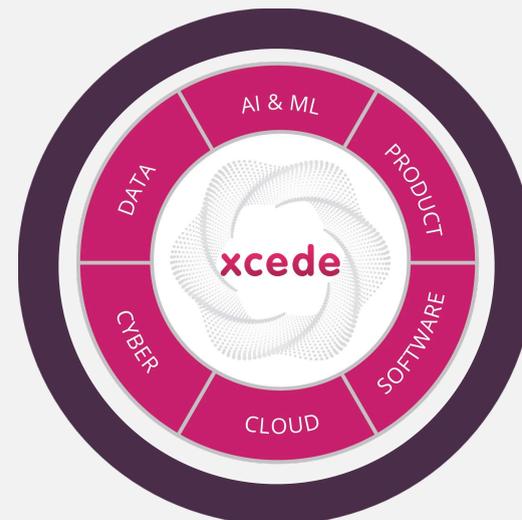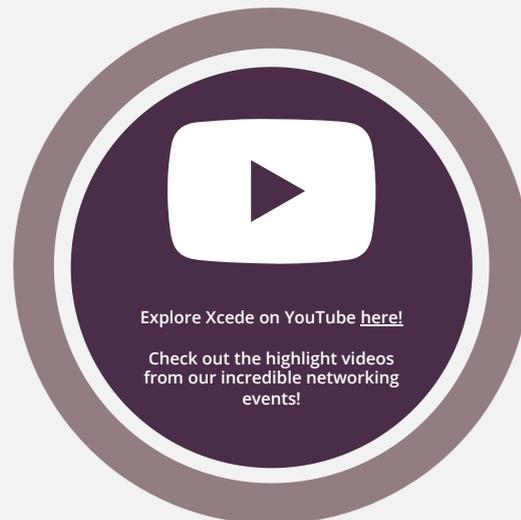# xcede

2026 UK
SALARY GUIDE

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ABOUT XCEDE

We connect companies with exceptional professionals who empower growth.

Founded in 2003, our specialists provide global transformational talent in Data, AI & Machine Learning, Product, Software, Cloud and Cyber. We work with businesses, from pioneering start-ups to global brands, to find project-based or permanent talent that enables innovation in line with their vision and goals.

Across our key areas, our experts operate with a keen focus on delivering excellence and expertise for our clients, candidates and colleagues.

Explore Xcede on YouTube here!

Check out the highlight videos from our incredible networking events!

DATA
AI & ML
PRODUCT
SOFTWARE
CLOUD
CYBER

xcede

INTRODUCTION

MATTHEW JONES
Sales Director
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"The start of 2026 saw many forecasts paint a bleak picture for the UK labour market, with predictions of a potential market collapse and an 11-year high in unemployment, reaching almost 5.4%. Concerns centred around rising minimum wage costs, increased employer National Insurance contributions and broader economic pressure, with some commentators suggesting that so-called 'zombie companies' - businesses surviving on thin margins and sustained borrowing - could begin to fail under the weight of these changes.

In reality, however, the markets we operate in told a more nuanced story. 2025 proved to be a year of growing confidence across the technology hiring landscape, particularly in the second half of the year. Across data, AI, software engineering, product and cyber, demand for senior individual contributors strengthened significantly, with competition for AI talent in particular driving a marked uplift in both hiring activity and salaries. There has also been an increase in appetite to hire at the senior level which we believe may lead to a domino effect, creating further vacancies and movement across leadership and specialist functions. While some external commentators suggest the market may follow a bell-curve pattern - with demand peaking before moderating - any potential slowdown is likely to be linked either to a cooling of the current AI surge, should elements of an 'AI bubble' unwind, or to organisations increasingly leveraging AI tools to operate with leaner team structures rather than expanding headcount at the same pace.

At the same time, the market has become more selective. Organisations are building leaner, higher-impact teams, often expecting broader capability from each hire rather than narrowly defined skill sets. Return-to-office expectations have continued to firm across much of the market, and performance standards are rising. In some high-growth and AI-led environments, there are signs of more intense delivery cultures emerging, with greater emphasis on output, pace and commercial impact. An example of this is the emerging '996' work structure - a pattern of working 9am to 9pm, six days a week - which appears to be gaining momentum. This shift is contributing to rising salary expectations for highly capable professionals who can operate across multiple disciplines. Conversely, entry-level hiring has been more constrained, despite average junior salaries increasing, suggesting strong competition for high-potential talent even as overall vacancy volumes decline at that level.

As we move further into 2026, the market sits at an interesting inflection point. Demand remains strong, evidenced by record vacancy levels and revenue performance seen in our own business, but questions remain around how sustainable current AI-driven hiring momentum will be. External theories suggest a potential normalisation phase ahead, particularly as organisations explore how smaller, AI-enabled teams can deliver more with less. What is clear is that expectations of talent have risen, and the value placed on high-performing, adaptable professionals has never been greater."

