



ICIMS 

Workforce Report

Our data and insights support
your recruiting success.

September 2026 – Spotlight on the AI skills race

The big picture

Last month, demand was accelerating on both sides of the Atlantic, and the labor market answered with strain instead of speed. Demand has now turned, and the strain has not gone anywhere.

In the U.S., job openings are no longer surging ahead of hiring capacity, growth is decelerating and hiring is slowing even faster. The gap between the two has not closed. It is widening, just from a cooler starting point.

EMEA is shifting faster. Openings, applications and hires all declined this month, with hires posting the sharpest single-month drop either region has seen all year. Some of that is likely seasonal timing, but the size of the move is worth watching closely into next month regardless of the cause.

This month, the spotlight turns to the **AI skills race**. As organizations engage in the race toward AI, this report looks at what skills will be needed to win and how the market is responding.

TOP FINDINGS



U.S. employer demand stabilized in August, with an increase of only 1% in job openings month-over-month while hiring declined.



EMEA hiring dropped 20% month over month as application rates dropped 7%.

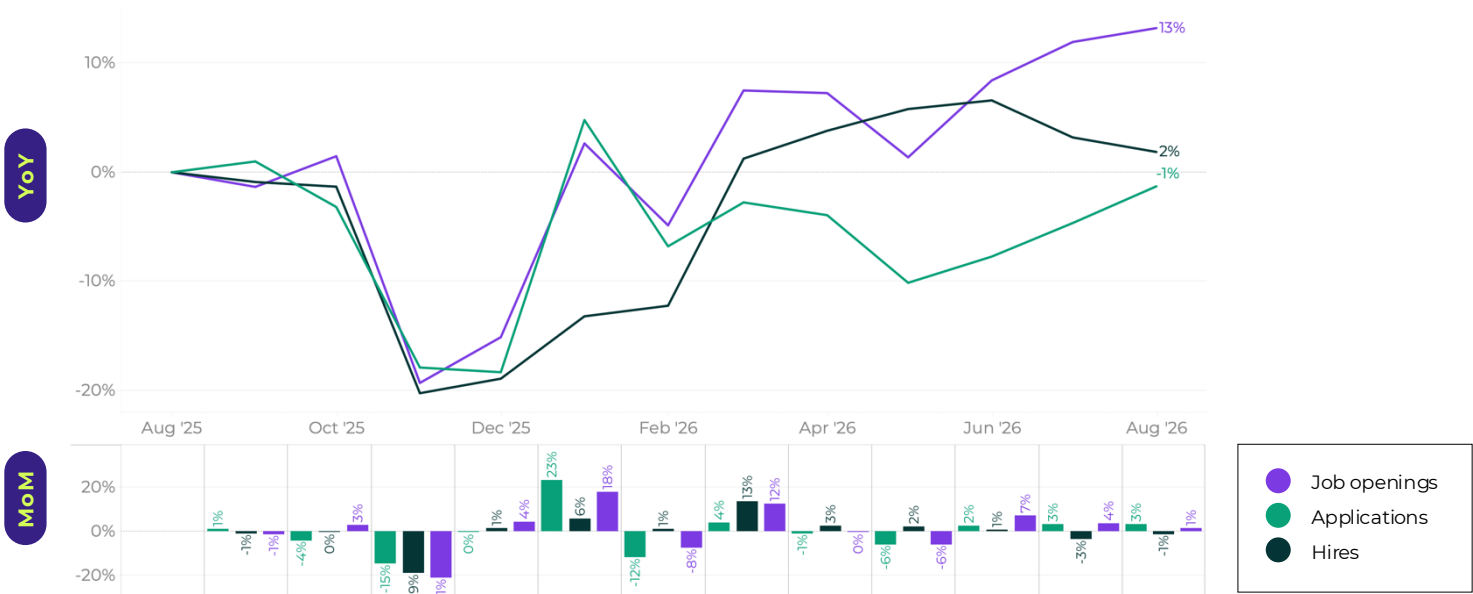


61% of candidates have sought out GenAI skills to enhance their opportunities in the job market.

ICIMS Insights Workforce Reports monitor monthly labor market activity based on hundreds of millions of applicants and millions of users. Organizations can use this data as a measuring stick to anticipate and adapt to ever-changing workforce dynamics.

The U.S. gap between openings and hires maintains its grip

U.S. PLATFORM INDICATORS | Job openings, applications and hires | August 2025–August 2026



ICIMS INSIGHTS QUICK TAKE: The gap between hires and openings widened only by a little, but recruiting teams are likely still feeling the heat from a hot summer.

MARKET UPDATE

August continued a pattern that has been building since June. Job openings finished 13% above the August 2025 baseline. This is still elevated, but the pace of growth is slowing. Month-over-month growth for job openings fell from 7% in June to 4% in July to just 1% in August. Three consecutive months of deceleration is worth watching closely. It could be normal pacing after a hiring surge or an early signal that demand is turning.

Hires ended the month at a 2% increase above the August 2025 baseline and posted their first back-to-back monthly decline of the year, down 1% month-over-month in August after a 3% drop in July. The gap between hiring and openings held steady but is still significant enough to cause pressure on recruiting teams trying to stay ahead.

Applications remained 1% below the August 2025 baseline but are on their third consecutive month of gains after the sharp decline in May. The recovery is promising, but it has not closed the gap enough. Growth in openings (+13% year-over-year) are now running roughly 11 points ahead of growth hires (+2% year-over-year), a wider gap than July's, because hiring kept slipping even as openings only slowed down.

The hiring drop this month points away from a sourcing problem and toward a conversion one. With applications slowly improving month-over-month and job openings surging, the constraint is not candidate volume. Rather, it is what happens once a candidate is in the pipeline. Recruiting teams should audit screen-to-interview and interview-to-offer conversion before defaulting to a top-of-funnel fix that this month's data does not support.

