UNDERDOG.IO INSIGHTS · NOVEMBER 2026

State of Tech Hiring 2026

How engineers and tech candidates actually behave on the market: when they stop replying, and which seniority levels won't come back to the office.

70% → 42%

Reply rate, week one vs. 30+ days on the market

5 of 5

Functions that go quiet after week one

7 in 10

Engineers with 8+ years who will only work remote

Underdog.io

Home of the quiet search for engineers

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Two numbers every hiring team should know

Most hiring reports tell you what roles pay. This one measures behavior: 30,385 first messages from hiring companies and 169,992 technical applications on Underdog.io, where every introduction and every stated preference is recorded on-platform.

41%

fewer replies when you wait 30+ days

Candidates reply to 70% of first messages sent in their first week live, and 42% after a month. Product, design, data and AI, business, and software engineering all follow the same curve.

71%

of engineers with 8+ years are remote-only

That share has held between 68% and 71% every year since 2023. Return-to-office mandates moved early-career engineers in 2024 and 2025. They never moved senior ones.

> **The short version:** message candidates inside seven days, and if your senior roles are in-office, expect to recruit from about 3 in 10 of the senior engineers who are looking.

Inside

- **Finding 1** — Message in week one or lose them (p. 3)
- **Finding 2** — Senior engineers didn't come back to the office (p. 4)
- **Playbook** — Benchmarks and five moves for your hiring team (p. 5)
- **Data tables & methodology** (p. 6)

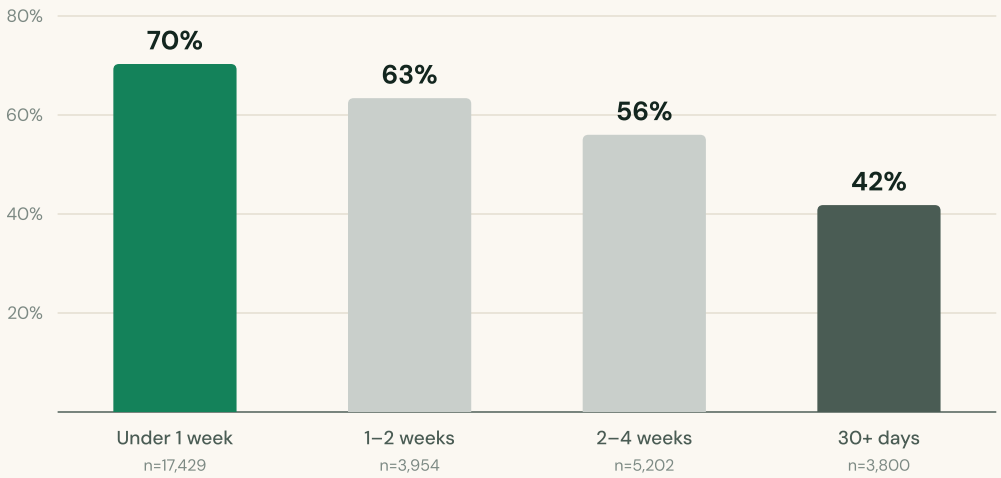
FINDING 1

Message in week one or lose them

Reply rates fall from 70% in a candidate's first week to 63% at one to two weeks, 56% at two to four weeks, and 42% after 30 days. Nothing changes except timing.

Reply rates fall from 70% to 42% after the first month

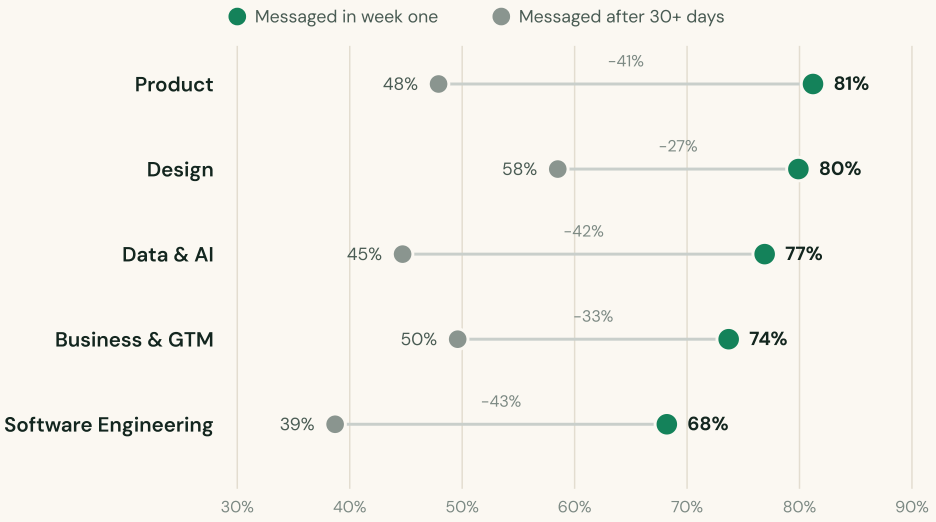
Share of first company messages that got a candidate reply, by time since the candidate's profile went live.



