

UK MARKET EDITION | 2026

AI & DATA SALARY GUIDE 2026

UK salary benchmarks, contractor rates and hiring intelligence across Artificial Intelligence, Machine Learning and Data.

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Built for hiring leaders, technology teams and candidates navigating the 2026 UK market.

The 2026 market in six signals

A concise view of the demand, pay and skills environment behind the numbers in this guide.

+61% UK specialist AI job postings vs prior year, as reported by PwC [4].	34.2% Average AI wage premium in the UK across sectors in PwC data [4].	4,566 England contract adverts citing AI skills over the six months to 23 Sep 2026 [3].
1,417 England contract adverts citing Data Engineering over the same period [3].	1,368 England contract adverts citing Machine Learning over the same period [3].	£575 England median Data Science contract day rate, six months to 23 Sep 2026 [3].

What the data tells hiring teams

- AI demand has rebounded. PwC reports specialist AI postings in the UK rose 61% year-on-year in 2025, returning volumes to around 2022 levels [4].
- AI skills are being priced differently from generalist tech. PwC reports an average 34.2% AI wage premium in the UK in 2025 [4].
- Data foundations matter. IT Jobs Watch shows strong contract activity in Data Engineering and Machine Learning, alongside large volumes of AI-related contracts [3].
- Hiring is more skills-led. Skills England highlights stronger emphasis on adaptability, accountability, communication and the ability to use AI alongside technical expertise [6].

Important: market benchmarks vary by role definition, sector, location, seniority, employer size, contract structure and scarcity. Use these figures as planning ranges rather than promises.

UK permanent salary benchmarks

Published 2026 market ranges. Skyline has used national UK ranges from Pearson Carter as the primary reference and cross-checked selected London roles against Morgan McKinley and Robert Walters [1][2][7].

Role	Lower	Median	Upper
AI Architect	£107k	£138k	£171k
AI Engineer	£83k	£105k	£132k
Machine Learning Engineer	£77k	£99k	£127k
MLOps Engineer	£77k	£99k	£121k
Data Architect	£80k	£100k	£113k
Data Scientist	£66k	£83k	£93k
Data Engineer	£64k	£78k	£96k
Data Governance	£66k	£85k	£107k
Business Intelligence	£51k	£66k	£83k
Data Analyst	£47k	£61k	£79k

Selected national range



London cross-check
Morgan McKinley 2026 lists London ranges such as:

- AI / ML specialist: £65k-£110k
- Data Engineer: £50k-£125k
- Data Scientist: £65k-£140k
- Data Architect: £75k-£140k

Source note: salary ranges are reported market benchmarks, not Skyline offers. Employer package can differ materially once bonus, equity, pension, location and scarcity are included.

Indicative UK contractor day rates

Pearson Carter provides national UK ranges [1]. IT Jobs Watch provides live England medians [3], which are included as a current-market cross-check for selected roles.

Role	Indicative range	Market median / note
AI Architect	£1,075-£1,265	£1,170/day midpoint
AI Engineer	£815-£970	£893/day midpoint
Machine Learning Engineer	£760-£915	£838/day midpoint
MLOps Engineer	£730-£880	£805/day midpoint
Data Architect	£870-£1,025	£948/day midpoint
Data Scientist	£665-£805	£575 England median [3]
Data Engineer	£705-£860	£500 England median [3]
Data Governance	£610-£750	£680/day midpoint

Live market check: England

Contract adverts citing AI skills: £565/day median across quoted rates.

Data Science: £575/day; Data Engineering: £500/day; Machine Learning: £548/day.

Figures cover six months to 23-24 Sep 2026 and reflect advertised contract rates [3].

Contract rates are sensitive to IR35, contract length, location, urgency and skill scarcity. Do not compare a PAYE/inside-IR35 rate directly with an outside-IR35 limited-company rate without normalising the commercial terms.

Where specialist premiums concentrate

The highest-value roles are typically those combining deep technical expertise with production delivery, architecture, governance or leadership responsibilities.

AI Architect

Permanent: £107k-£171k
Contract: £1,075-£1,265/day

Designs enterprise AI systems, platforms and governance.

AI Engineer

Permanent: £83k-£132k
Contract: £815-£970/day

Builds and productionises AI capabilities and LLM-powered systems.

ML Engineer

Permanent: £77k-£127k
Contract: £760-£915/day

Moves models into reliable, scalable production environments.

MLOps Engineer

Permanent: £77k-£121k
Contract: £730-£880/day

Bridges models, platforms, automation and operational reliability.

2026 AI hiring signal

PwC reports UK specialist AI job postings rose 61% year-on-year, while AI user roles grew faster than AI developer roles in its 2026 analysis. The signal is that employers need people who can apply AI to business problems, not only people who can build models.

This does not mean developer roles are disappearing; it means the mix of demand is broadening toward applied AI, workflow integration, governance and domain-specific adoption [4].

Selected salary data: Pearson Carter 2026 [1].

The data function is broad - and still foundational

Employers are hiring across engineering, science, architecture, governance and analytics. The pay gap is strongly shaped by production ownership and the complexity of the environment.

Specialism	Permanent range	Contract range	Skyline hiring note
Data Architect	£80k-£113k	£870-£1,025/day	Architecture and platform design
Data Scientist	£66k-£93k	£665-£805/day	Modelling, experimentation and decision support
Data Engineer	£64k-£96k	£705-£860/day	Pipelines, platforms and production data
Data Governance	£66k-£107k	£610-£750/day	Controls, policy, quality and responsible use
BI Developer / BI	£51k-£83k	£540-£660/day	Reporting, analytics and decision systems
Data Analyst	£47k-£79k	£475-£585/day	Descriptive analysis and operational insight

Current contract market signal

IT Jobs Watch shows 1,417 England contract adverts citing Data Engineering skills over the six months to 23 Sep 2026, compared with 539 in the same period of 2025 [3].