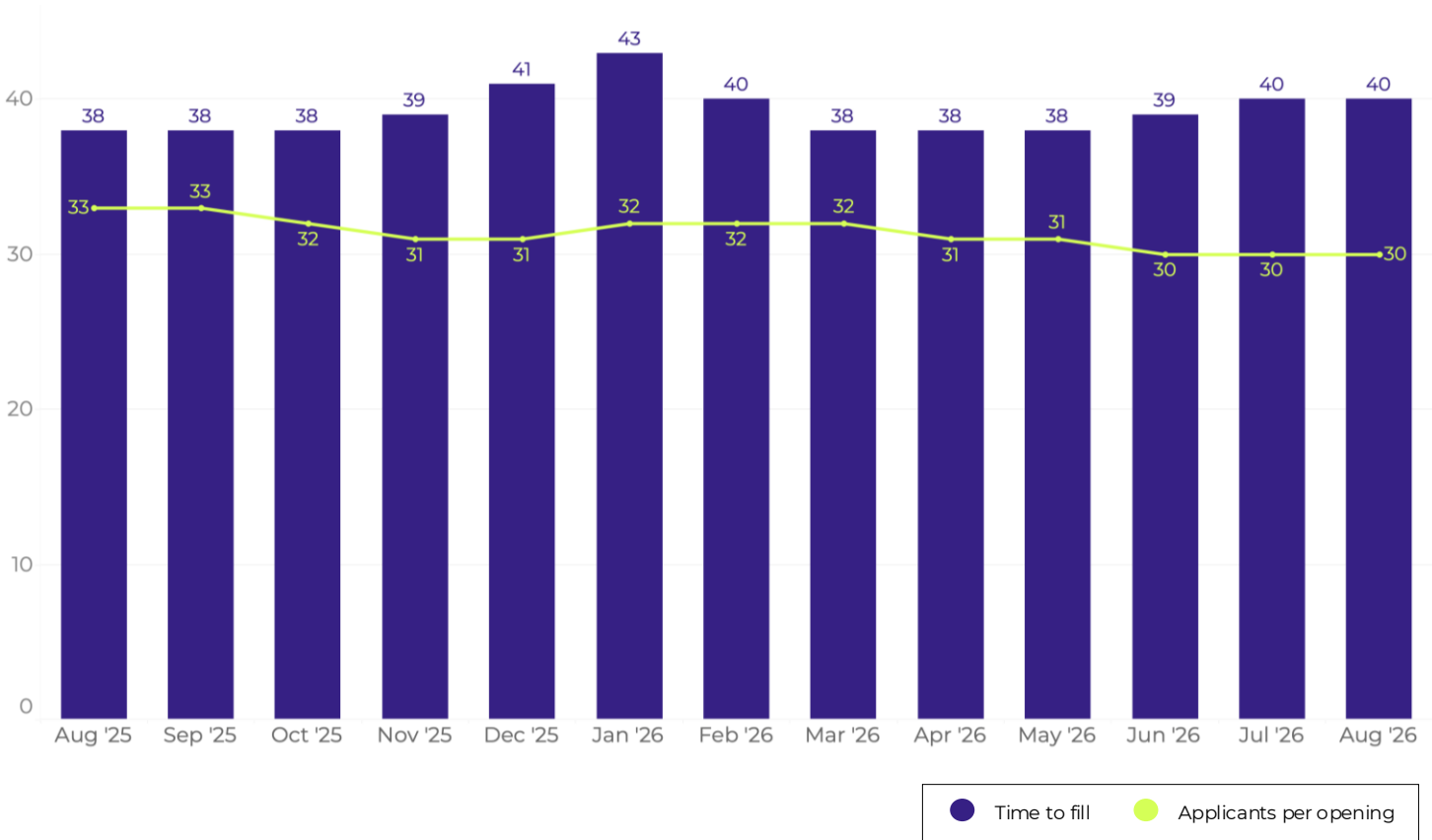
STRATEGY

Find out whether hires are declining because job requisitions are stalling or because they are being pulled. Those are different problems with different owners. A stalled job requisition is a recruiting process issue. A pulled requisition is a finance and headcount issue. Pull every requisition closed without a hire in August and code each one by reason before assuming it is a funnel problem.

More openings in the U.S., longer time to fill

The gap between hirings and openings is affecting time to fill as it slowly increases to an average of 40 days over the last two months.

