

ONWARD  SEARCH

2026

# SALARY GUIDE

marketing | creative | technology



**INTRODUCTION**

Foreword ..... 3  
Hiring Trends ..... 5  
Talent Trends ..... 6

**SALARY DATA**

Artificial Intelligence ..... 8  
Client Services ..... 9  
Content ..... 10  
Creative & Production ..... 11  
Digital Accessibility ..... 13  
Experience Design ..... 14  
Gaming & Extended Reality ..... 15  
Marketing ..... 16  
Technology ..... 18  
Fractional Leadership ..... 20  
About the Data / Multipliers ..... 21

**ABOUT ONWARD SEARCH**

Solutions Overview ..... 23  
Additional Resources ..... 24



## FOREWORD

## When AI is everywhere, talent is everything.

AI is reshaping every aspect of work, and compensation is no exception. Where experience and education once drove hiring and salary decisions, AI literacy is now a leading factor. And in many cases, it's the deciding one.

According to *PwC's AI Jobs Barometer*, professionals with AI skills now command a 56% wage premium. While that number varies across disciplines, pay rates in the industries most exposed to AI are rising twice as fast as others. And over time, this premium is poised to become the standard. Already, many employers won't consider candidates without AI skills.

The challenge for hiring managers is that the supply hasn't yet caught up with the demand. Our *2026 Hiring in an AI World Survey*\* found that fewer than 10% of professionals rate their AI skills as advanced. With the technology evolving at an unprecedented rate, it's difficult for people to keep pace on top of their daily responsibilities. But to stay ahead in 2026, teams need more than just expertise in their fields; they must be able to successfully integrate AI into their workflows.

\* Unless otherwise specified, all data in this guide comes from our 2026 Hiring in an AI World study. Supported by third-party research, this survey polled over 260 marketing, creative, and technology professionals and leaders.

Recognizing this, top companies are acting fast to close skill gaps. Over 90% of leaders say they're budgeting for AI tools, talent, training, or enablement in 2026. Some are focused on upskilling. Others are outsourcing. Many are adjusting compensation packages to attract skilled experts. And most are taking an integrated approach. No matter the strategy, the companies that thrive will be those that demand, develop, and reward AI fluency.

**90% of leaders indicated they're budgeting for AI experts, tools, training, or enablement in 2026.**

— Onward Search Hiring in an AI World Survey

This salary guide is here to help. It provides a comprehensive view of U.S. compensation trends across creative, marketing, and technology roles—including emerging AI positions and the roles that require AI skills most. We're proud to share this data so companies can offer competitive pay, attract top talent, and win in an AI world.



# MARKET TRENDS

HIRING TRENDS

All in on AI.

Today’s hiring landscape continues to evolve amid rapid AI advancements. Last year brought unprecedented innovation, and there’s no sign of it slowing down in the coming year. For leaders across teams, this brings both new opportunities for growth and obstacles to overcome.

In 2026, leaders say their greatest challenges will include keeping pace with AI-driven change, identifying professionals with AI skills, and meeting rising salary expectations. Still, optimism remains high. From AI training initiatives to broader enablement efforts, companies are investing in the technology and taking proactive steps to support their teams.

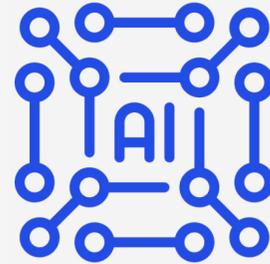
These insights, gathered from our *2026 Hiring in an AI World Survey*, highlight how marketing, creative, and technology leaders are adapting to the AI world around them.



84% of leaders indicated their companies are likely to hire in 2026.



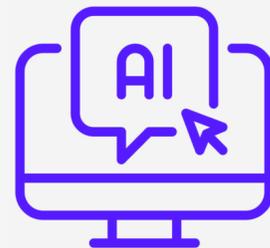
67% of leaders are concerned about meeting candidate salary expectations in 2026.