OUR COMMITMENT STATEMENT

xcede

OUR DE&I APPROACH

At Xcede, we have created an environment that is accessible, inclusive and open to different perspectives. Through our journey, we aim to address barriers to equality and promote diversity and inclusion so that each of our offices reflects its diverse local communities.

Internally, our 'Women of Xcede Group' provides a platform for discussing current matters, celebrating success, collaborating, and inspiring change across our global offices. We aim to build a more diverse team across a predominantly male industry.

Externally, we use the following practices:
Inclusive Hiring Practices: We work closely with our clients to ensure that their hiring processes are unbiased and inclusive. This involves providing training on fair and equal interviewing techniques, implementing blind recruitment strategies, and promoting diverse candidate pools.

Partnerships with Diverse Networks: We actively collaborate with diverse professional networks, organisations, and affinity groups to expand our reach and connect with a broader range of talent. To support this, we regularly host networking events, roundtables, podcasts, and webinars. By fostering these partnerships, we contribute to creating a more inclusive ecosystem within the industries we serve.

Regular Training and Education: We prioritise continuous learning within our team and offer regular training sessions on DE&I topics. This includes compulsory training for all of our Consultants on 'Allyship', 'Unconscious Bias' and 'Neurodiversity'. This ensures that our consultants stay informed about best practices and emerging trends, enabling them to better support our clients in building diverse and equitable teams.

CSR

ethy VERIFIED · COMMUNITY CHAMPION ethy · INDUSTRY CHAMPION ethy · EMPOWERED EMPLOYEES ethy · GIVES TO CHARITY ethy

We have been committed to making a difference since the formation of our CSR Strategy in 2015. Being socially responsible is an integral part of our business ethos. We listen to our employees who actively drive initiatives to support our CSR goals, including:

CSR Days:
These days enable our team members to take time off during the workday to volunteer in their local communities. This initiative aligns with our CSR strategy, which is rooted in bettering the communities in which we work. Since 2022, we have raised over £25,000, and 120 employees have made use of their CSR Days, showcasing our unwavering commitment to CSR and community support.

Annual initiatives:
Our employees nominate charities close to their hearts, and the company supports these choices throughout the year with events like Jurassic Coast Challenge, London 10k, and bake sale fundraisers. In 2025, the National Autistic Society was our Charity of the Year. Our team surpassed our annual target by 34%, raising £6,700 in total for this incredible cause. In addition to this, our team donates time and recruitment expertise to local students and professionals.

Our partnership with Ethy:
Through Ethy, we're making ethical choices a part of our daily operations. Ethy acknowledges our commitment to charity, our community, and our employees. This is seen in the badges we have earned thus far. Together with Ethy and our dedicated team, we're working towards a more sustainable and ethical future.
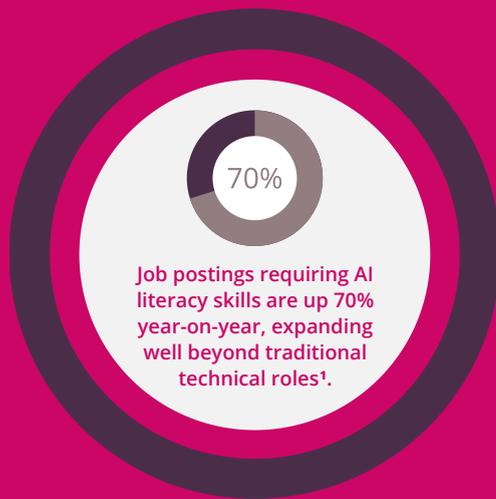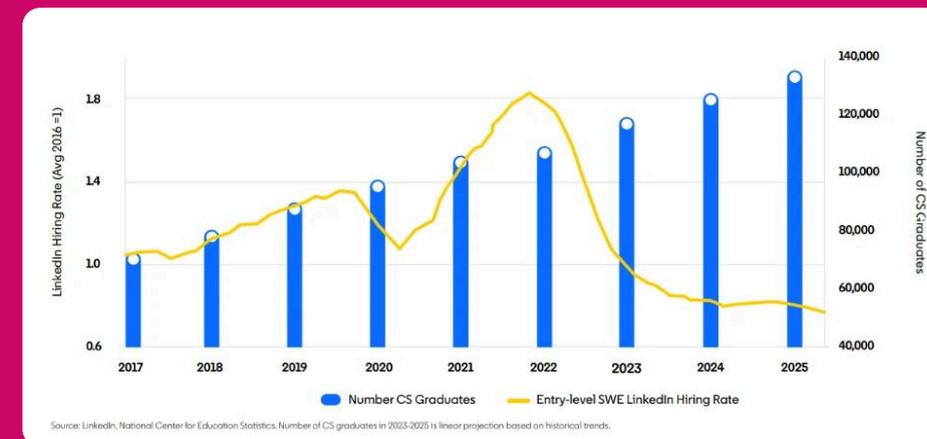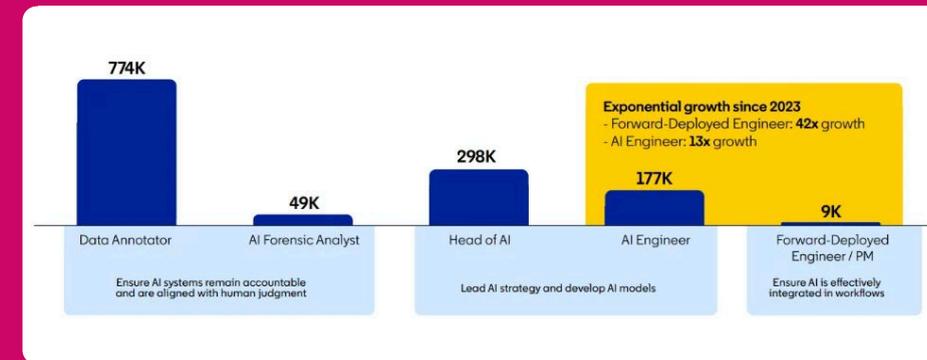
CURRENT STATE OF THE MARKET

