

What It's Like to Be an Engineer Operating Metro-North Trains — Cameron on Transportation

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Bobby has every kid's dream job: he's an engineer for Metro-North. But Bobby isn't his real name because he's asked for anonymity so he can speak candidly about his work.

"I used to love this job," he says. "But I still take pride in it. Not just anybody can drive a train safely and smoothly."

Bobby has worked for the railroad for more than 20 years. Engineers start at \$32 an hour, climbing to \$46 after eight years.

He says Metro-North receives [thousands of applications](#) each month for a [handful of job openings](#).

After randomizing applicants' resumes, the railroad puts candidates through extensive background checks and, if finally hired, they enter a 15- to 18-month training program.

The "rule book" for being an engineer is daunting, requiring them to know every aspect of the railroad's locomotives and rail cars' systems to memorizing hundreds of miles of tracks and signals on [all three lines](#).

The railroad has about 500 engineers (the folks who run the trains) and 900 conductors and assistant-conductors (trainmen). Before every run, the crew meets for a safety briefing and review of train order bulletins like where the speed restrictions are located and which stations operate with bridge plates.

In a typical day, the engineer and conductor work as a team all day with assistant-conductors rotating through. They're all paid by the hour and can do about four or five runs a day if their assignment is New Haven to Grand Central.

If they have a layover between runs, they get three-quarters pay. More than eight hours of work is time-and-a-half overtime. So are worked holidays.

When the timetables change twice a year, the assignments are rearranged based on seniority. First pick goes to the engineer with the most seniority (33 years on the job), which means the last-hired pick up the crumbs like nights and weekends.

If he volunteers to be on the "[Extra Board](#)," Bobby can be called in on as little as two hours' notice to work, challenging his family life.

"The [benefits are excellent](#)," he says, including medical and dental coverage, 12 paid holidays, a dozen sick days and up to five weeks paid vacation per year. Spouses also get a free railroad pass, but not employees' kids.

Safety is always Bobby's top priority, but he does feel pressure to keep running on-time. Even when he's ordered to run slower for safety reasons, Bobby risks being called into the office when he arrives at Grand Central if he's really late. And he's also not a fan of the new TV cameras in his cab monitoring his every move.

"But I get it. As engineer, I'm responsible for up to a thousand passengers, entrusted by the railroad with millions of dollars of equipment," he says.

When an eight-car train is taken out of service and he has to run a six-car replacement, Bobby knows conditions will be standing-room-only and [passengers will be upset](#).

"We're just told (by our bosses) to do the best we can," he said.

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But he doesn't enjoy seeing the angry gestures (and one-finger salutes) from passengers on the platform when he pulls into a station 15 minutes late.

"I just wish that the passengers knew how much is involved in running a railroad," instead of taking their anger out on the crew.

Jim Cameron has been a Darien resident for more than 25 years. He is the founder of the [Commuter Action Group](#), sits on the [Merritt Parkway Conservancy](#) board and also serves on the Darien RTM and as program director for Darien TV79. The opinions expressed in this column, republished with permission of Hearst CT Media, are only his own. You can reach him at CommuterActionGroup@gmail.com.