

BURTCH WORKS

AI & DATA SCIENCE COMPENSATION REPORT

2026 EDITION

Inc. 5000

SIA STAFFING INDUSTRY ANALYSTS 2026 Fastest Growing Staffing Firms

ABOUT BURTCH WORKS

Burtch Works is a U.S.-based talent solutions and services firm specializing in data, analytics, engineering, and artificial intelligence. Founded in 2009, the firm helps Fortune 500 companies, private equity firms, and venture-backed businesses build high-performing teams and achieve business outcomes through executive search, on-demand contract staffing, and managed outcomes solutions.

Burtch Works is also a trusted source of compensation data and workforce insights. Its annual benchmark reports draw on validated, first-party data to inform hiring, compensation, and career decisions for individual contributors, managers, and executives. These insights help organizations and professionals navigate evolving skill requirements, leadership responsibilities, and talent demand in the age of AI.

Burtch Works has earned a place on the Inc. 5000 list of America's fastest-growing private companies for three consecutive years and has been recognized by Staffing Industry Analysts as one of the fastest-growing staffing firms for two consecutive years. Its research and expertise have been cited by *The Wall Street Journal* and other prominent media outlets. As trusted advisors to clients and career advocates for talent, Burtch Works is committed to its mission: building a world that works better for everyone.

Domain areas of expertise

We design, build, and manage specialized talent programs across the full data, engineering, product, and AI lifecycle.

- **AI Team Buildout** – Stand up a center of excellence in **weeks, not quarters**: first hires through scaled pods, with governance and success metrics.
- **Forward Deployed Engineers** – Embed engineers who **fine-tune, align (RLHF) and integrate** models inside real business workflows.
- **Interoperable Infrastructure** – Create the **infrastructure and data foundation** that unlocks AI transformation.
- **Data Science & Analytics** – Unlock **predictive insights** that drive revenue, efficiency, and risk reduction.
- **MLOps & Platform Engineering** – Keep models **reliable and cost-efficient** with CI/CD, monitoring, and scalable multi-cloud infrastructure.

How we provide our solutions

- **Contract / Employer of Record (EOR)** – **Flex talent up or down** without adding FTE overhead, with nationwide compliance and payroll.
- **Contract to Hire (C2H)** – Bring in top talent quickly on contract, converting to full time once funding is approved and the workload is stable.
- **Executive Search** – Full-time leaders and individual contributors, on a contingency or retained basis depending on the level and the need.
- **Fractional Talent** – CxO-caliber talent part-time or on an interim basis to deliver an assessment, execute critical work, or provide strategic oversight.
- **Managed Services** – Outcome-driven solutions delivered under a fixed statement of work, with defined milestones and payment schedules.

WHERE WE SPECIALIZE

Talent solutions and managed services across Data Science, Artificial Intelligence, Analytics, Machine Learning, Data Engineering, Cloud Engineering, Cybersecurity, Product, Technology, Market Research, and Marketing Analytics. Our domain expertise, industry focus, national reach, and curated talent networks let us meet organizations wherever they are in the AI transformation journey — from a first hire to scaling a team to delivering a business outcome.

How we're different

- **Specialization:** Trusted advisors with domain expertise and specific industry knowledge.
- **High Tech & High Touch:** Qualified talent through technical assessments and recruiting experts.
- **Proprietary Talent Community:** Unique access to 150k+ pre-vetted technical practitioners.
- **Research-driven insights:** Our annual Burtch Works reports and market intelligence inform workforce planning, compensation, and techniques to attract and retain top talent.
- **Employer of Record (EOR):** Best-in-class benefits and 401(k) match for all consultants.
- **Transparency tools:** A dynamic salary calculator built on the latest Salary Report data.

ABOUT THIS REPORT

The 2026 edition benchmarks **1,096 data science and AI professionals**: 1,054 interviewed one-on-one by Burtch Works recruiters between May 2025 and May 2026, supplemented for the first time by **42 U.S. data and AI managers and directors** from our 2026 benchmark survey. Figures are annual base salary only, and they are benchmarks, not offers. Tables lead with the mean, as in prior editions, with medians and percentiles where they add context.

691	405	42
Data Scientists	AI Professionals	Manager-level survey records

What's new in the 2026 edition

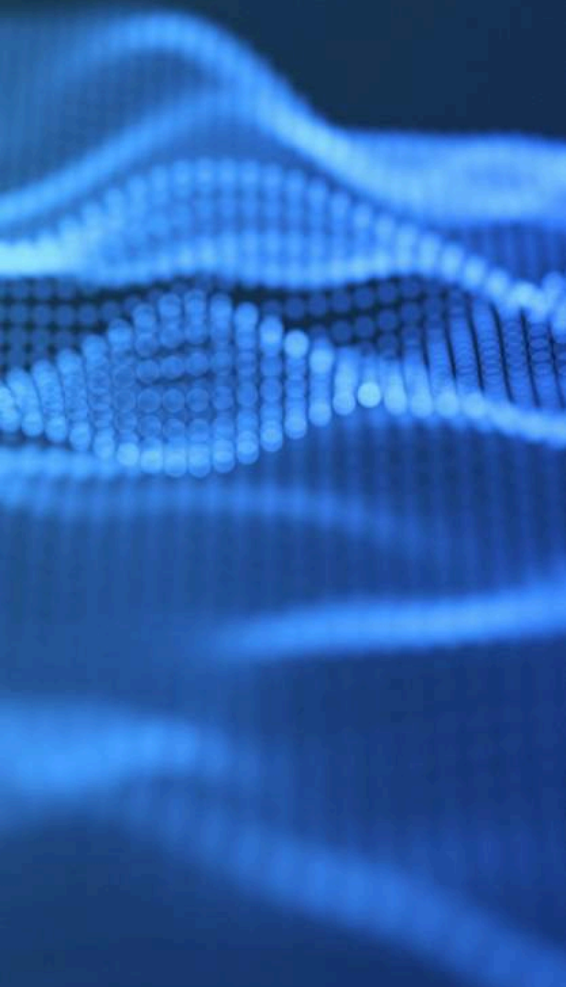
Five tenets, one market
Key findings organized around data privacy, open vs. closed models, token vs. value economics, AI infrastructure, and buy vs. build.

A deeper management sample
42 U.S. managers and directors from our 2026 benchmark survey strengthen the MG-1 to MG-3 tiers.

Every change tested
Year-over-year moves are flagged for statistical significance, and every table shows its sample size.

The management pulse
How data and AI managers negotiate, how AI is changing their roles, and whether pay is keeping up.

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AI & Data Science Hiring Landscape

FROM HANDS-ON TO ACCOUNTABLE

AI hiring scaled — with experience
AI Professionals are **37%** of this year's sample, up from 18% in 2025, and **63%** of them bring nine or more years of experience (45% in 2025). Employers are staffing AI programs with seasoned builders.

The AI pay premium is back
After converging in 2025, AI pay pulled away from data science again: AI Professionals now out-earn Data Scientists by **11%** at IC-2, **15%** at IC-3 and **16%** at MG-3.

Senior builders are the scarcest seat
AI IC-3 base pay rose **+12.1%**, a statistically significant move, as teams stand up platforms, evaluation and agentic workflows.

The entry-level door is narrower still
Only 4% of AI Professionals and 6% of Data Scientists in our sample are in their first three years (11% and 9% in 2025).

Mandates expanded; the pay link is unproven
74% of data and AI managers and directors say AI expanded their responsibilities in the past year. In our data their base pay doesn't vary with how much the role grew, so whether pay has kept pace with the bigger job is still an open question.

Fewer visas, more citizens
H-1B holders fell to 3% of AI Professionals (17% in 2025) and 7% of Data Scientists (11%), a shift that coincides with the $100,000 fee on new H-1B petitions introduced in September 2025.

Skills are outrunning credentials in AI
Bachelor's-degree holders now make up **21%** of AI Professionals (8% in 2025) and earn as much as or more than Master's holders at IC-2 and IC-3.

Key Takeaways

2026 DATA & AI MANAGEMENT PULSE

74%

say AI **expanded the scope of their role** in the past 12 months; 39% say it expanded significantly.

52%

negotiated and received a higher offer for their current role; 72% negotiated in some form.

67%

were **employed elsewhere when they accepted** their current role; most moved directly from one job to the next.

33%

had **at least one competing offer** at the time of hire.

32%

formally **oversee data privacy & compliance**, compared with 47% of VP-and-above data executives.

44%

are **satisfied with their total compensation**; 31% are dissatisfied.

Source: 2026 Data, AI & Analytics Executive Benchmark Survey. Base: 110 respondents at Manager (33) or Senior Manager/Director (77) level with a full-time role in the past six months, responding May 21, 2026 – September 14, 2026. VP-and-above comparison: the 243 executives in Burtch Works' 2026 executive benchmark.



Key Findings

FIVE TENETS DEFINING DATA SCIENCE & AI IN 2026

In 2025 the question was whether AI could leave the lab. In 2026 it is whether AI can be **governed, afforded and proven.** Five tenets now frame how data science and AI teams are built, what they spend, and which skills command a premium. Each is explored on the pages that follow, alongside what our 2026 data shows.

01 **Data Privacy**
How privacy requirements are shaping data and AI programs.

47% vs. 32%
of VP+ executives vs. managers & directors formally own privacy

02 **Open vs. Closed Source**
Who owns the decision, the tradeoffs, and the risks.

64%
of the AI Professionals we interviewed work primarily on generative AI / LLM systems

03 **Token Maxing vs. Value Maxing**
Measuring AI spend against business value.

74%
of managers & directors say AI expanded their role; no pay premium for it is visible yet

04 **Building AI Infrastructure**
What teams are standing up to support AI at scale.

+12.1%
AI IC-3 base pay — the senior builders who stand up AI platforms

05 **Buy vs. Build**
How teams are deciding what to build in-house.

+18.4%
AI pay in consulting, where buy-side and partner capacity is built

ACROSS ALL FIVE

The scarcest talent in 2026 is the people who make AI safe, affordable and measurable. Pay has followed senior AI builders; for privacy and governance skills, it hasn't yet.

Key Finding 01 · Data Privacy

PRIVACY IS NOW A DESIGN REQUIREMENT

How privacy requirements are shaping data and AI programs

Privacy used to be a review at the end of a project. In 2026 it is a design input at the start. Generative AI multiplies the places sensitive data can surface — prompts, retrieval indexes, fine-tuning sets, logs and agent tool calls — while the rulebook keeps layering up: a growing patchwork of U.S. state privacy laws, sector rules such as HIPAA and GLBA, and the EU AI Act, whose obligations for general-purpose AI models began to apply in August 2025.

How privacy is shaping programs

- **Classify before you retrieve.** Teams tag personal data and restrict what reaches embeddings, context windows and evaluation sets.
- **Private-by-default deployment.** Virtual-private-cloud or on-premises inference, zero-retention vendor terms and region pinning for regulated data.
- **Privacy-enhancing techniques.** De-identification, synthetic data and differential privacy for analytics and model training.
- **Lineage and consent as product features.** Provenance tracking so models can be audited and data can be withdrawn.