A recent Labour Market Report[1] published by LinkedIn offers several valuable insights into the current state of the job landscape.

Figure 1 highlights the relationship between LinkedIn's hiring rate and applicants per job opening, pointing to a highly competitive market shaped by cautious hiring and ongoing layoffs. July 2025 recorded both the highest number of applicants per vacancy and the lowest LinkedIn hiring rate since July 2020, underscoring the reduced availability of opportunities.

Figure 2 suggests that AI is not the primary driver behind the slowdown in hiring. The report notes that AI has generated more than 1.3 million new jobs globally over the past three years. Employers are increasingly seeking candidates who combine strong technical capability with distinctly human skills such as adaptability, problem-solving and communication. The most in-demand profiles are those that blend AI expertise, ranging from hands-on engineering to broader AI literacy, with these human capabilities. This combination gives organisations a clear competitive advantage.

Figure 3 shows that last year recorded the highest number of computer science graduates across the 2017–2025 period, while entry-level software engineering hiring on LinkedIn fell to its lowest point over the same timeframe. This closely reflects our own observations: despite increases in junior-level salaries over the past year, entry-level hiring activity remains extremely limited.

70%

Job postings requiring AI literacy skills are up 70% year-on-year, expanding well beyond traditional technical roles[1].

Remote roles remain significantly oversubscribed, attracting x2.7 more applications than the number of roles posted.[1]

FIGURE 1: LINKEDIN HRING RATE VS APPLICANTS PER JOB OPENING[1]

FIGURE 2: AI JOBS CREATED BETWEEN 2023 AND 2025[1]

FIGURE 3: NUMBER OF COMPUTER SCIENCE GRADUATES VS ENTRY LEVEL SOFTWARE ENGINEER LINKEDIN HIRING RATES[1]

DATA & AI

PERMANENT ROLES	JUNIOR	MID LEVEL	SENIOR	LEAD	HEAD OF
BI & Data Warehousing	£43 000	£63 000	£81 000	£100 000	£121 000
Digital Analytics & Optimisation	£45 000	£62 000	£70 000	£81 000	£110 000
CRM & Marketing Analytics	£42 000	£56 000	£75 000	£85 000	£109 000
Product Analytics	£49 000	£69 000	£86 000	£108 000	£129 000
Data Science	£47 000	£71 000	£95 000	£117 000	£147 000
Machine Learning Engineering	£55 000	£77 000	£101 000	£124 000	£140 000
Analytics Engineering	£40 000	£64 000	£90 000	£113 000	£130 000
Data Engineering	£47 000	£71 000	£94 000	£124 000	£150 000
AI & Research Science	£60 000	£81 000	£107 000	£147 000	£181 000
Data Governance	£56 000	£67 000	£85 000	£92 000	£121 000

CONTRACT ROLES	INSIDE IR35	OUTSIDE IR35
BI & Data Warehousing	£850 - £1 250	£700 - £1 000
Digital Analytics & Optimisation	£550 - £650	£450 - £650
CRM & Marketing Analytics	£400 - £800	£500 - £700
Product Analytics	£550 - £600	£400 - £550
Data Science	£650 - £750	£500 - £600
Machine Learning Engineering	£600 - £750	£500 - £650
Analytics Engineering	£550 - £650	£425 - £575
Data Engineering	£550 - £750	£500 - £550
AI & Research Science	£500 - £650	£425 - £575
Data Governance	£600 - £800	£425 - £700

Despite continued market caution, permanent salaries rose across most roles in 2025, marking a clear shift from the softer trends seen previously. Growth was strongest at the junior and mid-levels, with salary increases typically ranging from 8–20%. However, despite these increases, we've seen less hiring activity at these levels. Data Engineering, Analytics Engineering, Machine Learning Engineering, and AI & Research Science saw the most consistent uplifts across all seniority levels, while senior and leadership roles experienced steadier, more controlled growth.