U.S. TIME TO FILL AND APPLICANTS PER OPENING | August 2025–August 2026



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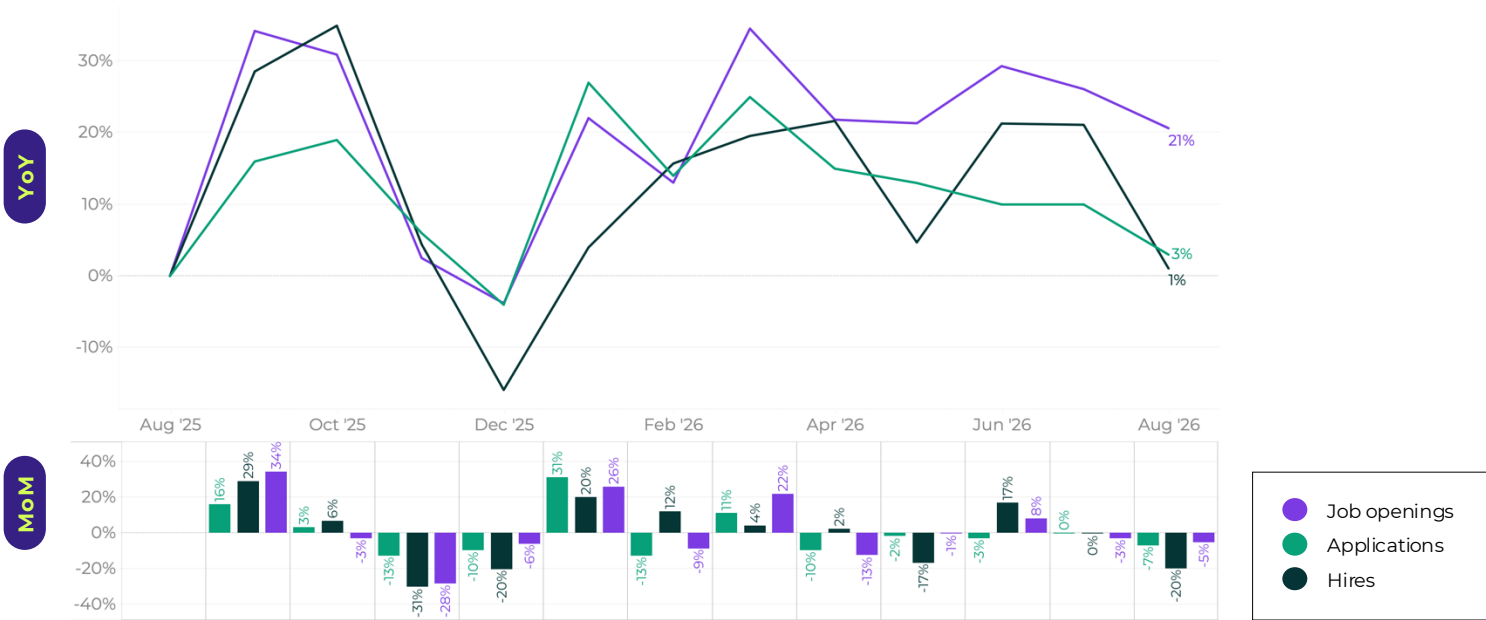
“This is what a constrained talent market looks like. Demand is rising, supply is flat and the only lever left is how well you execute inside your own process. With only 30 candidates per role, every breakdown in your process is costing you real hires.”

TRENT COTTON
Head of Talent Insights,
ICIMS



EMEA's heat wave just cooled off.

EMEA PLATFORM INDICATORS | Job openings, applications and hires | August 2025–August 2026



ICIMS INSIGHTS QUICK TAKE: All three EMEA metrics cooled in August, and hires posted the sharpest single-month drop this year.

MARKET UPDATE

Job openings in EMEA finished August at 21% above the August 2025 baseline, but growth has turned negative for two straight months, down 3% month-over-month in July and 5% in August after peaking in March.

Hires tell the sharper story. After a steep drop in May with a slight rebound in June and July, hires fell 20 points in a single month, the largest one-month move in either region this year, pulling the cumulative figure down to just 1% above baseline. Worth noting before reading too much into it: August is peak vacation season across much of EMEA, and hiring approvals and start dates typically slow region-wide, regardless of demand. This may be a seasonal pause landing on top of a real slowdown, not a standalone signal.

Applications ended the month at 3% above the August 2025 baseline, continuing a slide that started in June: down 3% month-over-month in June, flat in July and down 7% in August. That is the opposite direction from the U.S., where applications have posted three consecutive monthly gains. In EMEA, candidate engagement is fading at the same time employers are pulling back, rather than offsetting it.

STRATEGY

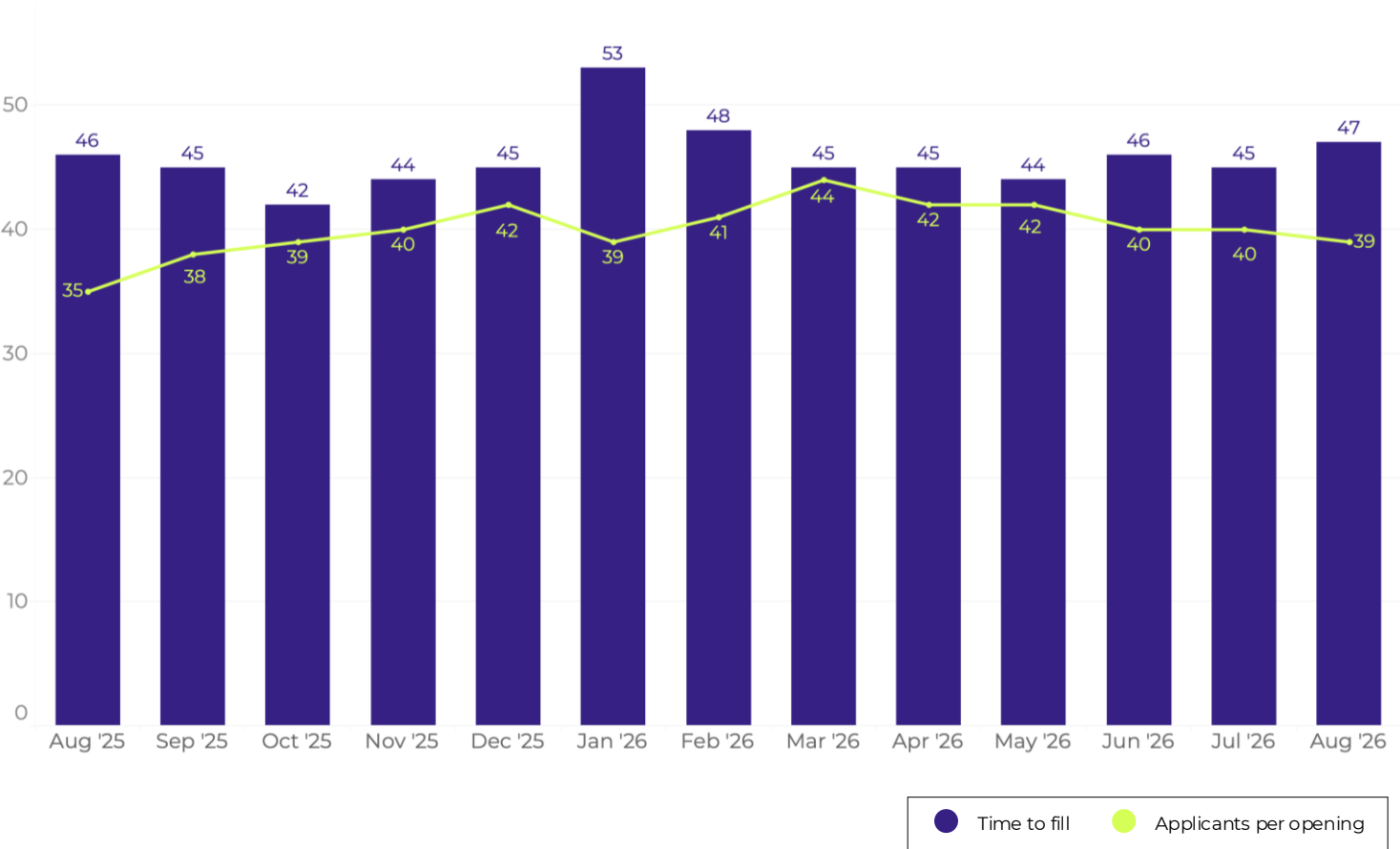
Confirm the seasonality before you act on the hires number. Pull August 2025's month-over-month change for the same three metrics. If last August also showed a sharp hires dip, then this is a pattern, not news, and the story should be about the underlying trend line rather than the August number itself. If last August was flat, the drop is real and deserves more attention than any single U.S. finding this cycle.