The same source shows Data Science at a £575/day England median, while Data Engineer is at £500/day across current quoted rates [3].

Interpret contract medians as market signals from advertised rates, not guaranteed transaction prices.

Senior AI and Data roles have a different pay curve

Leadership packages can vary dramatically with organisation size, scope, equity and board exposure. Use these benchmarks as a starting point for conversations, not a fixed tariff.

Role	UK permanent range	Contract range
Chief AI Officer	£160k-£259k	£1,540-£1,760/day
Chief Data Officer	£154k-£220k	£1,320-£1,540/day
Head of AI	£127k-£198k	£1,320-£1,540/day
Head of Data	£121k-£154k	£1,100-£1,320/day
AI Architect	£107k-£171k	£1,075-£1,265/day

Scope Role title alone is not enough. Team size, budget ownership, product ownership and regulatory responsibility all alter the package.	Scarcity Architects and leaders who can connect AI strategy to production delivery are often priced differently from purely technical or purely managerial profiles.	Package Bonus, equity, pension and long-term incentive plans can materially change the value of a senior package.
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Pearson Carter benchmarks [1]. Robert Walters reports higher London averages for some leadership roles, particularly in large enterprises [7].

What employers are competing for in 2026

A salary guide is more useful when it also explains what is changing in the talent market.

AI becomes embedded in roles PwC reports AI-user roles grew faster than AI-developer roles in the UK, pointing to broader demand for applied AI capability [4].	Data engineering is rising in visibility IT Jobs Watch records a large year-on-year increase in the share and volume of England contract adverts citing Data Engineering [3].
Governance and judgement matter more Skills England highlights stronger emphasis on accountability, collaboration, adaptability and effective AI use alongside technical expertise [6].	Technical depth still commands premiums AI, ML, architecture and production engineering roles sit toward the upper end of salary and contract benchmarks in 2026 data [1][2].

Skills showing up repeatedly across market data and hiring briefs

LLM / GenAI MLOps Python Data Engineering Cloud Databricks Snowflake Azure AWS
Google Cloud AI Governance Model Evaluation Platform Engineering Data Architecture

Skill list is thematic rather than a ranked league table. Demand differs by sector and employer maturity.

Turning salary data into an actionable hiring brief

Use the guide to define a range, then validate it against the exact scope, scarcity and location of your role.

01

Define the output

Describe what the person must deliver in 6-12 months, not only the job title.

02

Set the market

Choose permanent vs contract, location, seniority and IR35 assumptions before benchmarking.

03

Price scarcity

Separate core skills from scarce skills such as advanced AI architecture, MLOps, governance or domain-specific AI.

04

Build the package

Factor base, bonus, equity, pension, flexibility, project length and progression.

05

Validate the brief

Check the salary against live candidate availability, competitor demand and realistic notice periods.

06

Move quickly

For scarce profiles, speed of feedback and clarity of process are part of the compensation equation.

Skyline benchmark principle

Use published salary ranges as a baseline, then layer in the specifics that markets alone cannot price: scarce skills, employer brand, urgency, location, project complexity and the candidate's proven impact.

What the numbers mean for employers and candidates

The same market data can support two different conversations - budget planning and career positioning.

For employers

- Benchmark the whole role. Compare scope, not just title.
- Price hard-to-find skills. AI architecture, production ML and strong data engineering experience can move a role up the market.
- Separate base from total package. Senior talent may weigh equity, flexibility and progression heavily.
- Track live market signals. Contract rates and vacancy volumes can shift faster than annual salary guides.

For candidates

- Make outcomes visible. Show measurable impact, not only technologies used.
- Show production depth. Building models and running models at scale are valued differently.
- Map adjacent skills. Cloud, data platforms, governance and AI literacy can raise the value of a core discipline.
- Understand the full package. A larger base is not the only lever in a senior technology offer.

Skyline note

This guide is intended to support informed market conversations. It is not a guarantee of salary, contractor rate or hiring outcome.

How this guide was built

The benchmark is deliberately transparent: published market ranges are combined with live advertised-rate signals and current labour-market research.

Primary salary benchmark Pearson Carter 2026 UK Data & AI Salary Guide for national permanent ranges and contractor ranges [1].	London cross-check Morgan McKinley 2026 technology salary guide for London permanent and contract bands [2].
Live contract signals IT Jobs Watch England contract data for AI, Machine Learning, Data Engineering and Data Science, covering six months to 23-24 September 2026 [3].	Hiring trend context PwC 2026 AI Jobs Barometer for UK AI hiring and wage premium signals [4].
Skills context UK government / Skills England research on AI labour-market gaps and changing digital skill needs [5][6].	Additional London context Robert Walters salary survey for Data, AI & Machine Learning [7].

Selected sources

Source	Description
[1] Pearson Carter	Data & AI Salary Guide 2026 - UK salary and contractor benchmarks.
[2] Morgan McKinley	Technology Salary Guide 2026 - London permanent and contract market ranges.
[3] IT Jobs Watch	Live UK/England contract market data, September 2026 - AI, Machine Learning, Data Engineering and Data Science.
[4] PwC	2026 AI Jobs Barometer / UK press release, 15 Jun 2026.
[5] UK DSIT	AI Labour Market Survey 2025, published 28 Jan 2026.
[6] Skills England	Sector Skills Needs Assessment - Digital and Technologies, 2026.
[7] Robert Walters	Salary Survey - London Data, AI & Machine Learning benchmarks.

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