Contract rates also showed movement in 2025. Inside IR35 roles increased notably, particularly in specialist and high-demand areas such as BI & Data Warehousing, Data Engineering, and AI & Research Science. Outside IR35 rates remained broadly stable, with modest increases limited to niche skill sets. Overall, the trends point to strengthening demand for specialist data and AI expertise, alongside a continued preference for inside IR35 engagements.

INDUSTRY VIEW

"In 2026, the data market is shaped by a shift toward consolidation, efficiency, and value realisation, with organisations focusing on simplifying data estates, improving data quality, and enabling trusted decision-making. Demand is strongest for data engineers, analytics engineers, and senior data leaders who can rationalise tooling, embed governance by design, and enable self-service insight, alongside a growing emphasis on data product thinking with clear ownership. The most in-demand professionals are those who balance technical excellence with pragmatism, delivering trusted data, measurable impact, and sustainable capability."

Natalie Jakomis - Chief Data & AI Officer - Chambers and Partners

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OUR EXPERT'S OPINION: DATA & AI

"In 2025, hiring across the UK data and AI market started cautiously but gained momentum as the year progressed. Demand for Data Engineers rebounded after a brief dip, driven by organisations accelerating their AI ambitions. As high-quality data remains fundamental to AI success, Data Engineering, Analytics Engineering and Data Architecture have moved back to the top of hiring agendas. We've also seen renewed confidence in Analytics, with activity now primarily driven by increased demand for marketing and product analysts. This reflects higher marketing budgets, largely resulting from continued investment in new products that are moving into production and commercial environments. However, overall analytics hiring remains below the peak levels seen between 2020 and 2022.

AI has now moved beyond early experimentation into a phase of industrialisation. Organisations are shifting from proof-of-concept (POC) activity to long-term operating models, building teams and decision-making frameworks around AI capability. While adoption was previously driven by narrow use cases, momentum has broadened this year, with agentic AI emerging as a key theme. As AI functions mature, broad 'AI Engineer' roles are increasingly being split into more specialised positions, including research, infrastructure and LLM-focused roles.

Salary growth in AI remains among the strongest across the technology landscape, particularly for individuals who combine research-led experience with commercial impact. More broadly, salaries have been relatively stable, with premiums paid for senior, staff- and principal-level talent. Competition for top candidates has intensified, with senior professionals often receiving multiple offers, although risk aversion remains high and candidates are prioritising job security, cash-value benefits and flexibility.

Looking ahead, governance and responsible AI are expected to become core hiring priorities in 2026, driving increased demand for Data Governance specialists and leaders who can balance innovation with regulatory oversight. In this environment, securing top data and AI talent will require stronger value propositions and more compelling hiring processes than ever before."

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PRODUCT

PERMANENT ROLES	JUNIOR	MID LEVEL	SENIOR	LEAD	HEAD OF
Product Management	£54 000	£71 000	£87 000	£102 000	
Data Product Management	-	£77 000	£95 000	£120 000	£137 000
AI Product Management	-	£82 000	£100 000	£130 000	
Technical Product Managment	-	£75 000	£98 000	£117 000	
Product Owner	£51 000	£65 000	£82 000	£96 000	
Service Design	£38 000	£63 000	£82 000	£87 000	£107 000
UX Research	£40 000	£63 000	£78 000	£92 000	£120 000
UX Design	£41 000	£62 000	£77 000	£94 000	£120 000
Product Design	£49 000	£62 000	£78 000	£94 000	£118 000

CONTRACT ROLES	INSIDE IR35	OUTSIDE IR35
Product Management	£550 - £650	£500 - £650
Data Product Management	£600 - £800	£500 - £800
AI Product Management	£600 - £850	£500 - £750
Technical Product Managment	£550 - £750	£500 - £650
Product Owner	£450 - £650	£350 - £550
Service Design	£450 - £600	£350 - £650
UX Research	£450 - £650	£350 - £550
UX Design	£550 - £650	£500 - £600
Product Design	£450 - £600	£350 - £500

In 2025, permanent salaries across Product and Design functions showed stronger and more consistent growth than the previous year, particularly at mid to senior levels. Product Management roles saw increases of approximately 8–15%, with Lead and Head of Product positions commanding notably higher salaries, reflecting continued strategic importance. AI Product Management and Technical Product Management experienced the most pronounced uplift, especially at senior and lead level, reinforcing demand for technically aligned product leadership.