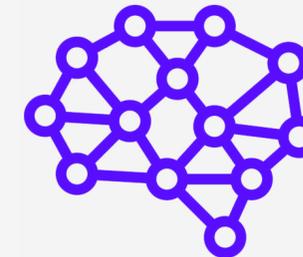
More than 90% of leaders indicated their companies are likely to invest in AI experts, tools, or services in 2026.



Only 11% of creative, marketing and tech teams report having a dedicated department-wide AI strategy.



More than 1 in 4 leaders would not hire a candidate without AI skills.



77% of leaders are not very confident in their ability to assess AI skills.

TALENT TRENDS

**Salaries above all.**

In a competitive job market, the employers who pay attention to their talent’s needs are often the ones who thrive. Fortunately, today’s marketing, creative, and technology candidates have made their priorities clear: compensation remains the leading factor in career decisions.

But it’s not the only one. In 2026, professionals value meaningful work just as much as remote flexibility. Recognizing their own AI skill gaps, job seekers also express continued interest in training. Across industries, high performers seek forward-thinking companies that inspire and invest in their people.

These insights, gathered from our *2026 Hiring in an AI World Survey*, showcase job seeker preferences and perspectives. Employers who recognize and adapt to these evolving expectations will be best positioned to attract and retain talent in 2026.



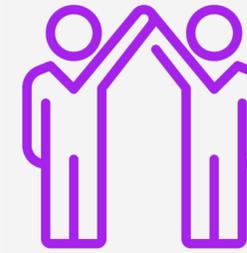
74% of marketing, creative and tech professionals are considering switching companies in 2026.



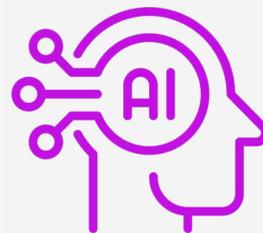
93% of marketing, creative and tech professionals would switch companies if offered a higher salary.



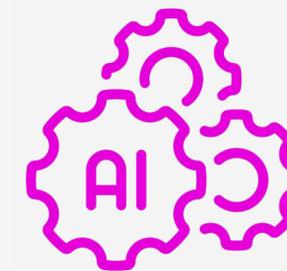
More than 50% of marketing, creative and tech professionals are targeting a salary increase of 10% or higher in 2026.



97% of marketing, creative and tech professionals say doing meaningful work is important to them.



Less than 10% of marketing, creative and tech professionals rate their AI skills as expert level.



Close to 70% of marketing, creative and tech professionals are interested in receiving AI training in 2026.

# SALARY DATA

## ARTIFICIAL INTELLIGENCE

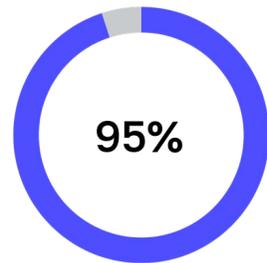


Over 90% of leaders indicated they're budgeting for AI experts, tools, training, or enablement in 2026.

Source: Onward Search

ROLE	LOW	MID	HIGH
AI Architect	\$146,000	\$184,000	\$222,500
AI Automation Engineer	\$110,000	\$140,000	\$175,000
AI Enablement Lead	\$100,000	\$135,000	\$185,000
AI Engineer	\$151,000	\$188,500	\$226,000
AI Ops Lead	\$185,000	\$268,000	\$350,000
AI Product Manager	\$121,500	\$156,000	\$189,000
AI Researcher	\$103,000	\$126,000	\$149,000
AI Trainer	\$135,000	\$175,000	\$215,000
GEO Specialist	\$130,000	\$175,000	\$210,000
Machine Learning Engineer	\$126,000	\$177,500	\$229,000
NLP Engineer	\$141,000	\$180,000	\$225,000
Robotics Engineer	\$96,500	\$119,500	\$142,500

# CLIENT SERVICES

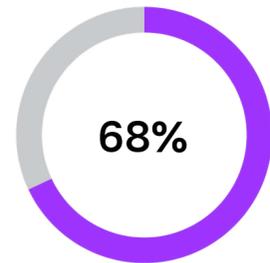


95% of customer service leaders plan to retain human agents while defining AI's role in support operations.