47%
of VP-and-above data executives formally oversee privacy & compliance

32%
of managers & directors do — though they run the pipelines where privacy controls live

WHAT WE SEE IN THE DATA

- **Ownership concentrates at the top:** privacy sits with 47% of executive data leaders but only 32% of managers and directors.
- **No pay premium yet:** U.S. managers and directors who oversee privacy report a median base of $216K vs. $225K for those who don't; executives $307,500 vs. $300,000.
- **Financial services is paying more:** Data Science base pay rose +8.8% in Financial Services (statistically significant); the +5.7% rise in Healthcare/Pharma is not statistically significant.

WHAT IT MEANS FOR TALENT & PAY

- **Employers:** write privacy into role architecture — privacy engineering, AI governance, platform security — and price it in. It costs less than a remediation program.
- **Professionals:** hands-on experience with personal-data handling, access controls, audit trails and privacy reviews is a differentiator on any AI résumé.
- **Leaders:** push privacy ownership down to the teams that build pipelines; a policy no engineer owns is a policy no one enforces.

THE BOTTOM LINE

Privacy is moving from the legal checklist to the engineering backlog — and the market has not priced that shift yet.

Key Finding 02 · Open vs. Closed Source

MODEL CHOICE IS A PORTFOLIO DECISION

Who owns the decision, the tradeoffs, and the risks

The open-versus-closed debate has moved from ideology to portfolio management. Closed, API-based frontier models still set the pace on the hardest reasoning and agentic tasks, while open-weight families such as Llama, Mistral, Qwen, DeepSeek and gpt-oss have narrowed the gap on many everyday enterprise workloads: classification, extraction, summarization and retrieval-augmented generation. Most teams now run both. The real question is who decides which model runs where.

Who should own the decision

A single accountable owner — typically the head of AI or AI platform engineering — with security, privacy, legal and procurement as required approvers. When ownership is split, organizations accumulate duplicate vendors and unmanaged "shadow" deployments.

	Open-weight	Closed / API
Control	Full: fine-tune, distill, self-host	Limited to vendor features
Data & privacy	Data can stay in your environment	Governed by vendor terms and regions
Cost profile	Infrastructure + talent; efficient at high volume	Pay per token; cheap to start, steep at scale
Time to value	Slower; needs LLMOps maturity	Fast; managed service
Frontier capability	Narrowing the gap	Typically leads
Key risks	License terms, patching, talent dependency	Lock-in, price and model changes, data exposure

WHAT WE SEE IN THE DATA

- **64%** of the AI Professionals we interviewed (243 of 377) work primarily on generative AI / LLM systems — the cohort most exposed to the open-vs-closed decision.
- GenAI / LLM specialists average **$162,588** at IC-2 and **$190,825** at IC-3 (interview sample).
- AI pay rose in every U.S. region (+12% to +21%; statistically significant in three of five), so demand for model-literate engineers isn't confined to tech hubs.

WHAT IT MEANS FOR TALENT & PAY

- **Hire for portability:** evaluation, routing, fine-tuning/distillation and inference optimization transfer across models; vendor-specific prompt tricks do not.
- **Build the evaluation harness first,** then pick the model — and keep an exit plan for every vendor.
- **If you go open, budget for LLMOps talent.** The license is free; the operating model is not.

THE BOTTOM LINE

The winners won't pick a side. They will build the evaluation, routing and governance to use both — and hire for it.

Key Finding 03 · Token Maxing vs. Value Maxing

USAGE IS EASY TO COUNT. VALUE GETS FUNDED.

Measuring AI spend against business value

Unit prices keep falling while AI bills keep rising. Stanford's 2025 AI Index found the cost of querying a GPT-3.5-level model fell more than 280-fold between November 2022 and October 2024, yet reasoning models and agents use far more tokens per task, so total spend climbs. Gartner expects more than 40% of agentic AI projects to be canceled by the end of 2027 because of escalating costs, unclear business value or inadequate risk controls.

TOKEN MAXING

Optimizing for **activity**: more seats, prompts, agents and tokens. Easy to count, easy to celebrate — and easy to overspend on.

vs.

VALUE MAXING

Optimizing for **outcomes per dollar**: cost per resolved case, hours returned, revenue lift, error rates — the metrics that survive a CFO review.

Value scorecard	What to measure for every AI use case in production
Unit cost	Cost per task, per resolution or per 1,000 requests — not total tokens
Quality	Evaluation pass rate, accuracy, hallucination and incident rate
Adoption	Weekly active use of shipped AI features, not pilots launched
Outcome	Revenue lift, cost avoided, hours returned to the business
Risk	Policy violations, privacy incidents, audit findings

WHAT WE SEE IN THE DATA

- **Bigger jobs, no pay signal yet:** 74% of managers and directors say AI expanded their role, but U.S. median base is $214K, $244K and $221K where AI made no, some or significant change (n = 14, 24, 31) — no consistent pattern.
- **The lever already exists:** 45% of managers and directors carry a target bonus of 21% of base or more — the natural place to tie AI pay to value.
- **Outcomes aren't measured yet:** our data cover pay and scope, not results, so they can't show whether delivering measurable value is paid more.

WHAT IT MEANS FOR TALENT & PAY

- **Tie AI incentives to value metrics,** not token volume or the number of pilots launched.
- **Stand up AI FinOps:** someone must own unit economics between the platform team and finance.
- **Data scientists are the value-maxing engine:** experimentation and causal measurement are how AI earns its budget.

THE BOTTOM LINE

Count tokens to manage cost; count outcomes to earn budget. Pay the people who can prove the difference.

Key Finding 04 · Building AI Infrastructure

THE BUILD-OUT MOVES BELOW THE MODEL

What teams are standing up to support AI at scale

The constraint on AI at scale is rarely the model. It is the plumbing — governed data, retrieval, evaluation, observability and security — that lets dozens of use cases share one paved road. In 2026, the teams pulling ahead treat AI infrastructure as a product with its own roadmap, owners and service levels.

6	**Agents & applications**	Copilots, agents and workflows embedded in business systems
5	**Orchestration & tools**	Agent frameworks, tool calling, the Model Context Protocol
4	**Evaluation & observability**	Eval harnesses, tracing, guardrails, cost and drift monitoring
3	**Model access**	Gateways and routing across open and closed models; fine-tuning pipelines
2	**Retrieval & context**	Vector and hybrid search, knowledge graphs, context engineering
1	**Governed data foundation**	Interoperable data, data contracts, lineage and access control

Security · Privacy · Governance

WHAT WE SEE IN THE DATA

- **The AI cohort doubled in share:** AI Professionals are 37% of the 2026 sample (18% in 2025); AI IC-3 records grew from 54 to 135.
- **Senior builders are being paid for it:** AI IC-3 base +12.1% and AI MG-2 +11.3%, both statistically significant.
- **Infrastructure is a leadership job:** 55% of managers and directors who oversee AI also oversee data engineering and architecture.

WHAT IT MEANS FOR TALENT & PAY

- **Sequence hiring platform-first:** data/platform and evaluation engineers before more model builders.
- **Pay senior ICs like the scarce asset they are;** the IC-3 premium is the market's verdict.
- **Use forward deployed engineers** to connect the platform to the business, so infrastructure turns into adoption.

THE BOTTOM LINE

AI scales on infrastructure, not demos. The scarcest talent is the senior builder who lays the paved road.

Key Finding 05 · Buy vs. Build

BUY THE PLATFORM, BUILD THE DIFFERENTIATION

How teams are deciding what to build in-house

With vendors shipping new capabilities monthly, building everything in-house is rarely the fastest path to value. MIT's NANDA initiative reported in 2025 that roughly 95% of enterprise generative AI pilots were delivering no measurable P&L impact, and that solutions bought from specialized vendors or built with partners succeeded markedly more often than purely internal builds. The winning pattern is selective: buy the commodity, build what differentiates, and partner to move fast while capability is built.

	Buy	Partner (hybrid)	Build
Choose it when	The capability is a commodity, time-to-value matters most, or a vendor's roadmap outpaces yours	You need speed now and ownership later, while internal skills are still being hired	The capability differentiates the business, depends on proprietary data, or needs tight control of privacy, latency or unit cost
Talent you need	AI product managers, solution architects, vendor & contract management, evaluation	Forward deployed and integration engineers, change management, contract-to-hire	ML/AI platform engineers, applied LLM engineers, evaluation & safety, LLMOps
Watch-outs	Lock-in, data exposure, shelfware	Knowledge transfer, dependency, scope creep	Talent cost, slower time-to-value, maintenance burden

WHAT WE SEE IN THE DATA

- **The buy side is hiring hard:** AI pay in Consulting rose +18.4% across 66 records, statistically significant.
- **In-house build-outs are spreading beyond tech:** AI pay rose +19.6% in Tech/Telecom and +36.5% in Retail (smaller base), both significant.
- **The premium is for AI capability, not analytics in general:** Data Science pay in Consulting rose +6.7% (not statistically significant).

WHAT IT MEANS FOR TALENT & PAY

- **Decide per capability, not per program,** and revisit every two quarters as vendors ship.
- **Whatever you buy, own the evaluation and the data** — they are your leverage at renewal.
- **Flex before you fix:** contract and managed-services models let teams build capability before committing headcount.

THE BOTTOM LINE

Buy speed, build advantage — and own the evaluation and the data either way.

AI at Scale Reprices Talent

COMPARISON TO 2025

2026 is the year AI became **accountable** — platformed, governed and measured against cost and value. Pay diverged again: AI roles captured double-digit gains at the senior IC and leadership levels, while data science pay rose at a steadier pace.

- **A bigger, more senior AI cohort:** 405 AI Professionals (162 in 2025), 37% of the sample; 63% have nine or more years of experience.
- **The premium reopened:** the AI–DS gap widened from +7% to +15% at IC-3 and from −1% to +16% at MG-3.
- **Data science steady, not stalled:** significant gains at IC-3 (+4.5%) and MG-2 (+9.4%); IC-1 and IC-2 moved +4.2% and +2.3%.
- **Credentials matter less in AI:** the Bachelor's share rose to 21% from 8%; the graduate-degree share fell to 76% from 91%.
- **A deeper management sample:** for the first time, 42 U.S. managers and directors from our 2026 benchmark survey supplement the interview data at MG-1 to MG-3.
- **The visa mix shifted:** H-1B holders fell to 3% of AI Professionals and 7% of Data Scientists.