Data Product Management rebounded after previous declines, with lead-level salaries increasing significantly, signalling renewed investment in data-led product strategies. UX Research, UX Design, Service Design, and Product Design remained relatively stable, with modest growth at senior and leadership levels, indicating a mature and steady market for design-focused roles.

OUR EXPERT'S OPINION: PRODUCT

"The Product market in 2025 has been shaped by caution and selectivity. The first half of the year was particularly challenging, with organisations hesitant to hire and increasingly precise about the profiles they were willing to invest in. Competition for roles has remained intense, and employers have held the advantage, often prioritising candidates who closely match both domain experience and delivery track records. As a result, Product Managers without hands-on exposure to AI products or automation initiatives have faced a more competitive and constrained market.

Investment dynamics are also influencing hiring behaviour. Private Equity (PE) activity has been relatively resilient, with firms targeting undervalued assets and backing efficiency-driven transformation, while Venture Capital (VC) investment remains more cautious due to ongoing economic pressures. This has contributed to leaner Product teams and a stronger emphasis on more senior 'player-coach' type Product leaders who can operate strategically while remaining close to execution.

Salary levels have remained broadly stable, with fewer inflated packages and a clearer alignment between compensation and proven impact. Companies that are serious about Product still recognise the value of strong talent and are prepared to pay accordingly, particularly where candidates bring technical fluency or the ability to operate effectively alongside engineering and AI teams.

From a Product strategy perspective, there is a clear divergence between B2B and B2C adoption of AI. B2B organisations are continuing to invest in AI to drive internal efficiencies, tooling and workflow optimisation, where usability and measurable outcomes matter more than polished consumer experiences. In contrast, B2C product teams are moving more cautiously, carefully assessing whether AI features genuinely solve customer problems or deliver clear value, rather than introducing AI for its own sake. This increased focus on user need and adoption is shaping the next phase of Product hiring, with growing demand for commercially minded, outcomes-driven Product Managers who can validate demand, challenge assumptions and ensure AI-enabled products are both needed and wanted by the end user."

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SOFTWARE

PERMANENT ROLES	JUNIOR	MID LEVEL	SENIOR	LEAD
Java / Kotlin / Spring	£50 000	£65 000	£86 000	£105 000
Scala / Clojure / Haskell	£54 000	£74 000	£91 000	£111 000
Python	£52 000	£70 000	£98 000	£110 000
Golang	£55 000	£76 000	£102 000	£115 000
C++	£65 000	£85 000	£105 000	£130 000
Frontend JavaScript / React	£45 000	£69 000	£85 000	£97 000
Backend Node / TypeScript / JS	£60 000	£79 000	£111 000	£129 000
Applications Architect	£118 000			
C# / .NET	£45 000	£61 000	£90 000	£110 000
Engineering Manager	£116 000			
Head of Engineering (NEW)	£132 000			
Mobile Development	£52 000	£72 000	£103 000	£127 000
Testing & QA	£40 000	£68 000	£80 000	£91 000
DevOps / SRE	£52 000	£75 000	£98 000	£118 000

CONTRACT ROLES	INSIDE IR35	OUTSIDE IR35
C# / .Net	£500 - £750	£430 - £660
Java / Kotlin / Scala	£600 - £700	£500 - £650
Python	£650 - £1 100	£500 - £900
Golang	£550 - £800	£400 - £650
C ++	£650 - £1 000	£500 - £850
Front End JavaScript / React	£550 - £750	£450 - £650
Back End Node / TypeScript / JS	£480 - £750	£400 - £600
Applications Architect	£500 - £900	£400 - £850
Engineering Management	£600 - £800	£500 - £700
Mobile Development	£500 - £650	£450 - £600
Testing & QA	£350 - £650	£300 - £650

Over the last 12 months, permanent salaries increased more consistently, with most roles seeing rises of around 5–10%. Golang, Python, and Backend JavaScript/TypeScript roles recorded the strongest growth across mid to senior levels, while Scala-related roles also saw steady uplifts. C++ salaries stabilised following previous declines, with modest increases across senior and lead positions. Leadership salaries remained largely fixed, with Applications Architect and Engineering Manager unchanged, and the Head of Engineering role continuing to command a £132k salary.

Contract rates showed little year-on-year movement, with both Inside and Outside IR35 roles remaining broadly stable across all skill sets. Overall, the data points to a more balanced engineering market, with sustained demand for modern backend and cloud-aligned skills, steady leadership investment, and minimal volatility in the contract space.

INDUSTRY VIEW

"The way AI companies scale has changed. The technical bar in AI and engineering roles is higher than ever, and maintaining that standard is what allows organisations to move fast without breaking things.