Source: Gartner

ROLE	LOW	MID	HIGH
Account Director	\$98,500	\$121,000	\$144,500
Account Executive	\$56,000	\$71,000	\$87,500
Account Manager	\$80,500	\$93,000	\$107,000
Digital Project Manager	\$77,000	\$97,500	\$114,500
Media Director	\$97,500	\$118,000	\$138,000
Media Planner	\$61,000	\$73,500	\$87,000
Producer	\$81,500	\$94,000	\$108,000
Project Manager	\$70,500	\$86,000	\$104,500
Traffic Manager	\$57,500	\$68,000	\$84,000

# CONTENT

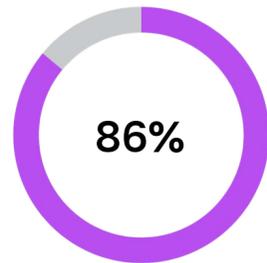


68% of businesses report higher content marketing ROI after adopting AI.

Source: Semrush

ROLE	LOW	MID	HIGH
Content Marketing Manager	\$72,000	\$84,500	\$99,500
Content Strategist	\$73,500	\$89,500	\$105,000
Copy Editor	\$54,500	\$71,000	\$81,500
Copywriter	\$65,500	\$82,500	\$95,500
Proofreader	\$49,000	\$59,500	\$70,000
Proposal Writer	\$69,500	\$82,500	\$95,000
SEO Writer	\$64,000	\$77,500	\$92,000
Technical Writer	\$68,500	\$84,000	\$97,500
Web Editor	\$62,000	\$76,500	\$89,000

## CREATIVE &amp; PRODUCTION (1 OF 2)



86% of creators now integrate generative AI into their creative workflows.

Source: Adobe

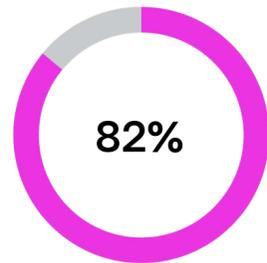
ROLE	LOW	MID	HIGH
2D/3D Animator	\$75,000	\$88,500	\$102,000
AR/VR Developer	\$105,000	\$133,500	\$162,000
Art Director	\$84,000	\$104,500	\$128,000
Creative Director	\$134,000	\$175,000	\$205,000
Creative Services Manager	\$78,000	\$97,000	\$115,000
Digital Designer	\$69,000	\$83,500	\$102,000
Event Manager	\$60,000	\$74,500	\$88,000
Graphic Designer	\$61,000	\$72,000	\$82,500
Illustrator	\$60,000	\$71,000	\$81,000
Instructional Designer	\$78,000	\$98,000	\$124,500
Mobile App Designer	\$93,000	\$118,000	\$142,000
Motion Graphics Designer	\$76,500	\$92,000	\$108,500
Multimedia Designer	\$65,000	\$82,500	\$100,000

## CREATIVE &amp; PRODUCTION (2 OF 2)

ROLE	LOW	MID	HIGH
Packaging Designer	\$57,000	\$70,500	\$84,500
Photo Retoucher	\$52,000	\$67,000	\$82,000
Photographer	\$48,000	\$62,500	\$78,000
Presentation Designer	\$63,500	\$78,000	\$89,000
Product Designer	\$81,000	\$98,000	\$118,000
Production Artist	\$58,000	\$72,500	\$87,000
Production Manager	\$57,000	\$68,000	\$80,000
Studio Manager	\$66,000	\$77,500	\$91,500
Traffic Manager	\$57,500	\$68,000	\$84,000
VFX Artist	\$80,500	\$96,000	\$117,000
Video Editor	\$62,000	\$73,000	\$91,500
Video Producer	\$68,000	\$89,000	\$106,500
Visual Designer	\$77,000	\$94,000	\$114,500