At a glance	2025	2026
Total sample	886	**1,096**
AI Professionals' share of sample	18%	**37%**
AI premium over DS at IC-3	+7%	**+15%**
AI premium over DS at MG-3	−1%	**+16%**
AI Professionals with 9+ years' experience	45%	**63%**
AI Professionals with a Bachelor's as highest degree	8%	**21%**
H-1B share of AI Professionals	17%	**3%**





SECTION 2

COMPENSATION CHANGES

JOB LEVEL SEGMENTATION

To examine how the compensation of Data Scientists and AI Professionals varies, Burtch Works uses characteristics of their jobs (level, location, industry) and demographic characteristics (gender, years of experience, residency status) to segment the sample. Burtch Works has developed the following job categories:

Individual Contributors

Level	Responsibility	Years of Experience
IC-1	Learning the job, hands-on analytics & modeling	0–3 years
IC-2	Hands-on, advanced problems, may help train analysts	4–8 years
IC-3	Subject-matter experts; mentor and train analysts	9+ years

Managers

Level	Responsibility	Typical No. of Reports
MG-1	Tactical; leads a small team within a function; project execution	1–3 reports (direct or matrixed)
MG-2	Leads a function; moderately sized team; executes strategy	4–15 reports (direct or matrixed)
MG-3	Senior/executive management; determines strategy; large team	15+ reports (direct or matrixed)

For the 42 survey-based management records added in 2026, the level was assigned from each respondent's management tier and span of control using these same definitions (see Appendix 4.3).

ROLE CLASSIFICATION & SAMPLE

Burtch Works differentiates these groups by their **primary mission and deliverables**, not just data modality.

Data Scientists drive decisions with statistical analysis and classical machine learning. They own experimentation and causal inference, forecasting, segmentation and predictive modeling on business and operational data; their outputs are analyses, validated experiments, and models embedded in analytics, BI, or batch and stream scoring.

AI Professionals design, build and operate **ML- and LLM-powered systems** that interact with users and workflows. They work across unstructured and multimodal data; fine-tune and distill models; implement retrieval and grounding; orchestrate tools and agents; run alignment and safety evaluations; and manage MLOps (serving, monitoring, cost, latency and governance).

Roles increasingly overlap; we classify each professional by what they primarily do day to day in their current job.

2026 Sample: 691 Data Scientists and 405 AI Professionals (**1,096 total**). 1,054 records come from one-on-one Burtch Works recruiter interviews conducted May 1, 2025 – May 31, 2026; 42 are U.S. data and AI managers and directors from the 2026 Data, AI & Analytics Executive Benchmark Survey who were not part of our executive report and fit our MG-1 to MG-3 definitions.

Job Level	Data Scientists	AI Professionals	Total	of which survey-based
IC-1	59	17	76	–
IC-2	261	100	361	–
IC-3	166	135	301	–
MG-1	50	19	69	7
MG-2	113	95	208	25
MG-3	42	39	81	10
Total	**691**	**405**	**1,096**	**42**

Burtch Works has tracked data science and AI compensation for more than a decade. The 2026 cycle shows a market that has moved from operational AI to **accountable AI** — and pay is moving to the senior builders and leaders who can make AI scale, comply and pay for itself.

IMPACTS OF AI IN 2026

Scarcity moved up the ladder.
The hardest seats to fill are senior builders and the leaders who run AI as a portfolio: AI base pay rose +12.1% at IC-3, +11.3% at MG-2 and +25.3% at MG-3.

Mandates expanded; the pay link is unproven.
74% of data and AI managers say AI expanded their scope this year. In our data their base pay doesn't vary with how much the role grew, so whether pay kept pace is a role-by-role question.

Skills over credentials in AI.
Bachelor's holders now earn as much as or more than Master's holders at AI IC-2 and IC-3, and their share of the AI cohort nearly tripled.

WHAT THIS MEANS FOR 2026 COMPENSATION STRATEGY

Pay for the senior builder.
Budget AI IC-3 bands roughly 15% above equivalent data science bands (mean $191,352 vs. $166,014).

Review expanded AI mandates.
When AI responsibilities are added to a role, review its level or attach a **value-based incentive** tied to unit cost, quality and adoption — not token volume.

Protect the data science core.
DS IC-2 pay grew +2.3% (not significant). The scientists who run experimentation, forecasting and measurement are the ones who prove AI's value; under-paying them is a retention risk.

Price in privacy and governance.
Owning privacy carries no pay premium today, even as regulation layers up. If your AI program depends on that expertise, decide deliberately how to reward it.



TEAM COMPOSITION & TALENT STRATEGY

AI Team Build-Out

(Center of Excellence)

Role families & representative titles

- Head of AI / AI CoE Director (Director/VP), AI Product Lead, AI Technical Program Manager
- AI Solutions Architect, AI Governance & Risk Lead, Evaluation Lead

What they do

- Run AI as a portfolio: intake, prioritization, funding gates and kill criteria.
- Own the reference architecture and the open/closed model policy.
- Publish a value scorecard — unit cost, quality, adoption — for every use case in production.

Must-have skills

- Turning business goals into an AI roadmap with measurable value.
- Platform thinking across build, buy and partner.
- Governance: model risk, privacy and policy.

KPIs

- Time-to-production, share of use cases meeting value targets, cost per task, governance pass rate.

2026 market note

- AI leadership pay moved sharply: MG-2 mean $220,866 (+11.3%) and MG-3 $307,564 (+25.3%, on a small 2025 base of 13 records). Employers that delayed VP hires in 2025 are now paying up for AI leadership.

Forward Deployed Engineering

& Alignment

Role families & representative titles

- Forward Deployed Engineer (FDE), AI Solutions Engineer
- RLHF / Preference-Data Lead, Evaluation Engineer, Red-Team Lead

What they do

- Embed with business teams to turn a model into a working workflow — data, tools and guardrails, on site.
- Fine-tune and align models to domain, brand and policy (RLHF, DPO); build evaluation sets from real traffic.

Must-have skills

- Full-stack engineering plus applied ML.
- Customer-facing problem solving.
- Evaluation design and preference-data quality.

KPIs

- Time from kickoff to production, task success rate, aligned-response rate, cost per task.

2026 market note

- The FDE model, pioneered by data-platform companies and adopted by AI labs, has spread to enterprises and consultancies; AI pay in Consulting rose +18.4%.

TEAM COMPOSITION & TALENT STRATEGY

Gen-AI & Agentic

Implementation

Role families & representative titles

- Applied LLM Engineer, Agent / Orchestration Engineer
- Retrieval & Context Engineer, AI Product Engineer

What they do

- Ship agents and copilots that take actions inside business systems: tool use, memory, orchestration, human-in-the-loop controls.
- Engineer context — retrieval, chunking, re-ranking, knowledge graphs — so agents act on the right data.

Must-have skills

- Python/TypeScript; agent frameworks; tool-calling standards such as MCP.
- Evaluation and observability; prompt and context hardening.

KPIs

- Task completion rate, containment, cost per resolution, latency p95, incident rate.

2026 market note

- AI IC-2 pay +7.4% and IC-3 +12.1%, both significant. Hiring has moved from “can you build a RAG demo” to “can you run an agent safely in production.”

Data Science

& Analytics

Role families & representative titles

- Product / Decision Scientist, Experimentation & Causal Inference Lead
- Forecasting Scientist, Marketing Science / MMM Analyst, Pricing Scientist

What they do

- Prove value: design experiments and causal studies that measure AI’s real lift.
- Forecasting, pricing, segmentation and measurement that feed planning; partner with AI teams on evaluation design and ground truth.

Must-have skills

- Experimental and quasi-experimental methods, time series, SQL/Python.
- Communicating impact in financial terms.

KPIs

- Incremental revenue or savings, forecast error, test velocity, adoption of DS outputs.

2026 market note

- DS pay rose modestly at IC-2 (+2.3%, not significant) while leadership gained (MG-2 +9.4%, significant). Measurement is the backbone of value-maxing.

TEAM COMPOSITION & TALENT STRATEGY

AI Infrastructure, MLOps

& Platform Engineering

Role families & representative titles

- AI/ML Platform Engineer, LLMOps / Inference Engineer
- Data Platform & Streaming Engineer, AI Reliability Engineer, AI FinOps / Cost Engineer

What they do

- Provide the paved road: model gateways and routing across open and closed models, vector and feature stores, CI/CD for models and prompts.
- GPU and inference optimization (batching, caching, quantization); observability for quality, drift, cost and safety.

Must-have skills

- Kubernetes, GPUs, inference servers (e.g., vLLM, Triton), Ray.
- Infrastructure as code, telemetry, policy and PII controls.

KPIs

- Cost per request, latency, uptime, deployment frequency, MTTR.

2026 market note

- Interoperable infrastructure is the 2026 bottleneck: teams cannot scale agents without governed data and observability. Engineers who cut inference cost without hurting quality are in demand.

Data Privacy

& AI Governance

Role families & representative titles

- AI Governance Lead, Privacy Engineer, Responsible AI Lead
- Model Risk Manager (MRM), Data Protection Officer

What they do

- Translate regulation — state privacy laws, sector rules, the EU AI Act — into controls engineers can implement.
- Run AI risk assessments, model inventories and audit trails; partner with platform teams on PII detection, access and retention.

Must-have skills

- Privacy engineering; risk frameworks such as NIST AI RMF and ISO/IEC 42001.
- Data lineage; translating policy into code.