The focus for 2026 is on building momentum through quality of hire, not sacrificing it for short-term volume"

Nicola Manning - Head of Talent Acquistion - Faculty

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OUR EXPERT'S OPINION: SOFTWARE

"Last year, we observed a shift in the Software market towards product engineering, with organisations placing greater emphasis on engineers who can work closely with the business across the full product development lifecycle. Rather than hiring narrowly defined front-end or back-end specialists, companies are increasingly seeking senior, well-rounded engineers who can contribute to analysis, system design and stakeholder engagement, and who understand how engineering decisions directly impact commercial outcomes. This trend, previously most common in startups, has become far more prevalent across larger organisations over the past year.

Hiring activity has remained cautious and highly selective, with interview processes becoming longer and more rigorous as employers focus on demonstrable return on investment from every hire. Salaries have largely plateaued across the wider market, reflecting ongoing cost sensitivity. However, product-focused engineers, particularly within startups, continue to command a premium as organisations look to consolidate capability and reduce overall headcount. Demand has become increasingly concentrated at the senior end of the market, with minimal investment in junior and mid-level hiring.

This lack of junior hiring presents a longer-term risk for the sector. As companies lean on AI and automation to replace entry-level work, the pipeline of future senior engineers is narrowing, potentially creating significant skills gaps in the years ahead. At the same time, competition for top-tier senior talent remains intense, with employers often seeking the 'top 10%' candidates while remaining reluctant to meet their salary expectations. Combined with ongoing economic uncertainty, interest rate pressure and UK-specific tax changes, this has created a market characterised by high expectations, constrained budgets and a continued focus on value-driven engineering capability."

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CLOUD

PERMANENT ROLES	JUNIOR	MID LEVEL	SENIOR	LEAD	HEAD OF
Infrastructure	£40 000	£50 000 - £80 000	£80 000 - £120 000	£90 000 - £140 000	£100 000 - £160 000
EUC / Workplace	£35 000	£50 000 - £80 000	£80 000 - £120 000	£90 000 - £140 000	£100 000 - £160 000
Cloud / Platforms	£45 000	£55 000 - £85 000	£80 000 - £120 000	£100 000 - £140 000	£110 000 - £160 000
Networks	£40 000	£55 000 - £85 000	£80 000 - £120 000	£90 000 - £140 000	£110 000 - £160 000
Project / Service Management	£45 000	£65 000 - £75 000	£80 000 - £95 000	£90 000 - £110 000	£100 000 - £140 000
Programme Management / Transformation	£50 000	£65 000 - £75 000	£100 000 - £150 000	£120 000 - £170 000	£130 000 - £200 000

CONTRACT ROLES	INSIDE IR35	OUTSIDE IR35
Infrastructure Architect	£650 - £850	£650 - £900
Infrastructure Engineer	£500 - £650	£450 - £700
EUC / Workplace Architect	£650 - £850	£600 - £850
EUC / Workplace Engineer	£500 - £700	£450 - £650
Cloud / Platform Architect	£700 - £1 000	£650 - £900
Cloud / Platform Engineer	£600 - £850	£550 - £800
Network Architect	£650 - £850	£600 - £800
Network Engineer	£500 - £750	£500 - £700
Linux / Systems Engineer	£500 - £750	£500- £650
Project Manager	£550 - £750	£500 - £850
Programme / Transformation Manager	£750 - £1000	£700 - £900
Migration & Support Engineers	£275 - £450	£200 - £350

Reviewing 2025, permanent Infrastructure and Cloud salaries remained largely stable, reflecting a more settled market. Junior and mid-level roles showed little movement, with wide salary ranges continuing to reflect differences in scope and responsibility. Senior and lead salaries were broadly unchanged, while Head of roles maintained higher salary bands, indicating continued investment at leadership level.

Contract rates were also steady overall. Inside IR35 showed minimal movement across most roles, while Outside IR35 saw modest improvements at the upper end for Infrastructure Architects, Cloud Engineers, and Project Managers.

OUR EXPERT'S OPINION: CLOUD

"2025 remained a challenging market overall, with contract hiring proving busier than the permanent market. Demand varied by sector, with defence in particular seeing increased activity as a result of the ongoing geopolitical climate. We also saw strong demand driven by Windows 11 refresh programmes, while Broadcom's licensing changes contributed to greater demand for alternative skillsets such as OpenShift. Microsoft Copilot has delivered mixed results; although there was an initial push to launch pilot programmes, adoption has stalled in many cases as users have gravitated towards ChatGPT and other publicly available LLMs. Enterprise organisations remain highly cost-conscious, seeking to drive more value from their investments, strip out duplication and rationalise their estates. From a resourcing perspective, this has continued to drive demand for offshore skillsets.