Treat this as a demand signal, not a funnel signal. The metrics point to fewer active searches and lower urgency from hiring managers rather than a broken pipeline. Before recommending a recruiting fix, check open requisition counts and hiring manager engagement, not funnel conversion rates.

When the EMEA pool shrinks, speed wins

Fewer applicants per opening in EMEA and five straight months of decline means less room for a slow process. The advantage goes to companies that prioritize their top roles and move fast.

EMEA TIME TO FILL AND APPLICANTS PER OPENING | August 2025–August 2026



“When the pool was bigger, a slow process cost you good candidates. Now, it costs you the offer entirely. Months of consecutive decline in EMEA means it is worth checking whether your process has sped up to match or stayed the same while the market moved.”



TRENT COTTON
Head of Talent Insights,
ICIMS



REPORT FOCUS

The AI skills race

Skills-based hiring is having a moment, especially as organizations rethink how they evaluate candidates for an AI-upgraded workforce.

This report draws on two data partners to understand what that shift looks like.

- **Lightcast's job postings and skills data** shows where and how fast AI requirements are spreading across occupations and industries.
- **ICIMS commissioned a survey in August 2026 of 1,000 U.S. adults** to understand how they are responding to the AI skills race. We found candidates are building AI skills largely on their own.

Together, the two data sets tell a story. Lightcast shows what employers are asking for. Our survey shows whether workers can meet the ask and who is being left out as the bar rises.

This month's spotlight covers four threads: which occupations are already saturated by AI requirements, how industry adoption diverges by region, how skill requirements reshuffle once AI enters a posting and how workers are building AI skills largely on their own.

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“I’ll admit, I thought skills-based hiring was hype. **This data changed my mind.**”

Workers are outpacing employer training. Job postings are outpacing both. That is the market talking, and I trust what the numbers are telling us. This is a topic every practitioner should have a plan for today.

The pressure for organizations to win the AI race will only intensify the need for an AI-ready workforce plan.”



