

# Hiring booms at SpaceX and Blue Origin making it hard for NASA to attract talent

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SpaceX and Blue Origin LLC are competing to launch satellites and take humans to the moon. They are also paying big salaries to hire so many young and tireless engineers that old-line aerospace employers like Boeing Co. and NASA are finding it harder to fill positions.

Most aerospace students really covet jobs at SpaceX and Blue Origin,

recruiters say. The [private firms](#) are run by two of the three richest men in the world, Elon Musk and Jeff Bezos, who ultimately imagine people living and working in Earth's orbit and on the surface of Mars.

Their private firms also often pay more than established [space operations](#). SpaceX is currently listing starting aerospace engineer positions at \$95,000 to \$115,000 a year.

NASA, which follows the federal government's General Schedule pay scales, offers starting salaries along a range that starts at \$54,557 for engineers with bachelor's degrees, \$66,731 for master's degrees and \$73,038 for doctorates at the Kennedy Space Center in Florida.

Helping SpaceX or Blue Origin build towering rockets, orbiting labs or moon landers can also mean serving at the whims of mercurial executives. California has accused SpaceX of routinely underpaying women and minority workers. And jobs at the startups can mean laboring on projects that never see the light of day or sitting at a cubicle for 80 or 90 hours a week.

"You're doing this cool thing," said Griffin Rahn, who is earning his aerospace master's degree at Georgia Tech. "You're also going to be like really worked to death."

Nonetheless, graduates from elite colleges have been jumping at the chance to contribute to the ambitious plans of the startups, and each company is hiring rapidly. Blue Origin, with more than 10,000 workers, had more than 1,500 job postings in mid-March. SpaceX is estimated to have more than 11,000 workers and had over 1,100 openings.

This has intensified recruiting drives for aerospace majors at colleges like the Georgia Institute of Technology, Massachusetts Institute of Technology and the University of Michigan.

William Putaansuu, an aerospace engineering undergraduate at the Georgia Institute of Technology, said that Blue Origin and SpaceX "know people want to go work for them."

The sharp growth of space projects mean aerospace engineer jobs are projected to grow 6% from 2022 to 2032, twice as fast as the average overall U.S. job growth rate, according to the Bureau of Labor Statistics. Over the next five years, the booming global space economy is expected to grow roughly 40% to some \$770 billion.

"Twenty years ago, you would not have characterized the space business as fast moving," said Daniel Hastings, professor of aeronautics and astronautics at MIT. The speed is "what attracts the younger people these days."

The sharp differences between the space startups and old-school operations can also be seen in their different college recruiting strategies. Established firms with government space contracts, like Boeing and Lockheed Martin Corp. set up booths at career fairs to explain their programs and benefits. SpaceX and Blue Origin recruiters go right to campus robotics teams or rocket clubs.

Rahn, who interned at NASA with the Jacob's Space Exploration Group, said that his interview there focused on his resume to determine his qualifications and the questions were more personality based.

His interviews at Blue Origin and Relativity Space Inc. went through multiple rounds, mostly filled with technical questions with the goal of learning what they will "get out of you if they hire you," he said.

Students say they know that the demands at the private space firms can take its toll on mental and physical health. This often prompts workers to take another look at more established space operations.

The turnover rate at SpaceX and Blue Origin "is insanely high," Putaansuu said. "Not because they don't necessarily like working for that company, but there are so many offers out there."

Spokespeople for SpaceX and Blue Origin did not immediately respond to requests for comment.

## **Burned out**

Ann Richmond, deputy director of talent services at NASA, said that as private sector space companies grow, NASA has "a little bit of a tougher time competing with them salary-wise," though she and recruiters for firms like Boeing say they offer employees a better work-life balance.

Richmond said that people who have come to NASA after working for private firms "shared that they felt a little burnout."

She added that NASA's federal retirement and health benefits as well as opportunities for promotion draw employees who are "playing the long game."

"We see some very savvy applicants that are really looking at the total compensation package," Richmond said.

NASA views space startups as partners and wants to benefit from their efforts and experiences. "It's more and more common that we have people moving back and forth between NASA and SpaceX and NASA and Blue Origin," Richmond said.

Boeing also pitches young engineers on a more stable work-life balance. Beyond its besieged commercial aircraft division, the company can offer career paths spanning a range of other high-profile programs, from fighter jets to missiles to spacecraft. Recent graduates joining Boeing

can work on products currently in use, rather than futuristic ideas locked in long and potentially dead-end development cycles.

While NASA and its contractors don't have the same buzz that Blue Origin and SpaceX do, they do have storied histories stretching back 65 years that include some of humankind's greatest achievements in space.

But many aerospace majors remain more drawn to buzz than benefits and legacies.

"I think a lot of people when they're looking for jobs, they're not nearly focused enough on what an actual position is," Rahn said. "They're much more worried about the place that they're at."

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