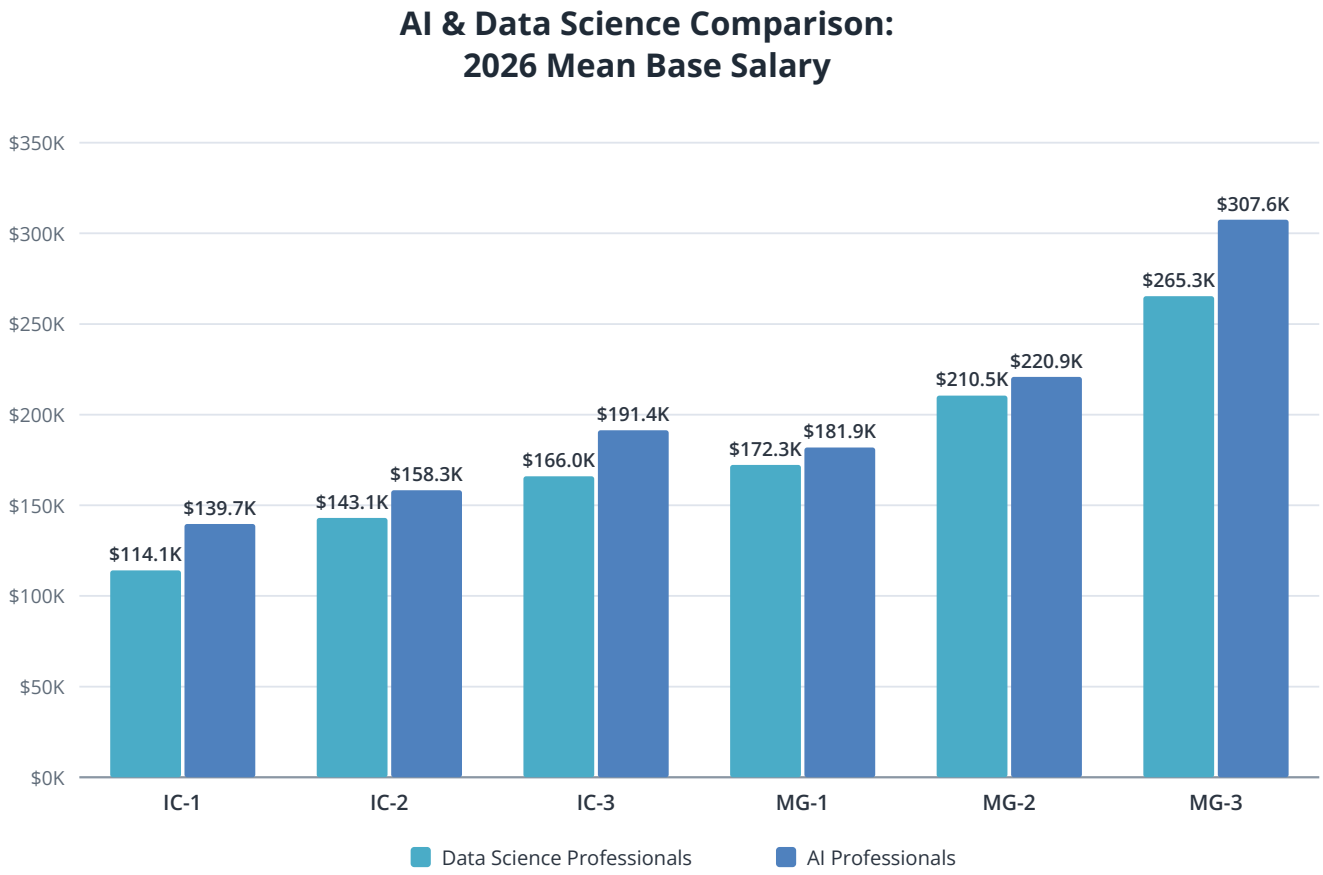
KPIs

- Share of AI use cases with a completed risk assessment, time-to-approval, incidents, audit findings closed.

2026 market note

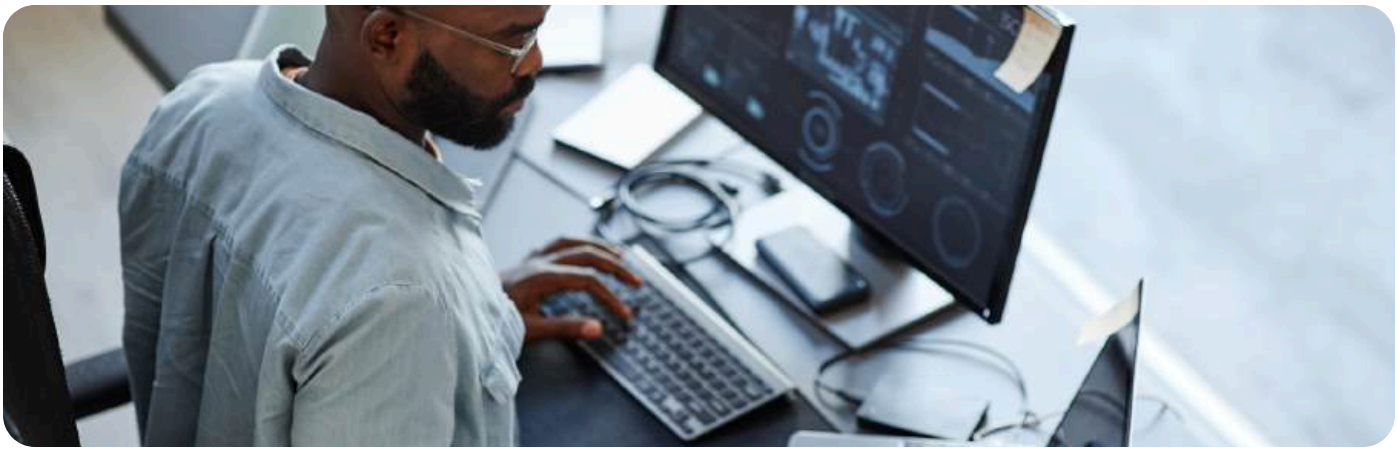
- 47% of VP-and-above data executives own privacy vs. 32% of managers and directors, and ownership carries no pay premium yet. Regulated industries lead demand.

COMPENSATION CHANGES



AI premium over DS	IC-1	IC-2	IC-3	MG-1	MG-2	MG-3
2026	+22%	+11%	+15%	+6%	+5%	+16%
2025	+20%	+5%	+7%	−1%	+3%	−1%

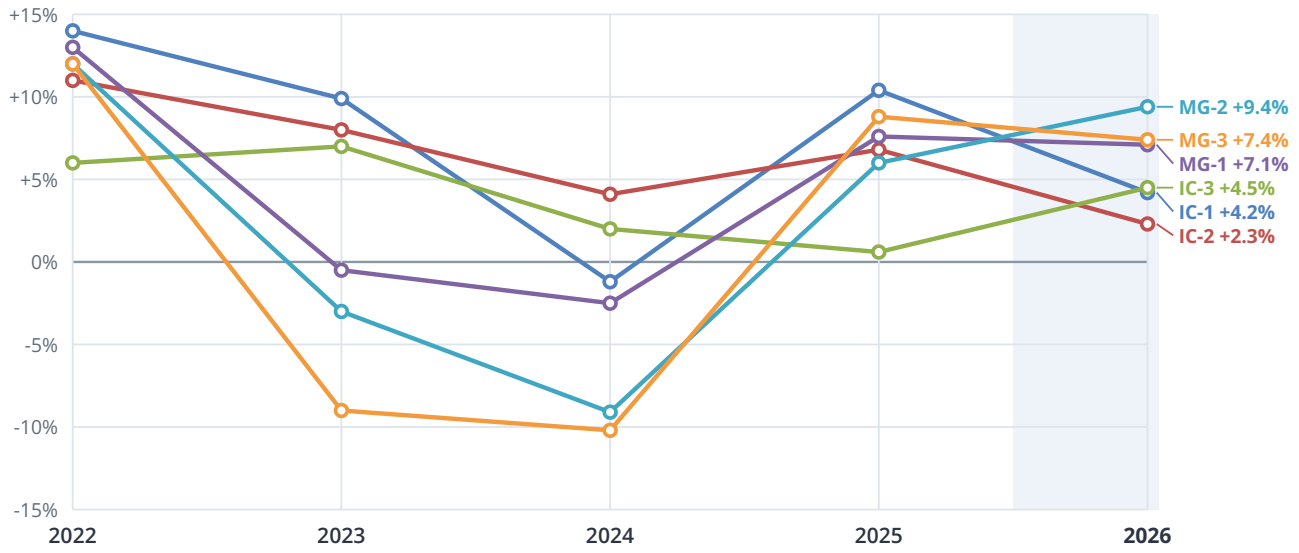
AI IC-1 includes one exceptional offer; the AI IC-1 median is $100,000 vs. $120,000 for Data Science, so treat the entry-level premium as unreliable.