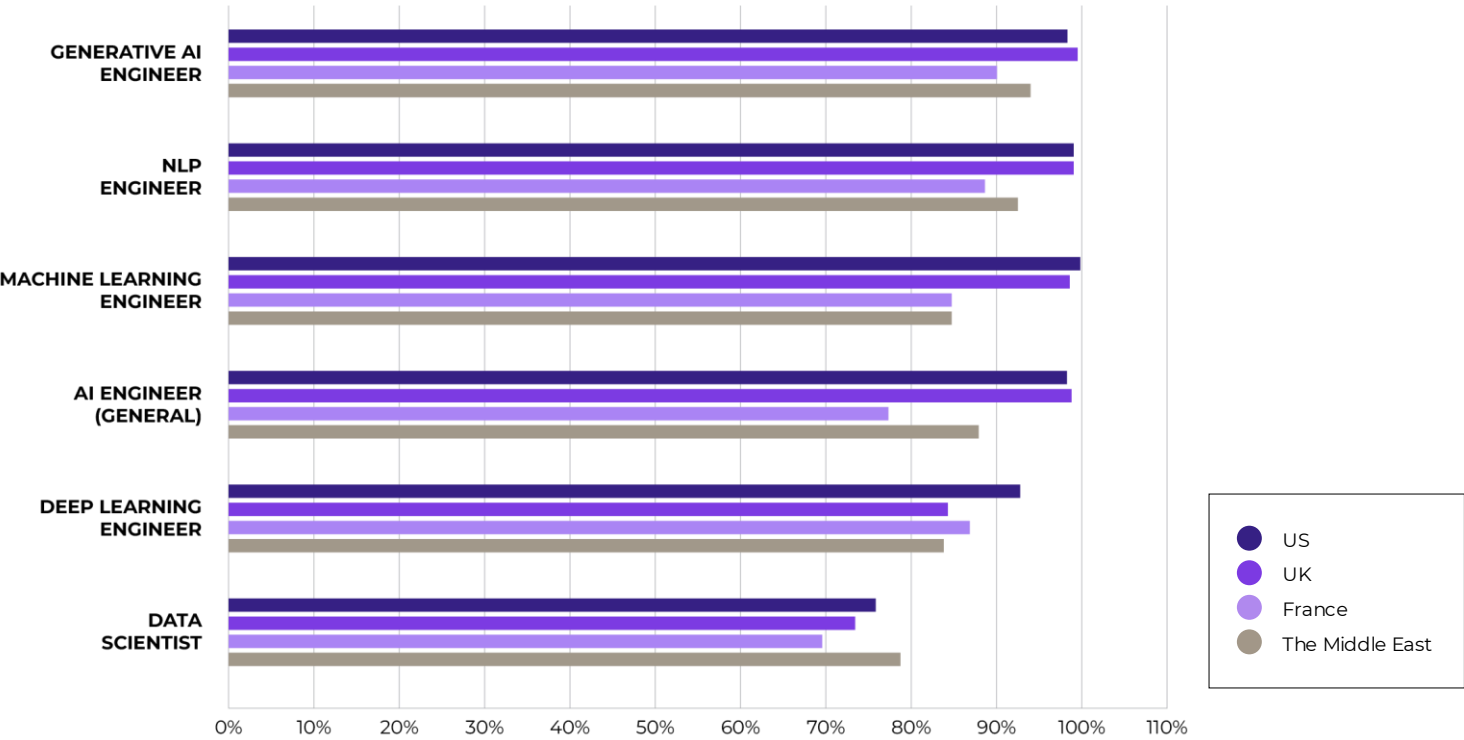
TRENT COTTON

Head of
Talent Insights
ICIMS

Six job titles every market is fighting over

AI requirements have saturated a small set of engineering roles.
The more interesting story is in the jobs nobody calls AI jobs.

THE COMMON CORE: The top six occupations across regions that require AI skills most often



Source: Copyright 2024 Lightcast

AI-related job postings account for only a small share of overall hiring demand: 4% of job postings in the U.S., 2.7% in the U.K. and 1.2% in France.

AI hiring demand is concentrated rather than distributed as you look at job titles. A small group has become almost entirely AI-defined, while the broader market absorbs AI requirements a few percentage points at a time.

Six occupations had the highest share of postings requiring AI skills across all four regions

- Generative AI engineer
- Natural language processing engineer
- Machine learning engineer
- Artificial intelligence engineer
- Deep learning engineer
- Data scientist

Employers hiring for these titles compete for the same candidates in every market, increasing the difficulty of these types of searches.

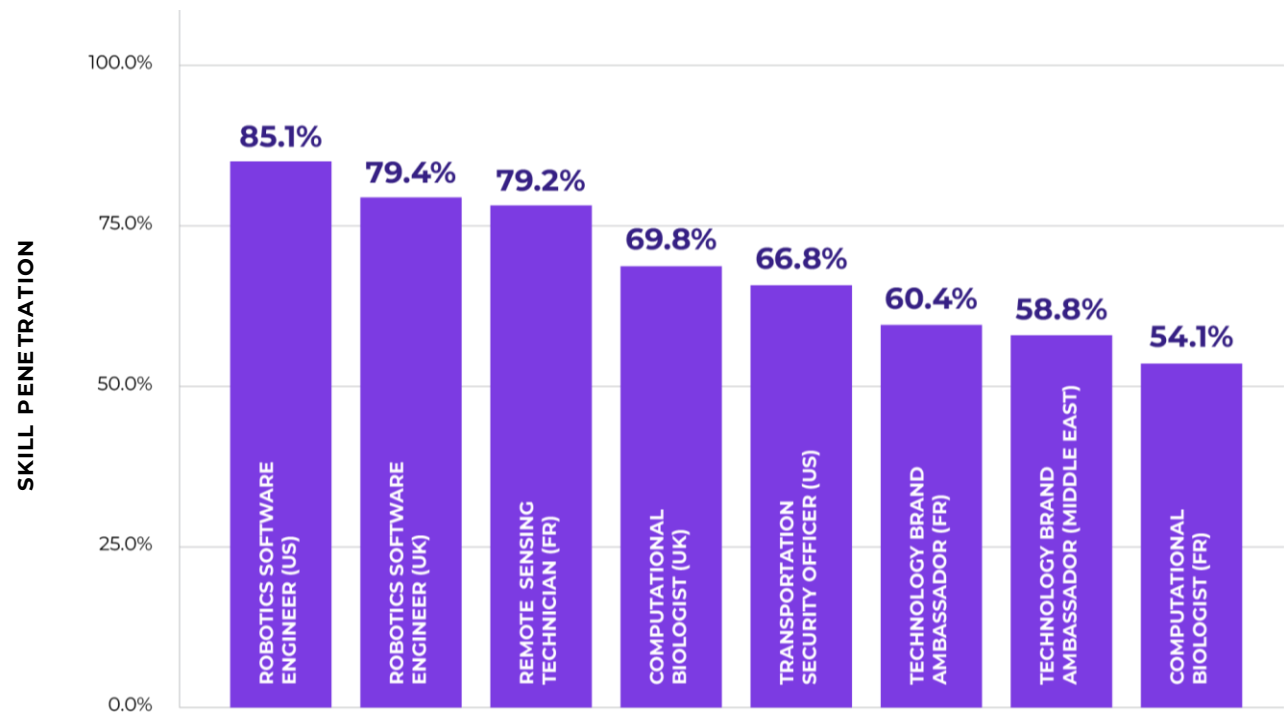
“Data Scientist” is the exception in this group. Between 69% and 79% of Data Scientist job postings ask for an AI skill, depending on the region. That leaves somewhere between 20 - 30% of job postings for Data Scientists with no AI requirement at all. This is one job family that still has a direct impact in multiple functional areas within an organization and is not entirely dependent upon AI skills to be successful.

The engineering roles beside it offer no such room. Nearly every posting in those titles already carries the AI skill requirement, so there is no group of qualified candidates sitting outside it waiting to be found. AI skills are becoming routine for engineering roles.