30,385 first messages · 2018–2026

Every function goes quiet after week one

Reply rate, week one vs. 30+ days, by the candidate's primary target role.



Function = candidate's #1 target role

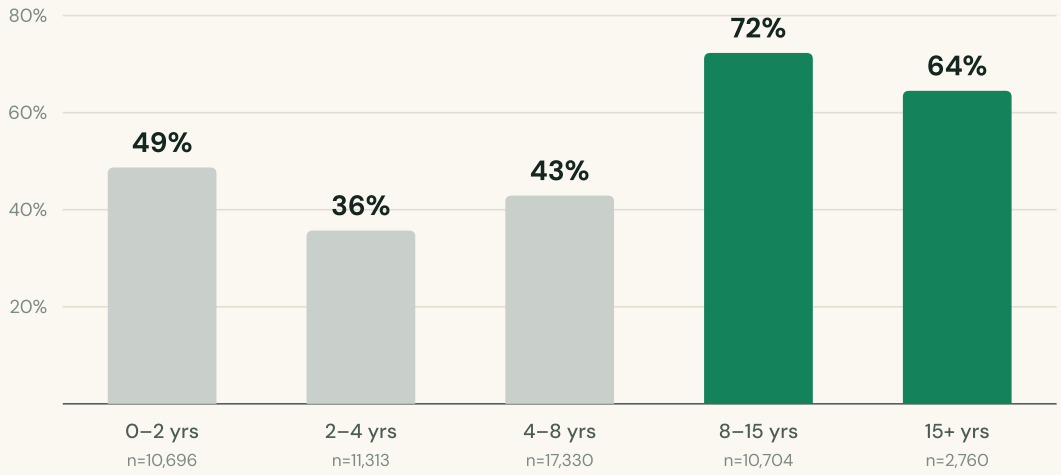
FINDING 2

Senior engineers didn't come back to the office

In 2025–2026, 72% of technical applicants with 8–15 years of experience were remote-only, about double the 36% of those with 2–4 years. Senior demand for remote has barely moved since 2023, while early-career demand swung with the RTO cycle.

Senior engineers are twice as likely to refuse the office

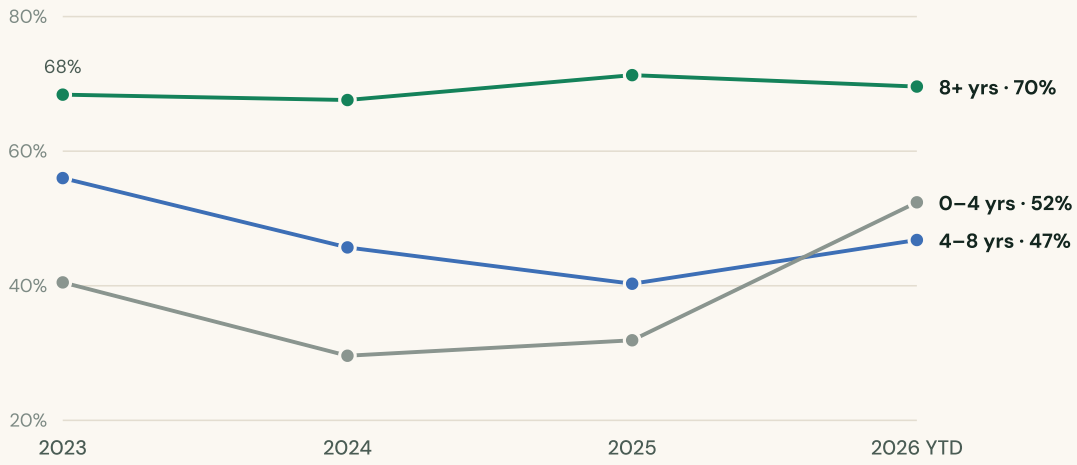
Share of technical applicants open to remote only, by years of experience. 2025–2026 applicants.