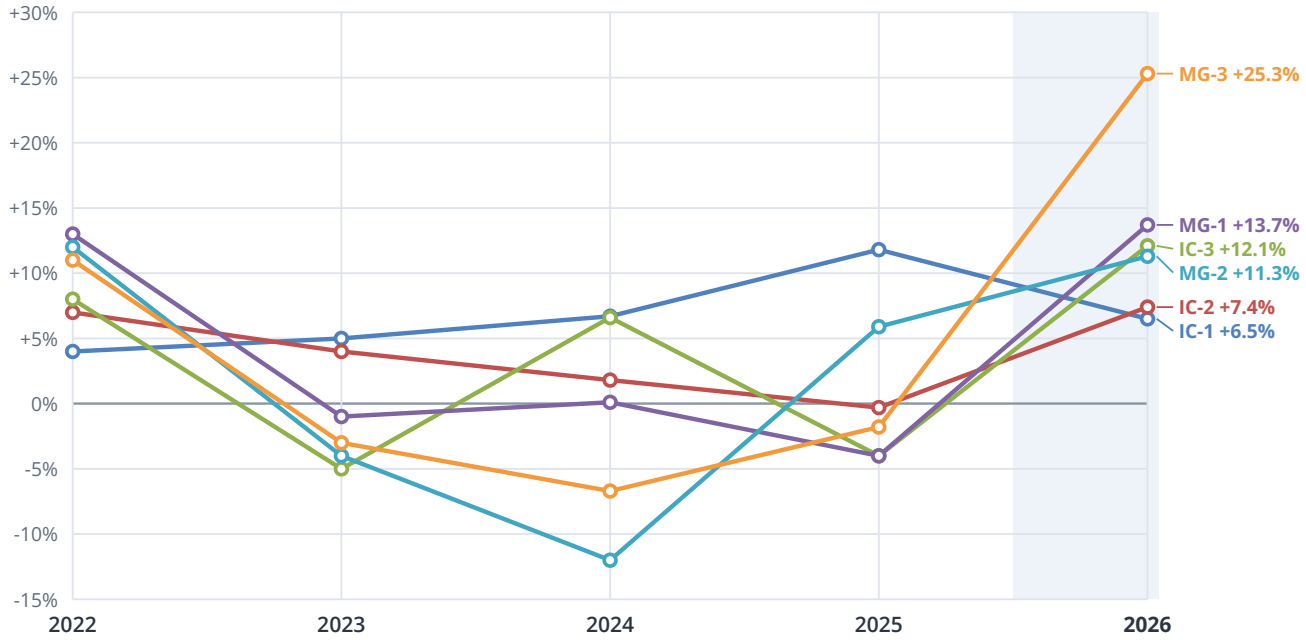
COMPENSATION CHANGES

Data Science Professionals – Mean Base Salary Changes Over Time

Year-over-year change in mean base salary by job level



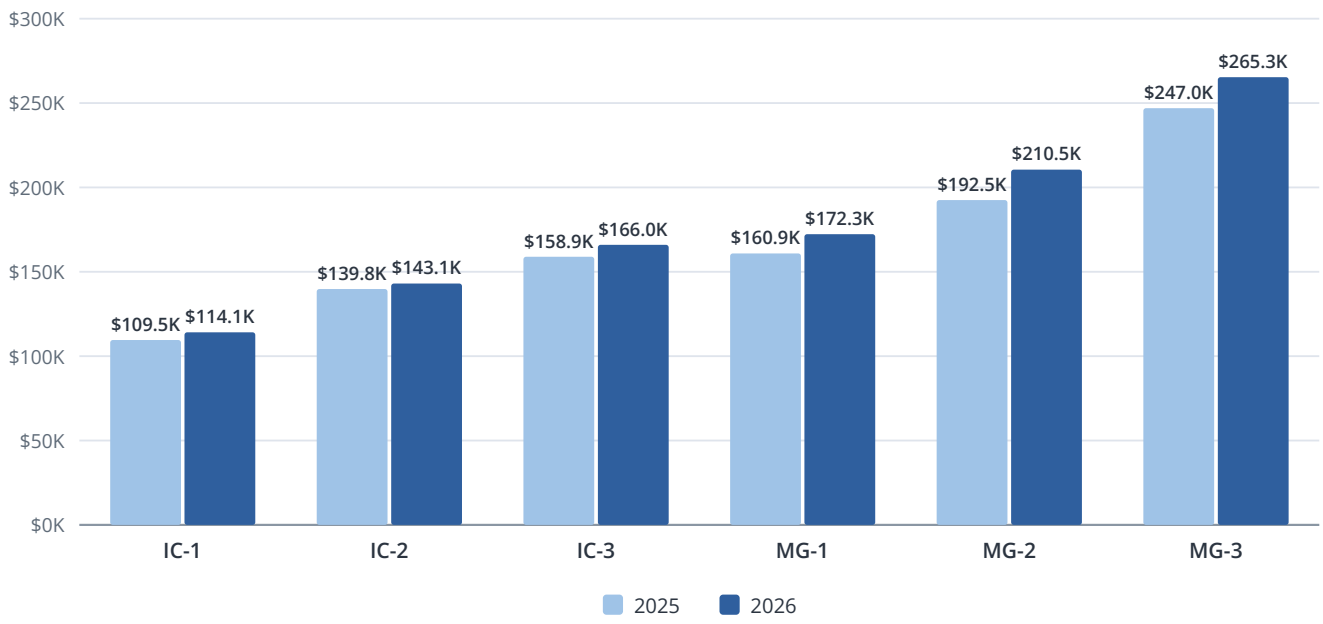
AI Professionals – Mean Base Salary Changes Over Time



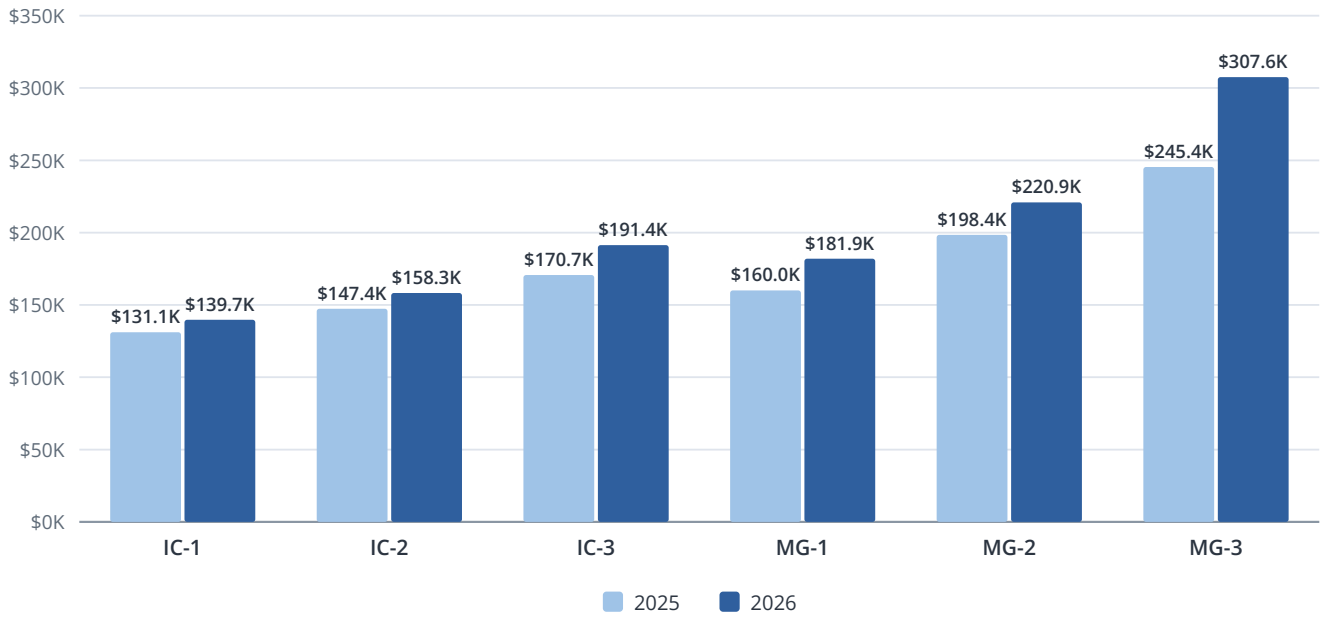
2022–2024 points as charted in the 2025 edition; 2025 and 2026 points are the year-over-year changes in the 2025 and 2026 report tables. Shaded band: 2026.

COMPENSATION CHANGES

Comparison of Data Science Mean Base Salaries: 2025 vs. 2026



Comparison of AI Professionals Mean Base Salaries: 2025 vs. 2026



COMPENSATION CHANGES: DATA SCIENCE SALARIES

- Statistically significant base-pay gains at IC-3 (+4.5%) and MG-2 (+9.4%).
- MG-1 (+7.1%) and MG-3 (+7.4%) rose but fell short of the 5% significance threshold; IC-1 (+4.2%) and IC-2 (+2.3%) were modest.

Job Level	Year	n	Mean
IC-1	2025	74	$109,545
	2026	59	$114,102
	Change		**+4.2%**
IC-2	2025	230	$139,837
	2026	261	$143,078
	Change		**+2.3%**
IC-3	2025	209	$158,861
	2026	166	$166,014
	Change		**+4.5% ***

Job Level	Year	n	Mean
MG-1	2025	39	$160,869
	2026	50	$172,300
	Change		**+7.1%**
MG-2	2025	106	$192,507
	2026	113	$210,510
	Change		**+9.4% ****
MG-3	2025	66	$247,000
	2026	42	$265,321
	Change		**+7.4%**

** significant at p<0.01; * significant at p<0.05 (Welch two-sample t-test). § 2025 base of fewer than 15 records; read the change as directional.

COMPENSATION CHANGES: AI PROFESSIONALS SALARIES

- Statistically significant base-pay gains at IC-2 (+7.4%), IC-3 (+12.1%), MG-2 (+11.3%) and MG-3 (+25.3%).
- Read MG-1 and MG-3 magnitudes with care: their 2025 bases were 4 and 13 records. AI IC-1 is lifted by a single exceptional offer; its median is $100,000.

Job Level	Year	n	Mean
IC-1	2025	23	$131,139
	2026	17	$139,718
	Change		**+6.5%**
IC-2	2025	46	$147,407
	2026	100	$158,322
	Change		**+7.4% ***
IC-3	2025	54	$170,683
	2026	135	$191,352
	Change		**+12.1% ****

Job Level	Year	n	Mean
MG-1	2025	4§	$160,000
	2026	19	$181,916
	Change		**+13.7%**
MG-2	2025	22	$198,445
	2026	95	$220,866
	Change		**+11.3% ***
MG-3	2025	13§	$245,408
	2026	39	$307,564
	Change		**+25.3% ****

** significant at p<0.01; * significant at p<0.05 (Welch two-sample t-test). § 2025 base of fewer than 15 records; read the change as directional.



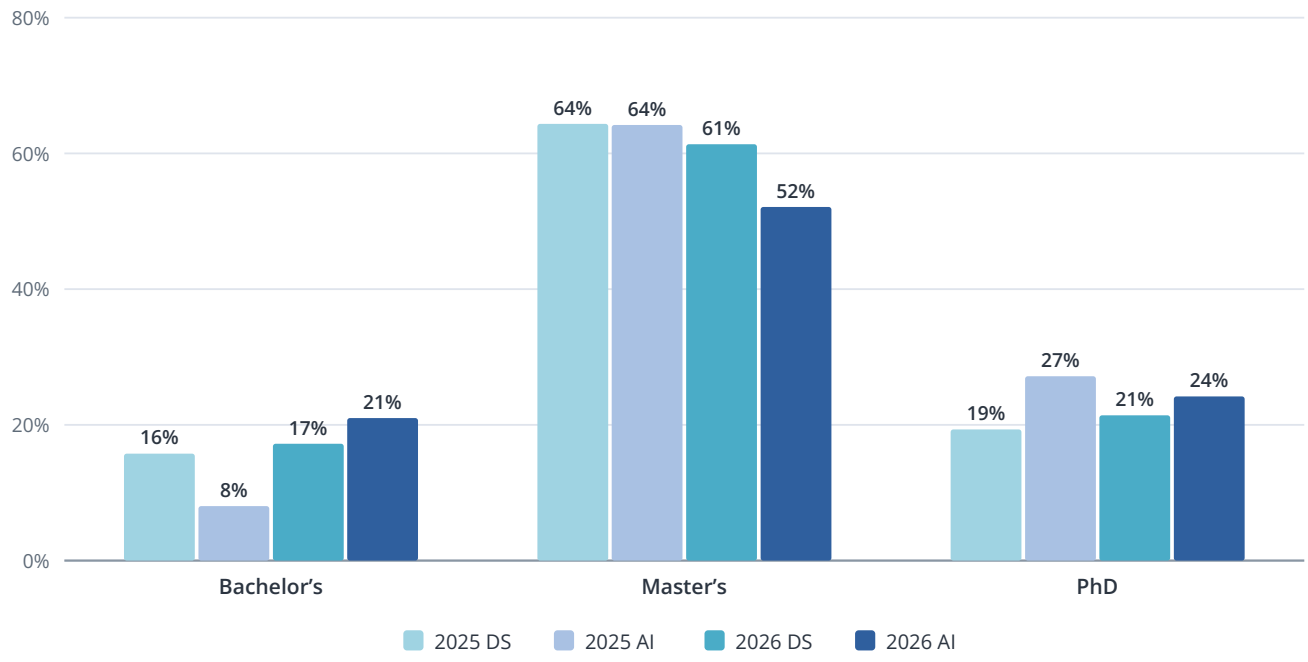
SECTION 3

DEMOGRAPHIC PROFILE

EDUCATION: COMPARISON OF DEGREE LEVEL

- **AI credentials loosened:** 76% of AI Professionals hold a graduate degree in 2026 vs. 91% in 2025.
- **Bachelor's share of AI nearly tripled** to 21% (8% in 2025); Master's fell to 52% (64%); PhD 24% (27%).
- **Data Science is stable:** Master's 61% (64%), PhD 21% (19%), Bachelor's 17% (16%).
- **Implication:** in AI, shipped systems and platform experience increasingly substitute for an advanced degree — Bachelor's holders average $166,458 at IC-2 (Master's $149,771) and $189,516 at IC-3 (Master's $188,318). In data science the Master's remains the default credential, and PhDs still earn the most at IC-2 and IC-3.

Comparison of Degree Level: Data Science vs. AI (2025 vs. 2026)



Shares exclude "Other" degrees (associate's, certificates, professional degrees), which account for 2.7% of AI Professionals in 2026.