Where AI requirements go beyond the core occupations

The interesting signal sits below the top six, in the occupations that appear in only one or two regions' top 10 occupations with an AI skill requirement. These are the roles no one would call "AI jobs".

AI SKILLS REQUIREMENT BY OCCUPATION (REGION)



Source: Copyright 2024 Lightcast

Technology brand ambassador ranks #8 in France (60% AI skills penetration) and the Middle East (59%) for occupations that require AI skills. It appears in neither the U.S. or U.K.'s top 10 occupations with this skill requirement. This role is defined as representing and demonstrating a technology brand to promote brand awareness and sales in its market. That is a customer-facing sales and marketing job with no engineering component.

UX designer ranks #10 in France at 50% AI skills penetration, so half of all French UX postings now carry this skill requirement. This role is responsible for improving a product's usability, accessibility and interaction, drawing on traditional human-computer interaction design. The new ask is to design for AI behavior rather than build it.

Computational biologist appears in both European markets (U.K. and France) and neither the U.S. or Middle East for the top occupations that require AI skills, ranking #10 in the U.K. at 70% AI skills penetration and #9 in France at 54%. This role uses biological data to build models of biological systems with computational and mathematical methods. The postings now name AI modeling skills explicitly.

Robotics software engineer ranks #8 in both the U.S. and the U.K., at 85% and 79% AI skills penetration, respectively, for occupations that require AI skills. It appears in neither other market's (France and Middle East) top 10 occupations with this skill requirement. This role is defined as building software for the operation and development of robots, typically in manufacturing or transportation.

Transportation security officer ranks #10 in the U.S. at 67% AI skills penetration for occupations that require this skill. The role is defined as monitoring passengers and screening luggage or freight for weapons or dangerous materials. At 3,532 AI-related postings out of 5,287, it carries the largest volume of any role in this group.

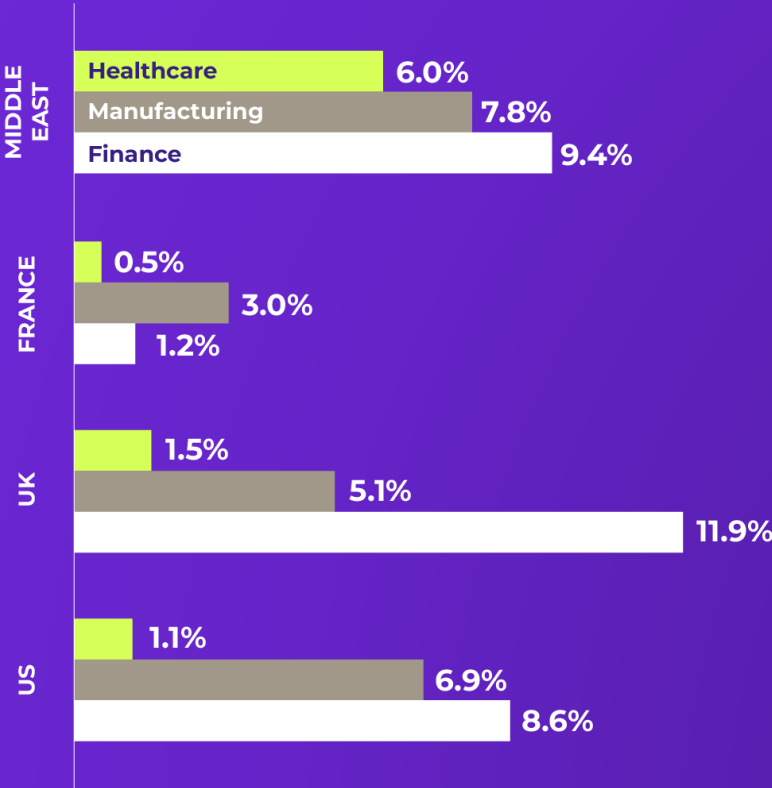
A deeper look at AI skill saturation: regionally and by sector

REGIONAL VIEW

We looked at four regional data sets (U.S., U.K., France and the Middle East) to better understand which industries are driving AI skill saturation globally.

Finance leads in three of the four regions (U.S., U.K. and Middle East) with the highest share of roles requiring AI skills, with the U.K. being the highest. That tracks with where the work sits: risk and credit decisions, fraud detection, customer service and back-office operations are document-heavy and pattern-driven, which exactly the kind of work today's AI tools handle best. That gave the sector an early head start on adoption.

Manufacturing came in second in those same three regions as companies look to automation and AI to increase operational efficiency. The U.S. and the Middle East show higher concentrations than their counterparts. France is the exception to both patterns, with manufacturing leading there and finance sitting second.



SECTOR VIEW

For each industry, we compared the top 30 skills employers ask for across all postings against the top 30 skills they ask for when the posting is specifically AI-related. The categories are:

- **Newly prominent:** outside the overall top 30 skills before but now appears only when the posting is AI-related
- **Rising:** already on the top 30 skills list and climbed more than five places when the posting is AI-related
- **Stable/core:** held within five places of where it was for both overall postings and AI-related postings
- **Reweighted downward:** stayed in the top 30 skills but fell more than five places when the posting is AI-related. This is a drop in relative priority, not lost value

Healthcare changed most. It has the largest share of Newly Prominent skills and the smallest Stable/Core, so less than a third of its AI-related skill profile is work employers were already asking for. Manufacturing changed least, holding the largest amount of Stable/Core skills of the three industries. Finance sits between them, with Rising skills sitting at 12% to 14% everywhere, so the movement is not gradual promotion of existing skills. It is new skills arriving.

Healthcare also had the lowest AI hiring rate of the three sectors.

MANUFACTURING



HEALTHCARE AND SOCIAL ASSISTANCE



FINANCE AND INSURANCE



The workforce is not waiting for an AI training program. They are learning on their own.