52,803 technical applicants · Jan 2025 – Nov 2026

Senior engineers held at ~70% remote-only through every RTO wave

Remote-only share by year applied and years of experience.



169,992 technical applicants · 2023–2026 YTD

PLAYBOOK

Benchmarks and five moves for your hiring team

Metric	Benchmark (Underdog.io)	Hold your team to
Time to first message	57% of first messages go out in week one	Under 7 days, every time
Reply rate, week-one outreach	70%	60%+ on warm, opted-in candidates
Reply rate, 30+ day outreach	42%	Treat as a re-engagement, not first touch
Senior remote-only share	71% of 8+ yr engineers	In-office senior roles reach ~3 in 10 of that pool

1. **Review new profiles twice a week.** A weekly review means half your outreach lands in week two. Put two fixed slots on the hiring manager's calendar.
2. **Send the first message inside seven days.** One owner per role, one SLA. If nobody owns the first message, it ships late.
3. **Make the first message decision-ready.** Comp range, the hiring manager's name, and the interview steps. A candidate in other loops is comparing offers, not reading pitches.
4. **Decide your senior remote policy before you open the role.** If a senior role must be in-office, budget for a longer search and a comp premium up front, not after 60 days of silence.
5. **Use early-career roles for in-office and hybrid.** That's where the office-open pool is deepest, though 2026 applicants show it tightening.

Hire from candidates who already said yes

Underdog.io is a curated marketplace of pre-vetted engineers and tech candidates searching quietly. Every candidate has opted in to hear from companies like yours, and you see new profiles the week they go live.

underdog.io/companies/apply →

DATA & METHODOLOGY

Data tables

Reply rate by time since live (all functions)

Time since profile went live	Reply rate	First messages
Under 1 week	70.3%	17,429
1–2 weeks	63.4%	3,954
2–4 weeks	56.0%	5,202
30+ days	41.8%	3,800

Reply rate by function

Function	Under 1 week	1–2 weeks	2–4 weeks	30+ days
Product	81.2% (n=1,261)	77.0% (n=331)	67.0% (n=485)	47.9% (n=311)
Design	79.9% (n=632)	71.5% (n=193)	69.0% (n=268)	58.5% (n=147)
Data & AI	76.9% (n=680)	67.7% (n=195)	61.1% (n=275)	44.7% (n=253)
Business & GTM	73.7% (n=1,153)	69.3% (n=398)	58.0% (n=572)	49.6% (n=401)
Software Engineering	68.2% (n=13,703)	60.1% (n=2,837)	52.9% (n=3,602)	38.7% (n=2,688)

Remote-only by experience, 2025–2026

Experience	Remote-only	Applicants
0–2 yrs	48.7%	10,696
2–4 yrs	35.7%	11,313
4–8 yrs	42.9%	17,330
8–15 yrs	72.3%	10,704
15+ yrs	64.5%	2,760

Remote-only by experience and year

Experience	2023	2024	2025	2026
0–2 yrs	39.2% (n=26,162)	27.3% (n=12,247)	34.0% (n=4,566)	59.6% (n=6,130)
2–4 yrs	42.6% (n=16,671)	31.8% (n=12,341)	30.4% (n=6,589)	43.0% (n=4,724)
4–8 yrs	56.0% (n=16,924)	45.7% (n=15,056)	40.3% (n=10,456)	46.8% (n=6,874)
8–15 yrs	67.9% (n=6,979)	67.7% (n=7,021)	72.4% (n=6,798)	72.0% (n=3,906)
15+ yrs	70.1% (n=2,123)	67.0% (n=1,665)	66.9% (n=1,781)	60.1% (n=979)

Methodology

- **Reply rate:** first messages sent by hiring companies to candidates on Underdog.io, 2018 – Nov 2026. Replied = candidate sent any later message in the same conversation.
- **Time since live:** time between the candidate's most recent profile publish to hiring partners and the company's first message.
- **Function:** candidate's #1 target role. Data & AI = data scientist, data engineer, data analyst, ML engineer, AI engineer.
- **Remote-only:** technical applicants not open to office or hybrid in any location listed. Experience = level selected for #1 target role.
- **Limits:** correlational, not controlled. 2026 early-career figures rest on smaller samples and may shift as the year closes. All data aggregated; no individual is identifiable.