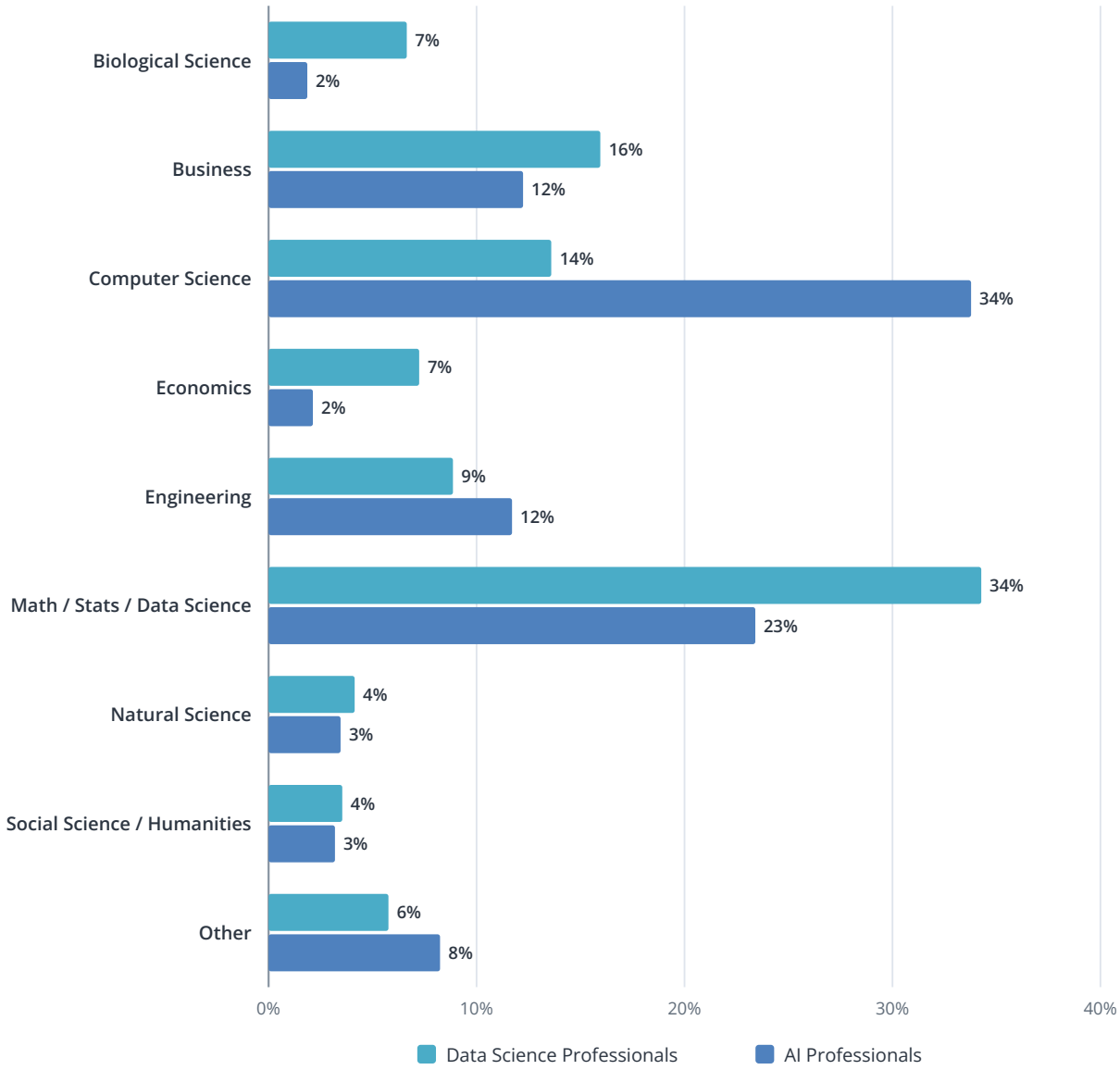


EDUCATION: COMPARISON OF AREA OF STUDY

Computer Science is the most common field among AI Professionals (34%); Mathematics, Statistics and Data Science lead among Data Scientists (34%).

Data Science Professionals vs. AI Professionals

(for highest degree earned)



Interview sample (677 Data Scientists, 376 AI Professionals); area of study was not collected in the survey supplement. Field-of-study groupings were rebuilt for 2026, so compare with earlier editions directionally.

EDUCATION: HIGHEST DEGREE BY JOB LEVEL

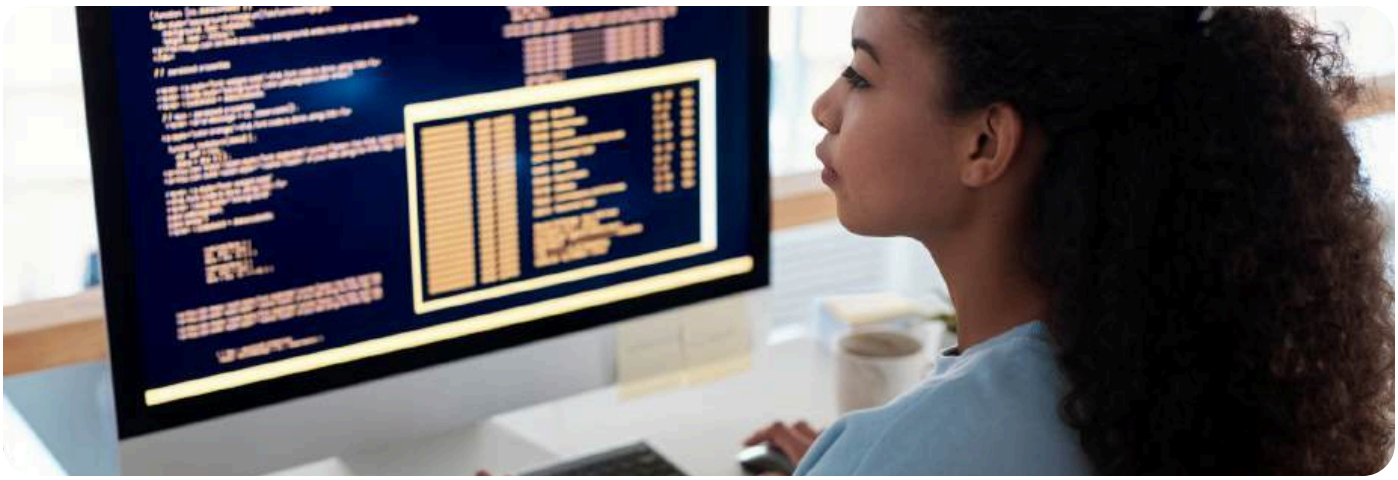
Data Science Professionals

Highest Degree	IC-1	IC-2	IC-3	MG-1	MG-2	MG-3
Bachelor's	22%	18%	13%	26%	16%	19%
Master's	68%	60%	58%	62%	66%	57%
PhD	10%	22%	29%	12%	18%	24%
n	59	261	166	50	113	42

AI Professionals

Highest Degree	IC-1	IC-2	IC-3	MG-1	MG-2	MG-3
Bachelor's	18%	24%	23%	11%	19%	18%
Master's	76%	56%	50%	47%	48%	51%
PhD	6%	16%	25%	42%	29%	28%
Other	0%	4%	2%	0%	3%	3%
n	17	100	135	19	95	39

Column percentages; n = records with a reported degree.



EDUCATION: SALARIES BY JOB LEVEL FOR DATA SCIENCE PROFESSIONALS

Level	Degree	n	Base Salary		
			25th	Mean	75th
IC-1	BS	13	$90,000	$113,846	$132,000
	MS	40	$91,500	$114,175	$130,000
	PhD	6	$102,500	$114,167	$130,000
IC-2	BS	46	$100,000	$124,109	$140,000
	MS	157	$125,000	$144,434	$160,000
	PhD	58	$140,000	$154,452	$168,750
IC-3	BS	21	$150,000	$165,910	$180,000
	MS	97	$150,000	$164,011	$180,000
	PhD	48	$150,000	$170,108	$180,000
MG-1	BS	13	$150,000	$162,538	$185,000
	MS	31	$160,000	$177,645	$194,500
	PhD	6	$152,500	$165,833	$168,750
MG-2	BS	18	$191,250	$220,083	$238,750
	MS	75	$180,000	$204,547	$226,500
	PhD	20	$180,075	$224,255	$250,000
MG-3	BS	8	$197,500	$246,875	$277,500
	MS	24	$235,250	$272,438	$292,500
	PhD	10	$225,000	$263,000	$297,500

n = 2026 records. — not shown for confidentiality: all figures where n < 3, percentiles where n < 5. Means based on fewer than five records are directional.

EDUCATION: SALARIES BY JOB LEVEL FOR AI PROFESSIONALS

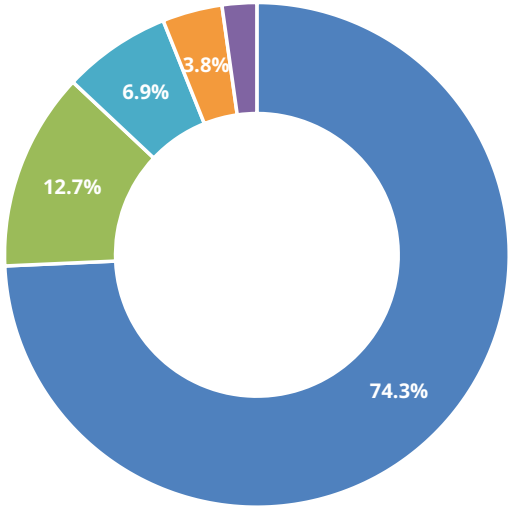
Level	Degree	n	Base Salary		
			25th	Mean	75th
IC-1	BS	3	—	$111,667	—
	MS	13	$90,200	$113,092	$135,000
	PhD	1	—	—	—
IC-2	BS	24	$157,500	$166,458	$180,000
	MS	56	$131,500	$149,771	$170,000
	PhD	16	$140,000	$172,500	$196,250
IC-3	BS	31	$162,500	$189,516	$200,000
	MS	67	$170,000	$188,318	$200,000
	PhD	34	$170,050	$195,300	$207,500
MG-1	BS	2	—	—	—
	MS	9	$150,000	$182,935	$220,000
	PhD	8	$145,000	$178,125	$203,750
MG-2	BS	18	$200,000	$227,278	$246,000
	MS	46	$191,250	$215,189	$237,500
	PhD	28	$200,000	$224,254	$246,250
MG-3	BS	7	$240,000	$270,286	$300,000
	MS	20	$250,000	$322,350	$356,250
	PhD	11	$225,000	$306,455	$325,000

n = 2026 records. — not shown for confidentiality: all figures where n < 3, percentiles where n < 5. Means based on fewer than five records are directional.