INSIGHT

According to our survey of 1,000 job seekers, **just under half the U.S. adults (47%) has taken steps to build AI skills in the past six months.** Last year that number was 41%. Another 21% have not started but plan to. The demand is real and climbing. The more revealing number is where the learning comes from.

Self-teaching for AI skills rose from 22% to 30% in a single year. Employer-provided training for AI held at roughly one in six, moving from 19% to 17%. Side by side, the two numbers say one thing: people are building AI skills faster on their own than employers are helping them do it. Among those actually working full- or part-time, the gap is sharper. Thirty-four percent taught themselves versus 24% who received employer-provided training.

That gap already shows up in hiring. **Forty-five percent of job seekers say they see GenAI skills listed as a requirement in postings for roles they would consider,** whether frequently or occasionally.

Confidence rose anyway. **Three in five (60%) feel ready to adapt to AI at work,** up from 54% a year ago, and the share who feel unprepared fell from 20% to 14%. People closed that gap largely on their own time. Sixty-four percent spent none of their own money doing it.

The risk sits with the group that is not moving. **Thirty-two percent of job seekers have not built AI skills and do not plan to. Twenty-six percent of job seekers say they have not considered how AI will affect their job at all.** Across either figure, this is a large share of job seekers who are not engaging with this shift at all.

STRATEGY

Give credit for self-teaching. Almost a third of U.S. adults (30%) are building AI skills entirely on their own, without employer help. Fifty-one percent say they currently have GenAI skills or are actively building them, and 57% say they are at least somewhat confident they could meet an AI requirement today. Most screening still looks for a certification, a job title or a named platform, and a free course finished on a Sunday afternoon leaves no trace in any of those fields.

Give self-directed learning somewhere to be declared and assessed. One skills-based screening question will surface more capability than a keyword filter.

Separate day-one skills from 90-day skills. Sort every AI requirement into two groups: what a candidate must know on day one and what they can learn in the first 90 days. Most belong in the second group, because these skills do not stay current for long. Thirty-two percent of adults expect an AI skill to lose its value within a year, and another 33% are not sure how long it will last. A requirement that names a specific tool goes stale when the tool does. One that measures how quickly someone learns a new tool holds up. Moving requirements into the 90-day group widens the pipeline and lowers time to fill.

Treat AI training as a recruiting offer. Most companies file AI training under retention. It attracts talent, too. Forty-two percent say a company offering AI training would be more attractive than a similar employer that did not, 28% would favor the company outright and another 14% would even accept lower pay for it. That is a compensation lever most talent teams are not pricing. Employers already running AI training should say so in the posting itself, rather than leave it for a benefits page a candidate only reaches after deciding to apply.

47% have built AI skills in the past six months, up from 41% in 2025

30% taught themselves, up from 22%.

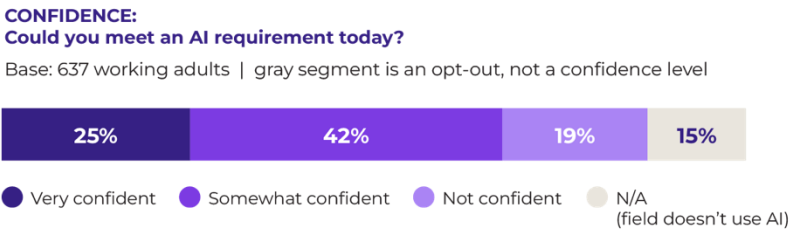
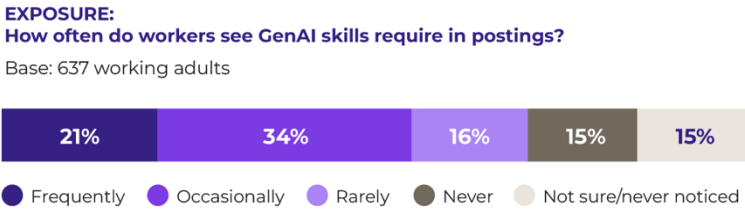
17% received formal training from an employer, down from 19%.

45% see GenAI skills listed as a requirement in postings they would consider

60% feel ready to adapt to AI at work, up from 54% last year

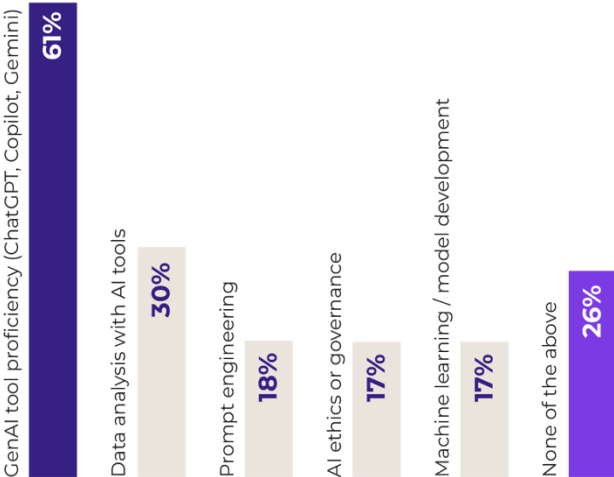
32% have not built AI skills and do not plan to

The biggest AI skill most workers have is familiarity



Source: ICIMS survey of 1,000 U.S. adults

SKILL:
Which AI skills do workers have or are building?
Multi-select – bars do not sum to 100%. Base: 637 working adults.



According to our survey of 1,000 U.S. job seekers, working adults are seeing AI show up in hiring at a real clip. **Fifty-five percent of job seekers say GenAI skills appear in postings they would consider at least occasionally:** 21% frequently, 34% occasionally. Only 15% say they never see it.

Confidence looks like it has kept pace. **Two-thirds of workers (67%) say they are at least somewhat confident they could meet an AI requirement today.** On the surface, that reads as a workforce that is caught up.