## DIGITAL ACCESSIBILITY

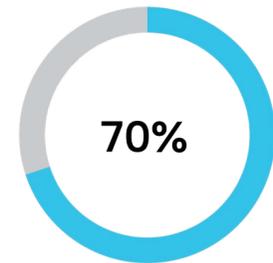
ROLE	LOW	MID	HIGH
Digital Accessibility Auditor / Tester	\$63,500	\$90,000	\$110,000
Digital Accessibility Director	\$152,000	\$183,000	\$245,000
Digital Accessibility Engineer	\$100,000	\$130,500	\$155,000
Digital Accessibility Product Manager	\$105,000	\$126,000	\$150,000
Digital Accessibility Program Manager	\$110,000	\$136,500	\$170,000
Digital Accessibility Strategist	\$120,000	\$162,500	\$205,000
Digital Accessibility Trainer	\$78,000	\$109,000	\$139,000
Digital Accessibility UX Researcher	\$97,000	\$119,000	\$142,000
Inclusive Designer	\$90,000	\$117,000	\$144,000



82% of enterprise organizations plan to incorporate AI into their accessibility strategies.

Source: Level Access

## EXPERIENCE DESIGN

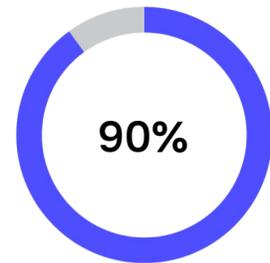


70% of CX leaders plan to integrate generative AI into as many customer touchpoints as possible by the end of 2027.

Source: Zendesk

ROLE	LOW	MID	HIGH
Information Architect	\$99,000	\$122,000	\$146,000
Interaction Designer	\$75,000	\$92,000	\$109,000
Interactive Designer	\$81,000	\$94,000	\$107,500
Product Designer	\$84,000	\$101,000	\$120,000
Product Manager	\$92,000	\$111,000	\$130,000
UI Designer	\$83,000	\$105,000	\$126,000
UX Architect	\$97,000	\$132,500	\$168,000
UX Content Strategist	\$88,000	\$104,000	\$120,000
UX Designer	\$97,000	\$119,500	\$142,500
UX Researcher	\$98,000	\$119,000	\$140,000
UX Writer	\$92,500	\$107,000	\$126,000

## GAMING &amp; EXTENDED REALITY

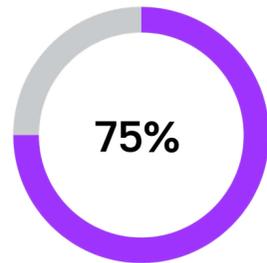


90% of video game developers have integrated generative AI tools into their development workflows, and 97% believe AI is transforming the industry.

Source: Google Cloud

ROLE	LOW	MID	HIGH
AR/VR Developer	\$105,000	\$133,000	\$162,000
Character Animator	\$78,000	\$98,500	\$126,000
Environment Artist	\$83,500	\$110,000	\$137,000
Game Designer	\$105,000	\$152,000	\$182,000
Gameplay Engineer	\$112,000	\$156,000	\$193,000
Graphics Engineer	\$102,000	\$122,500	\$145,000
Network Engineer	\$98,500	\$125,500	\$152,000
QA Tester	\$69,000	\$81,500	\$93,000
Systems Engineer	\$105,000	\$136,000	\$168,000
Technical Artist	\$102,000	\$128,000	\$154,000
Unity Developer	\$89,000	\$111,000	\$133,000
Unreal Engineer	\$96,000	\$120,000	\$143,000
VFX Artist	\$84,500	\$104,000	\$124,000

## MARKETING (1 OF 2)



75% of marketers believe AI skills are important to their jobs, but fewer than 5% rate their AI skills as expert-level.