CANDIDATE RESIDENCY STATUS

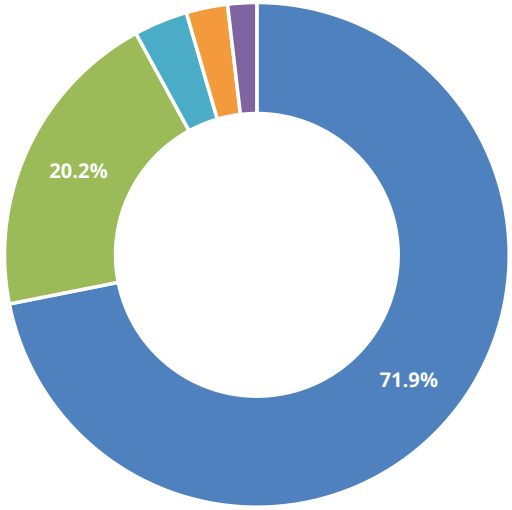
The share of visa holders fell in both cohorts. H-1B holders are 3.4% of AI Professionals (16.7% in 2025) and 6.9% of Data Scientists (10.9%), while U.S. citizens rose to 72% and 74%. The shift coincides with the $100,000 fee on new H-1B petitions introduced in September 2025 and broader immigration uncertainty; lawful permanent residents rose to 20% of AI Professionals (14%).

Data Science Professionals Residency Status Breakdown



U.S. Citizen	74.3%
Lawful Permanent Resident	12.7%
Lawful Temporary Resident (H-1B)	6.9%
F1/OPT	3.8%
Other (H4 EAD, TN, other)	2.2%

AI Professionals Residency Status Breakdown



U.S. Citizen	71.9%
Lawful Permanent Resident	20.2%
Lawful Temporary Resident (H-1B)	3.4%
F1/OPT	2.7%
Other (H4 EAD, TN, other)	1.9%

Interview sample; residency status was not collected in the survey supplement.

SALARIES BY REGION: DATA SCIENCE PROFESSIONALS

Level	Region	n	Base Salary		
			25th	Mean	75th
IC-1	Midwest	22	$90,000	$117,227	$139,250
	Mountain	5	$90,000	$103,000	$120,000
	Northeast	9	$120,000	$120,556	$130,000
	Southeast	13	$95,000	$108,077	$125,000
	West Coast	9	$100,000	$119,778	$130,000
IC-2	Midwest	102	$125,000	$140,196	$160,000
	Mountain	14	$100,000	$128,214	$147,500
	Northeast	73	$130,000	$149,356	$170,000
	Southeast	38	$120,000	$135,713	$150,000
	West Coast	33	$140,000	$151,461	$170,000
IC-3	Midwest	54	$145,000	$158,446	$173,750
	Mountain	12	$153,750	$161,250	$172,500
	Northeast	50	$150,000	$170,004	$190,000
	Southeast	27	$160,000	$174,630	$180,000
	West Coast	22	$152,500	$169,641	$180,000

Level	Region	n	Base Salary		
			25th	Mean	75th
MG-1	Midwest	16	$157,500	$172,250	$183,750
	Mountain	3	—	$173,333	—
	Northeast	18	$160,000	$179,278	$197,250
	Southeast	9	$150,000	$155,222	$160,000
	West Coast	4	—	$178,750	—
MG-2	Midwest	42	$180,000	$206,205	$250,000
	Mountain	12	$180,000	$211,667	$250,000
	Northeast	40	$200,000	$219,172	$230,000
	Southeast	11	$180,000	$210,918	$250,000
	West Coast	8	$161,250	$187,500	$201,250
MG-3	Midwest	14	$232,500	$274,293	$300,000
	Mountain	5	$220,000	$270,000	$310,000
	Northeast	17	$220,000	$257,435	$275,000
	Southeast	3	—	$245,667	—
	West Coast	2	—	—	—

n = 2026 records. — not shown for confidentiality: all figures where n < 3, percentiles where n < 5. Means based on fewer than five records are directional.

SALARIES BY REGION: AI PROFESSIONALS

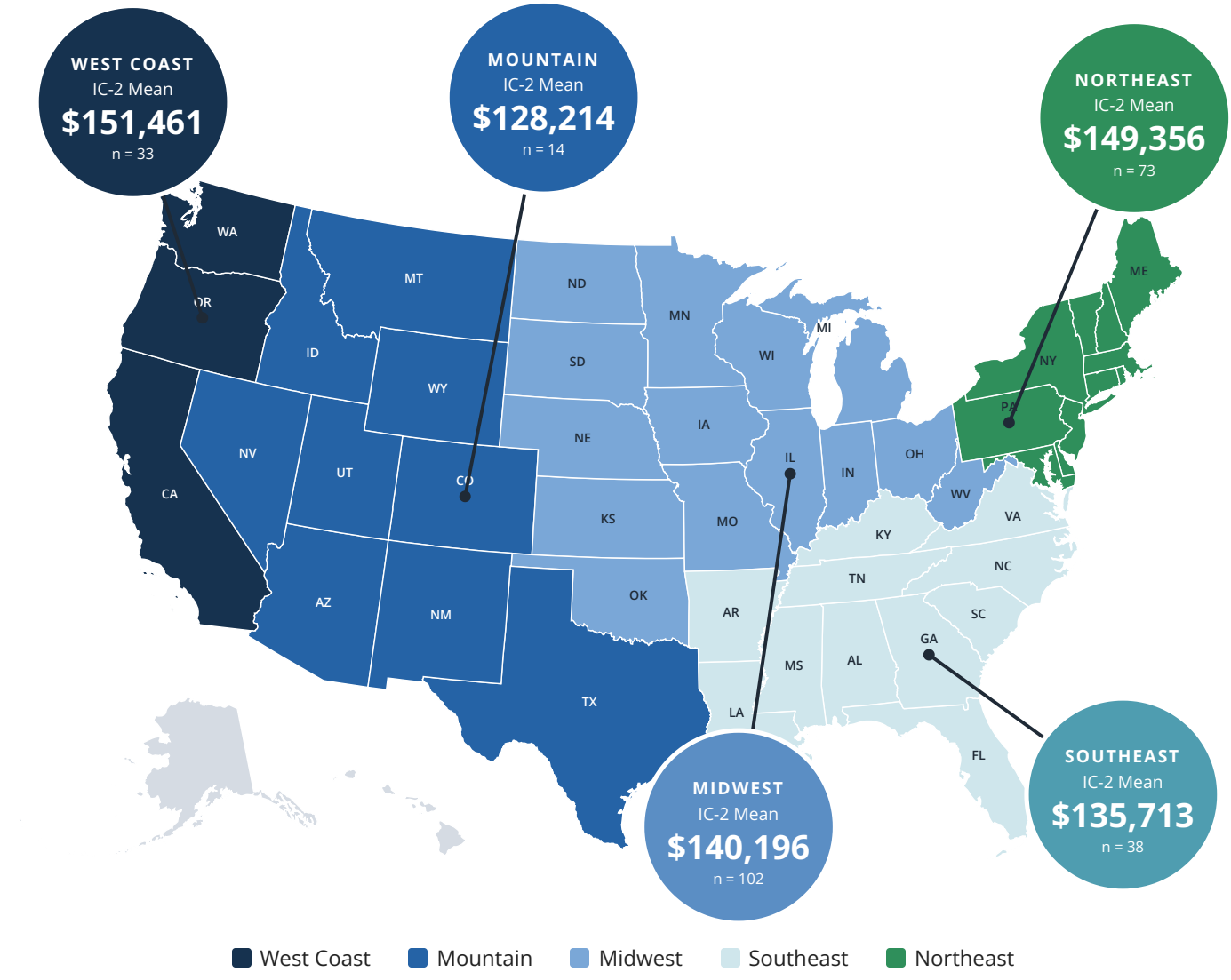
Level	Region	n	Base Salary		
			25th	Mean	75th
IC-1	Midwest	2	—	—	—
	Mountain	1	—	—	—
	Northeast	9	$100,000	$108,333	$120,000
	Southeast	4	—	$101,300	—
	West Coast	1	—	—	—
IC-2	Midwest	11	$112,500	$128,636	$147,500
	Mountain	13	$135,000	$150,000	$165,000
	Northeast	52	$140,000	$160,773	$176,250
	Southeast	7	$140,000	$154,571	$170,000
	West Coast	14	$162,500	$177,857	$190,000
IC-3	Midwest	30	$170,000	$194,333	$200,000
	Mountain	6	$171,250	$180,000	$178,750
	Northeast	65	$160,000	$183,005	$200,000
	Southeast	8	$170,000	$198,375	$194,250
	West Coast	23	$180,000	$204,139	$225,000

Level	Region	n	Base Salary		
			25th	Mean	75th
MG-1	Midwest	7	$163,500	$183,143	$215,000
	Mountain	2	—	—	—
	Northeast	7	$150,000	$166,429	$187,500
	Southeast	1	—	—	—
	West Coast	1	—	—	—
MG-2	Midwest	25	$200,000	$212,347	$240,000
	Mountain	10	$200,000	$217,300	$237,500
	Northeast	33	$195,000	$221,670	$250,000
	Southeast	10	$202,000	$225,050	$247,500
	West Coast	16	$200,000	$232,500	$251,500
MG-3	Midwest	10	$288,750	$362,000	$345,000
	Mountain	3	—	$243,333	—
	Northeast	15	$242,500	$297,733	$350,000
	Southeast	4	—	$238,500	—
	West Coast	7	$250,000	$317,857	$375,000

n = 2026 records. — not shown for confidentiality: all figures where n < 3, percentiles where n < 5. Means based on fewer than five records are directional.