Looking ahead to 2026, we expect Cloud demand to accelerate as AI becomes a key driver of investment. Organisations will need to strengthen their underlying infrastructure and 'plumbing' to support the shift from POC into production environments. Many are still wrestling with the broader implications of AI and how it reshapes the nature of work, including which roles may be replaced, augmented or newly created.

Salaries and contract rates have largely plateaued, with the exception of professionals who possess scarce skillsets or operate within Hedge Fund and Proprietary Trading environments, where demand continues to support premium compensation."

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CYBER

PERMANENT ROLES	SALARY RANGE
Head of Cyber	£110 000 - £180 000
Cloud Security Architect	£75 000 - £130 000
Cloud Security Engineer	£60 000 - £110 000
Security Engineer	£55 000 - £110 000
IAM Architect	£75 000 - £125 000
IAM Engineer	£60 000 - £85 000
IAM Developer	£50 000 - £85 000
DevSecOps	£80 000 - £130 000
SOC Analyst	£45 000 - £85 000
Incident Response / Digital Forensics	£75 000 - £100 000
Security GRC	£75 000 - £110 000

	CONTRACT ROLES	INSIDE IR35	OUTSIDE IR35
CORE	Cloud Security Architect	£670 - £1 200	£585 - £1 000
CORE	Network Security Architect	£750 - £1 000	£500 - £800
CORE	Network Security Engineer	£500 - £1 000	£450 - £900
MICROSOFT	Cloud Identity / Digital Identity Consultant	£600 - £850	£590 - £750
MICROSOFT	Microsoft Cloud Security Engineer	£740 - £800	£650 - £700

Despite ongoing market caution, permanent security salaries remained largely unchanged in 2025, indicating a stable but restrained market. Salary ranges across core roles such as Cloud Security, IAM, DevSecOps, and GRC showed no material movement year-on-year, with senior and leadership positions maintaining consistent bands. This stability suggests sustained demand for experienced security professionals, without the inflationary pressure seen in other technology disciplines.

Contract rates were similarly steady overall. Inside IR35 saw a small uplift in Network Security Architect roles, reflecting continued demand for specialist network security expertise, while other contract rates remained flat across both Inside and Outside IR35. The trends point to a mature security market, with consistent demand for critical skills and minimal volatility across both permanent and contract hiring.

OUR EXPERT'S OPINION: CYBER

"The Cyber market has experienced a complex and challenging year, shaped by geopolitical uncertainty and continued pressure on the UK economy. While this environment has made organisations more cautious, cyber security remains a non-negotiable priority, particularly within highly regulated sectors such as financial services. Hiring volumes have remained broadly consistent with previous years, with organisations recruiting steadily throughout the year rather than in short-term spikes. Supported by strong revenues and ongoing expansion, much of this activity is growth-led rather than replacement-driven, reflecting sustained investment in cyber capability as businesses continue to scale.

One of the more significant shifts in the sector is the increasing use of automation and AI-enabled tooling to enhance threat detection and response. Rather than reducing headcount, organisations are using these technologies to augment existing teams, allowing security professionals to operate more effectively and focus on higher-value work. Transactional and repetitive tasks are increasingly automated, while demand grows for experienced practitioners who can oversee, interpret and act on what these tools surface.

From a talent perspective, this remains a cutting-edge area with a limited supply of professionals who genuinely understand both security operations and AI-driven automation. Headcount numbers have remained relatively stable, but expectations have risen, with employers seeking fewer, more highly skilled individuals who can do more with advanced tooling. Over time, the balance between human expertise and automation may continue to evolve, but for now the human element remains critical. The challenge for organisations is not whether to invest in cyber capability, but how to deploy it intelligently in an increasingly complex threat landscape."

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OUR EXPERT'S OPINION: CONTRACT OVERVIEW

"The UK contract market remained steady throughout 2025 and, in many cases, continued to outperform the permanent market. As permanent hiring slowed due to economic pressures such as high interest rates, increased National Insurance costs and tighter investment conditions, organisations increasingly turned to contractors to maintain momentum on critical initiatives. This trend has been further reinforced by potential changes to UK legislation around full worker rights, prompting many businesses to remain cautious about long-term employment commitments.

Security and AI have been the dominant themes throughout the year. Significant investment in defence, driven by the geopolitical landscape, has fuelled demand for security-cleared engineers to support sensitive programmes. At the same time, AI-related activity has largely centred on advisory, programme management and enablement work, as organisations focus on defining strategy and establishing the foundations before scaling adoption.

Ongoing technology transformations, heightened cyber security focus following major outages, and sustained mergers and acquisitions activity have also driven demand for flexible, specialist talent. Contractors have played a key role in delivering time-sensitive programmes without increasing permanent headcount, particularly within technology- and change-led environments. We've also seen a shift in how contractors are engaged, with many organisations moving away from traditional headcount models and instead hiring through Statements of Work (SOWs) and procurement-led routes.