It has not. That 67% splits nearly two to one toward the soft end: 42% are "somewhat confident, with basic exposure," versus 25% who say they are "very confident" and already have the skills. Most of that confidence is exposure, not mastery. It is familiarity with AI at work, not a skill an employer could actually verify.

The skills data confirms it. When asked what AI skills they have or are building, workers point to one thing. **Sixty-one percent report proficiency with a GenAI tool like ChatGPT, Copilot, or Gemini.** Every other skill sits two to three times smaller: data analysis with AI tools (30%), prompt engineering (18%), AI ethics or governance (17%) and machine learning or model development (17%). More than a quarter of workers (27%) report none of these skills at all, even after removing everyone who is not currently working.

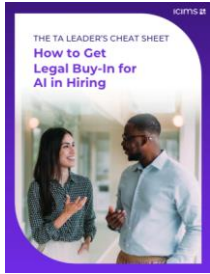
Put the three findings together and you get a funnel. Exposure to AI requirements is broad. Confidence is real but shallow. And the skill behind that confidence is almost entirely one generalist tool, not the specialized skills (prompt engineering, model development, AI governance) that actually define the AI roles employers are hiring for. Workers have learned to use the tool. Most have not yet built the skills one level deeper, the ones that would make them competitive for those roles.

For HR and talent teams, the fix is not more generic AI training. Screening should separate exposure from actual skill: a generalist "AI confidence" self-rating in an ATS or interview means little if the role needs prompt engineering, model development or AI governance specifically. Training budgets should move past the entry-level tool skill almost everyone already has and start building the specialized skills that are still scarce, since those are the ones that will actually widen your qualified candidate pool. And the 27% with no AI skill at all deserves a distinct plan, not a slower version of the same training track, because they are a different population with a different starting point.

ICIMS library

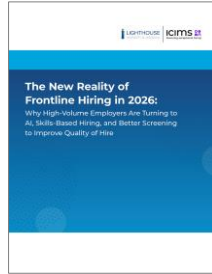
Some of our recent content to help your talent strategy.

RECOMMENDED READING



Legal Buy-in Cheat Sheet

Learn how to prepare clearer answers, evaluate AI tools responsibly and build a stronger case for legal approval. [Click here.](#)



New frontline hiring research

Why high-volume employers are turning to AI, skills-based hiring and better screening to improve quality of hire. [Click here.](#)



Hiring platform showdown

We put real candidates through hiring experiences and captured their reactions in real-time. [Click here.](#)

SIGNAL PODCAST



How EchoStar Won a Candidate Experience Award in 2 Years

For EchoStar, home to brands like DISH, Boost Mobile and Sling TV, the answer wasn't simply adding more technology. It was recruiting optimization. [Watch here.](#)



Enterprise Value, AI & High Volume Hiring

ICIMS CEO unpacks what enterprise value really means, how AI is reshaping hiring and why high-volume frontline hiring is a board-level business issue, not just a recruiting metric. [Watch here.](#)

UPCOMING EVENTS



Frontline hiring webinar

Join Ben Eubanks of Lighthouse Research & Advisory and Trent Cotton, ICIMS' head of talent insights, as they unpack the data. [Register here.](#)



AI Power Labs

These in market events help you separate hype from data about AI adoption. This is a "train the trainer" event for leaders who want to tackle AI in TA. [Register here.](#)

FROM INSIGHTS TO IMPACT

Tailored takeaways

Whether you lead people, run operations or shape strategy, you can use these insights to align teams, reduce friction and move faster on your goals.

FOR THE Talent Leaders

Now is the time to diagnose and treat bottlenecks before the pressure becomes too much for your recruiting teams.

Leveraging the data in your ATS is the right move. One of the most effective reports to use for identifying bottlenecks is a report that tracks the average number of days a candidate spends in each stage. This single report can help you zero in on where you can increase efficiency and fast track top talent through your process.

FOR THE CHROs

Recruiting teams remain under intense pressure. Support for your recruiting organization should come from your ability to help align the organizational workforce plan.

Examine which departments are hiring to fill a role and which are posting only to change their minds later in the process.

This simple fix will not only help your recruiting team's efficiency but also protect your candidate experience.

FOR THE CXOs

Ask where the hardest-to-fill roles sit in your growth plan, and whether hiring timelines account for that. A role that structurally takes longer to fill needs to be planned for, not just chased faster.

Help your leaders understand the value in moving quickly on top talent. As the candidate pool continues to shrink, the need for speed increases.

Want more great insights?

The New Reality of Frontline Hiring 2026 Report

Frontline roles are the backbone of our workforce, but hiring for them continues to be challenging. New research shows 62% of high-volume and frontline employers say they do not want more applicants. See what leading high-volume employers are doing differently and why it is working in [The New Reality of Frontline Hiring in 2026](#).

ICIMS State of the CHRO Report

The role of HR has never been more strategic. Learn how 1,000 CHROs and chief people officers are navigating the shift and how 500 CIOs see HR navigating TA tech in the [ICIMS State of the CHRO Report](#).

The Definitive Guide to AI Adoption in Talent Acquisition

69% of companies are using AI to hire. Only 18% use it throughout the recruiting process. Find out where your team stands. Get the full [Definitive Guide to AI Adoption in Talent Acquisition](#).

About ICIMS

ICIMS is the talent acquisition platform built to help organizations hire at enterprise scale. Powered by billions of hiring interactions and more than 25 years of expertise, ICIMS combines trusted AI with end-to-end hiring technology to help recruiting teams hire smarter, faster and with greater confidence across corporate, high-volume and frontline roles.

Workforce data is vital to driving business forward.

ICIMS Insights provides data that is:

- Current
- Cross-industry
- Dual-focused on employer and job seeker intentions and activity

Data derived from:



3.1M+
global platform
users



691M+
candidate
profiles



~243M
applications



5M+
hires

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