behind you
- Nights, weekends and holidays, on rotating shifts, for years
- Very few positions and they are concentrated in a few cities
- A mistake on your desk can kill people, and you carry that

Good to know

One desk can cover hundreds of miles

A single controller may hold authority over a stretch of railroad longer than some states are wide, watching it entirely through screens and radio calls. The trains are real and you never see one.

Rail workers are not in Social Security

Since the 1930s, railroad employees have paid into a separate federal system run by the Railroad Retirement Board, with its own retirement, disability, unemployment and sickness benefits. It is one of the oldest...

Optional boosts

Conductor experience. Air traffic control or military experience. Extra territories. Chief dispatcher track.

Where these numbers come from

My Next Move: Railroad Conductors and Yardmasters (53-4031.00)
 SMART Transportation Division, the largest rail operating union
 Amtrak careers
 Railroad Retirement Board

Numbers checked September 2026. Pay figures are typical full-time annual amounts in United States dollars, based on Bureau of Labor Statistics wage data and published pay scales. They vary by state, employer and experience. Tuition is for in-state students at public schools unless the card says otherwise. Sources, links and the click-through version: <https://career.help/us/careers/rail-traffic-controller>



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