Overall, while there is significant discussion around the long-term impact of AI on the workforce, current contract demand remains firmly focused on senior advisory and delivery roles that help businesses extract tangible commercial value. The contract market is well positioned to continue benefiting from ongoing uncertainty in permanent hiring, where flexibility, speed and delivery certainty are increasingly prioritised."

C-SUITE OVERVIEW

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In addition to our expertise across roles and levels within the tech sector, we recognise the continued evolution of the C-Suite market, where base compensation in UK technology leadership has remained relatively stable, with modest increases weighted toward long-term incentives rather than significant salary growth[2]. Executive packages are now more commonly structured around bonuses, equity and performance-linked incentives to align leadership outcomes with long-term business value, transformation delivery and sustainability objectives[3]. At the same time, AI has moved firmly onto the strategic agenda, with a significant majority of UK CEOs adopting generative AI and viewing it as a core driver of productivity, growth and operating-model change, increasing demand for leaders with strong digital and AI fluency[4]. Despite the growing use of AI and automation across hiring processes, senior executive appointments remain highly relationship-driven, with boards continuing to prioritise trusted leadership capability, strategic judgement and change management alongside technical expertise[5].

OUR EVENTS

As part of our regular thought-leadership events, we also host networking events and roundtable dinners exclusively for our C-Suite audience. These niche events bring together executives from top companies to discuss pivotal topics shaping the future of business and technology. If you're interested in attending future events, reach out to us now and be part of an exclusive community driving innovation!

EXECUTIVE HIRING

When it comes to C-Suite or Senior appointment hires, we take an exclusive and retained approach. We understand the critical role that senior executives play in your organisation's success. Our executive talent acquisition experts have an extensive network and a deep understanding of the qualities needed for leadership positions. We work closely with you to identify, engage, and secure top-tier talent that will drive your company's strategic goals forward.

Click here to get in touch today!

C-SUITE TRENDS & 2026 OUTLOOK

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"The C-suite market remained active but uneven, with hiring occurring in short bursts rather than sustained waves. We've seen periods of heightened activity followed by quieter stretches, which largely reflects longer, more complex decision-making and interview processes at this level. Organisations continue to balance permanent appointments with fractional and interim leadership, signalling a degree of caution and a desire for flexibility rather than full long-term commitment.

One notable shift has been the maturing of leadership accountability for data and AI. After a couple of years of organisations experimenting with where the Chief Data Officer (CDO) should sit, the role is now increasingly aligned closer to the Chief Operating Officer (COO). Alongside this, we're seeing a growing number of CDOs transition into COO-style roles, reflecting a natural progression as data leaders expand beyond technical oversight into commercial execution. This evolution makes sense: it brings together operational delivery, strategic decision-making and disciplined use of data, and many senior Data leaders are actively seeking this path as the next step in their leadership journey.

Executive leadership salary levels have remained broadly stable, with only a handful of outliers commanding exceptionally high packages. Instead, the more significant change has been in private equity and portfolio-level hiring strategies, where firms are increasingly appointing executive data and AI leaders to operate across multiple assets. These roles are designed to build scalable data and AI strategies, drive value creation and influence commercial outcomes at board level, rather than acting purely as technical specialists.

AI remains a strategic priority, but investment is pragmatic rather than speculative. Many organisations are taking a step back to strengthen their data foundations, modernising infrastructure, restructuring teams and improving core analytics, before committing to more advanced AI initiatives. This reflects a broader realisation that sustainable AI adoption depends on strong fundamentals, not hype.

Looking ahead to 2026, we expect continued demand for transformational leaders who combine technical credibility with strong commercial acumen. The days of purely technical executives operating in isolation are fading; boards are seeking leaders who can influence, communicate and deliver measurable business impact. Despite ongoing economic and geopolitical uncertainty, there is cautious optimism that investment will continue, particularly across private equity and AI-driven businesses, making this another transitional, but increasingly positive, year for the C-suite market."

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REFERENCES & CONTACT US

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Whether you're interested in discussing the latest insights from our Salary Guide or want to learn more about our tailored services across the tech market, we're here to help. From junior roles to C-suite level, our team is committed to providing the expertise and support you need.
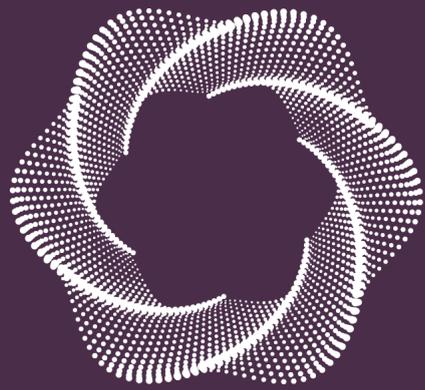
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