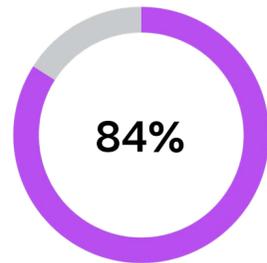
Source: Onward Search

ROLE	LOW	MID	HIGH
Brand Manager	\$81,500	\$99,000	\$118,000
Community Manager	\$54,500	\$68,000	\$82,000
Customer Experience Manager	\$63,500	\$80,500	\$93,000
Demand Generation Manager	\$89,000	\$105,000	\$127,500
Digital Acquisition Manager	\$88,000	\$107,000	\$129,000
Digital Analytics Manager	\$100,000	\$118,000	\$137,500
Digital Marketing Manager	\$84,500	\$103,500	\$123,000
Digital Strategist	\$92,000	\$110,500	\$129,000
Email Marketing Manager	\$77,000	\$96,000	\$114,000
Event Manager	\$60,000	\$74,500	\$88,000
Growth Marketing Manager	\$92,000	\$112,000	\$135,000
Marketing Analyst	\$74,000	\$86,000	\$98,000
Marketing Manager	\$80,000	\$99,500	\$119,000

## MARKETING (2 OF 2)

ROLE	LOW	MID	HIGH
Marketing Researcher	\$78,000	\$89,500	\$102,000
PPC Manager	\$74,000	\$91,000	\$105,000
PR Manager	\$80,000	\$93,500	\$106,000
Project Manager	\$72,000	\$86,000	\$100,000
SEO Manager	\$81,000	\$95,500	\$110,000
Social Media Manager	\$62,500	\$78,000	\$95,000

## TECHNOLOGY (1 OF 2)



84% of software developers are using or planning to use AI coding tools, and 51% now use AI assistance at least weekly.

Source: Stack Overflow

ROLE	LOW	MID	HIGH
Agile Coach	\$118,000	\$144,000	\$168,000
Applications Architect	\$137,000	\$169,000	\$200,000
Business Analyst	\$100,000	\$137,500	\$175,000
Cloud Engineer	\$119,000	\$145,500	\$173,000
Compliance Analyst	\$96,000	\$116,000	\$136,000
Cyber Security Engineer	\$121,000	\$157,500	\$195,000
Data Analyst	\$98,500	\$126,500	\$154,000
Data Engineer	\$127,000	\$156,000	\$185,000
Data Scientist	\$122,000	\$155,500	\$188,000
Database Developer	\$109,000	\$143,000	\$178,000
DevOps Engineer	\$108,000	\$142,000	\$176,500
Engineer (Back End)	\$94,000	\$124,500	\$154,000
Engineer (Front End / UI)	\$98,000	\$122,000	\$146,500

## TECHNOLOGY (2 OF 2)

ROLE	LOW	MID	HIGH
Engineer (Full Stack)	\$102,000	\$143,500	\$185,000
ERP Developer	\$120,000	\$150,000	\$182,000
Mobile App Developer	\$121,000	\$149,000	\$178,000
Network Cloud Architect	\$140,000	\$172,000	\$203,000
Network Engineer	\$110,000	\$134,500	\$161,000
Program Manager	\$144,000	\$177,500	\$210,000
Project Manager	\$100,000	\$133,000	\$165,000
Quality Assurance Manager	\$102,500	\$146,000	\$190,000
Quality Assurance Tester	\$99,500	\$129,000	\$159,000
Scrum Master	\$112,000	\$136,000	\$155,500
Software Developer	\$109,000	\$143,000	\$180,000
Solutions Architect	\$143,500	\$176,000	\$208,000
Systems Analyst	\$100,500	\$125,500	\$148,000

# FRACTIONAL LEADERSHIP

As organizations scale, they need specialized leadership to accelerate execution and deliver measurable impact. Fractional executives provide on-demand, C-level expertise that drives initiatives forward, closes capability gaps, and produces results without the cost or ramp-up time of a full-time hire.

## When should you use it?

Fractional executives are often brought in when an organization needs senior leadership at the executive table before a full-time role is justified. They provide strategic guidance and operational oversight during periods of growth, transformation, or leadership transition.

## How does it work?

Fractional executives typically operate on a monthly retainer, dedicating a defined amount of time to your organization each month. Engagements can be short-term, interim, or ongoing, and are designed to flex around your priorities.

## How much does it cost?

The exact cost varies based on the role, its scope, and the organization's size. However, the following range reflects typical compensation for fractional executives.

