

PAY GRADE | Rocket Scientist

■ **The job:** Aerospace engineer

■ **The pay:** The average annual starting salary for recent bachelor's degree graduates is \$54,008, according to a National Society of Professional Engineers survey. Those with 25 or more years of experience average \$121,679, the trade group says.

■ **The hours:** Eight-hour workdays, Monday through Friday, are common, though overtime may be necessary for time-sensitive projects.

■ **The benefits:** Employers typically provide standard health-care packages and retirement-savings plans. Many also offer tuition reimbursement for engineering-related graduate programs and pilot training.

■ **Other incentives:** "You get to see a lot of cool things a normal person would never get to see," such as stealth fighters and test sites, says Jonathan Nikkel, an aerospace engineer specializing in navigation theory for Raytheon Corp.

■ **Career path:** Entry-level jobs gener-



ally demand a bachelor's degree in an engineering discipline, says Sarah Zehr, director of engineering career services at the University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign. Candidates with internship or related work experience often have an edge, she notes. Top-secret security clearances may be required for some positions. In general, jobs in this field demand strong analytical, technical and problem-solving skills, says Ms. Zehr.

■ **Best part of the job:** Getting to work aboard jets about once a week, says Dawn Cole, an aerospace engineer responsible for flight-test data analysis at Cessna

Aircraft Co. Though most flights are round trip, she occasionally travels to test sites throughout the nation, she says.

■ **Worst part of the job:** "When there is a design change and you've got to scrap what you've done and start all over," says Kristyn N. Nesteikis, an aerospace engineer who specializes in airplane engine durability for Rolls-Royce Corp.

■ **Hiring:** Many employers recruit entry-level candidates from college campuses, which is how Mr. Nikkel, Ms. Cole and Ms. Nesteikis say they landed their first jobs in the industry. For experienced professionals, an effective strategy is to network at industry events hosted by trade groups such as the American Institute of Aeronautics and Astronautics, says Ms. Zehr. On the Net, job seekers can search for positions at sites such as aerospaceengineer.com, avjobs.com and the federal government's usa-jobs.com.

—Sarah E. Needleman