**\$15,000 - \$30,000 / month**

## EXAMPLE ROLES

Chief Accessibility Officer (CAO)

Chief Artificial Intelligence Officer (CAIO)

Chief Creative Officer (CCO)

Chief Finance Officer (CFO)

Chief Information Officer (CIO)

Chief Information Security Officer (CISO)

Chief Marketing Officer (CMO)

Chief Operating Officer (COO)

Chief Product Officer (CPO)

Chief Revenue Officer (CRO)

## INTERPRETING THE DATA

## A few words about our many numbers

The salary ranges presented in this guide are broken down into percentiles or levels of expertise. While a candidate's education, experience, and skill set have historically determined their level, AI fluency is now a leading factor for many hiring managers. The ranges were collected from public data, cross-referenced against our proprietary database of talent compensation figures, and vetted by members of our nationwide team.

However, compensation determination is not an exact science. Factors such as location, cost of living, or supply and demand may cause salaries to fall outside the stated ranges. Thus, this guide should be used as guidelines, rather than lines drawn in the sand.

### Adjusting for Location

The salary ranges represent the national average for each position. To get a more accurate figure for your geographic location, simply use the percentage multipliers below to calculate the difference.

LOCATION	%
Atlanta, GA	105
Austin, TX	111
Baltimore, MD	103
Boise, ID	90
Boston, MA	128
Charleston, SC	96
Charlotte, NC	105
Chicago, IL	118
Cleveland, OH	96
Dallas, TX	110
Denver, CO	115
Detroit, MI	100
Houston, TX	108
Indianapolis, IN	96

LOCATION	%
Las Vegas, NV	102
Los Angeles, CA	125
Memphis, TN	96
Miami, FL	106
Milwaukee, WI	101
Minneapolis, MN	105
Nashville, TN	103
New Orleans, LA	99
New York, NY	130
Newark, NJ	120
Oklahoma City, OK	94
Orange County, CA	115
Orlando, FL	101
Philadelphia, PA	112

LOCATION	%
Phoenix, AZ	110
Pittsburgh, PA	98
Portland, OR	112
Providence, RI	102
Raleigh, NC	104
Richmond, VA	100
Salt Lake City, UT	108
San Antonio, TX	98
San Diego, CA	118
San Francisco, CA	130
Seattle, WA	124
St. Louis, MO	100
Stamford, CT	125
Washington, DC	128

Example:  
Atlanta: \$100,000 x 105% = \$105,000



# ABOUT ONWARD SEARCH

## ONWARD SEARCH

# Solutions Overview

Onward Search provides innovative solutions and expert talent to help marketing, creative, and technology teams thrive in the future of work.

Partner with us to hire skilled professionals, achieve your digital accessibility goals, and make AI transformation possible.

Staffing & Recruiting: [onwardsearch.com/creative-staffing](https://onwardsearch.com/creative-staffing)

AI Transformation: [onwardsearch.com/AI-solutions](https://onwardsearch.com/AI-solutions)

Digital Accessibility: [onwardaccessibility.com](https://onwardaccessibility.com)

Request Talent or Solutions: [onwardsearch.com/schedule-call](https://onwardsearch.com/schedule-call)



## ONWARD SEARCH

## Additional Resources

Our Salary Guide isn't the only complementary resource we offer to hiring managers and job seekers. Explore our job board, AI webinars, and expert insights to advance your career, elevate your work, and optimize your hiring strategy.

Search for Jobs: [jobs.onwardsearch.com](https://jobs.onwardsearch.com)

Content Library: [onwardsearch.com/content-resources](https://onwardsearch.com/content-resources)

AI Webinars: [onwardsearch.com/AI-webinars](https://onwardsearch.com/AI-webinars)

Company Blog: [onwardsearch.com/blog](https://onwardsearch.com/blog)

Salary Guide for Sharing: [onwardsearch.com/salary-guide-2026](https://onwardsearch.com/salary-guide-2026)

Request Insights or Information: [onwardsearch.com/contact](https://onwardsearch.com/contact)



**ONWARD  
➔SEARCH**