SALARIES BY REGION: DATA SCIENCE IC-2 MEAN

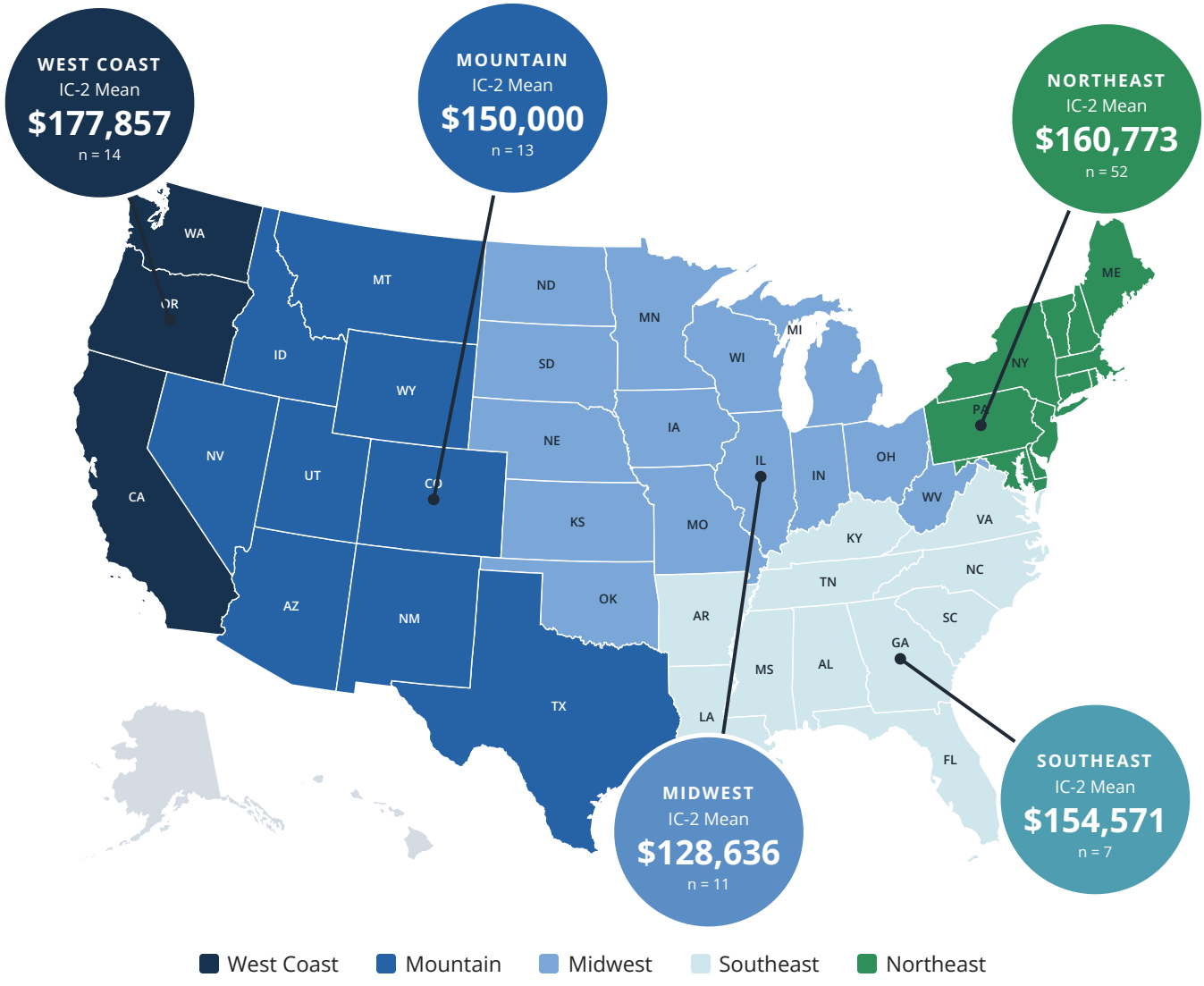
West Coast leads IC-2 pay at $151,461; Mountain is lowest at $128,214 (n = 14). The spread between the highest- and lowest-paying regions is $23,247.



Mountain region includes Texas; Midwest includes Oklahoma and West Virginia; Northeast includes Delaware, Maryland and Washington, D.C.

SALARIES BY REGION: AI PROFESSIONALS IC-2 MEAN

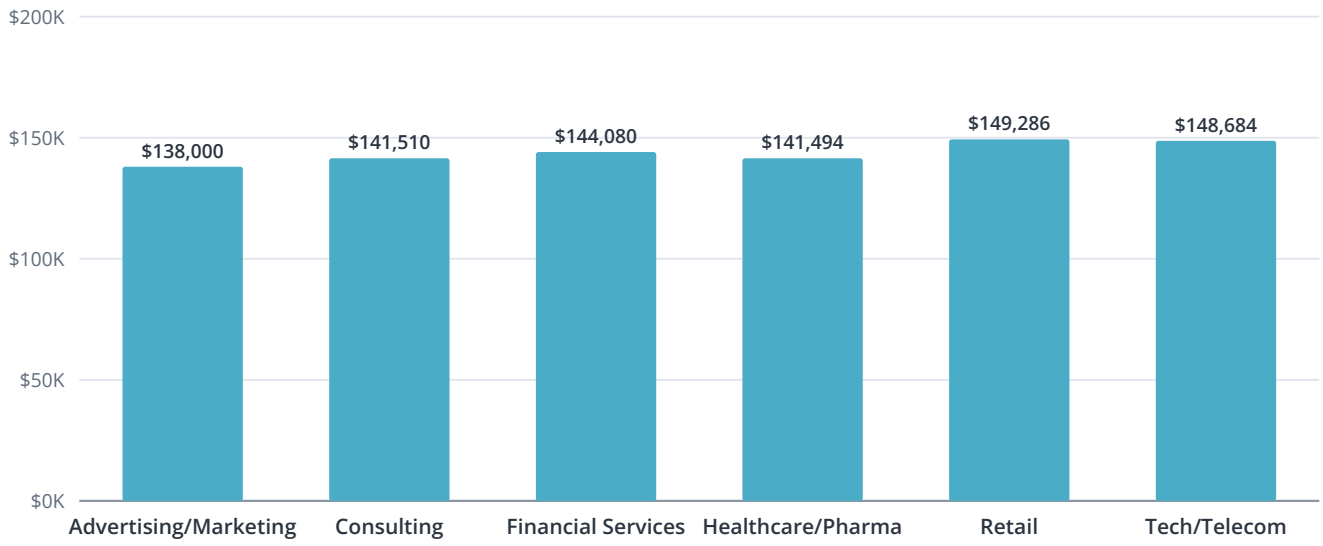
West Coast leads IC-2 pay at $177,857; Midwest is lowest at $128,636 (n = 11). The spread between the highest- and lowest-paying regions is $49,221.



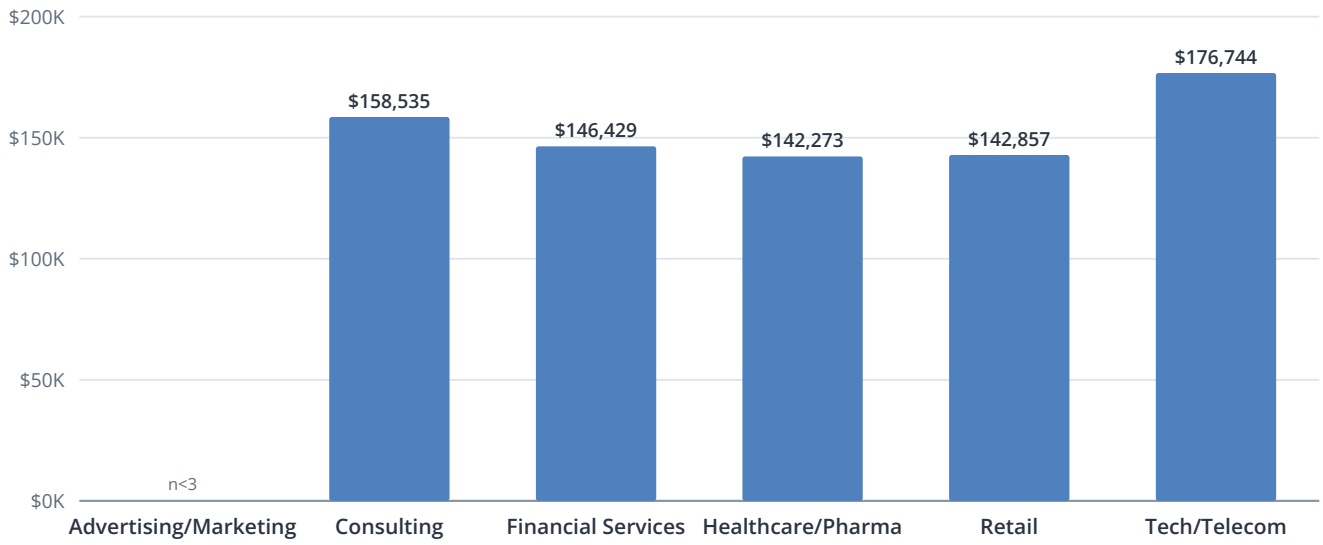
Mountain region includes Texas; Midwest includes Oklahoma and West Virginia; Northeast includes Delaware, Maryland and Washington, D.C.

INDUSTRY BREAKDOWN

Comparison of Data Science IC-2 Mean Base Salaries Across Industries



Comparison of AI Professionals IC-2 Mean Base Salaries Across Industries



n<3: fewer than three IC-2 records in the industry (suppressed). Insurance, government, manufacturing and other sectors are grouped as “Other industries” in the tables on the following pages.

INDUSTRY BREAKDOWN: DATA SCIENCE PROFESSIONALS

Level	Industry	n	Base Salary		
			25th	Mean	75th
IC-1	Adv. / Marketing	0	—	—	—
	Consulting	9	$90,000	$106,333	$130,000
	Financial Svcs.	6	$105,000	$122,000	$142,500
	Healthcare / Pharma	19	$110,000	$122,263	$130,000
	Retail	2	—	—	—
	Tech / Telecom	4	—	$96,250	—
	Other industries	19	$90,000	$113,947	$135,000
IC-2	Adv. / Marketing	10	$122,500	$138,000	$148,750
	Consulting	49	$120,000	$141,510	$160,000
	Financial Svcs.	25	$130,000	$144,080	$160,000
	Healthcare / Pharma	69	$120,000	$141,494	$160,000
	Retail	21	$135,000	$149,286	$165,000
	Tech / Telecom	19	$125,000	$148,684	$167,500
	Other industries	68	$120,000	$142,709	$160,000
IC-3	Adv. / Marketing	9	$150,000	$168,900	$180,000
	Consulting	26	$150,000	$162,392	$177,500
	Financial Svcs.	26	$150,000	$161,731	$167,500
	Healthcare / Pharma	32	$150,000	$172,094	$180,000
	Retail	20	$157,500	$169,505	$186,250
	Tech / Telecom	20	$153,750	$167,700	$185,500
	Other industries	33	$150,000	$162,424	$180,000

Level	Industry	n	Base Salary		
			25th	Mean	75th
MG-1	Adv. / Marketing	3	—	$147,333	—
	Consulting	11	$160,000	$172,273	$190,000
	Financial Svcs.	7	$150,000	$181,429	$205,000
	Healthcare / Pharma	16	$157,500	$174,750	$183,750
	Retail	10	$170,000	$176,200	$188,000
	Tech / Telecom	1	—	—	—
	Other industries	2	—	—	—
MG-2	Adv. / Marketing	14	$190,000	$220,000	$265,000
	Consulting	11	$190,000	$225,909	$250,000
	Financial Svcs.	14	$180,000	$218,929	$250,000
	Healthcare / Pharma	24	$180,000	$199,142	$220,000
	Retail	15	$180,050	$202,013	$200,000
	Tech / Telecom	10	$180,000	$203,500	$215,000
	Other industries	25	$180,000	$212,520	$250,000
MG-3	Adv. / Marketing	5	$245,000	$255,000	$270,000
	Consulting	5	$220,000	$277,000	$275,000
	Financial Svcs.	9	$225,000	$243,900	$270,000
	Healthcare / Pharma	7	$223,500	$266,200	$300,000
	Retail	4	—	$315,000	—
	Tech / Telecom	2	—	—	—
	Other industries	10	$210,000	$264,500	$300,000

n = 2026 records. — not shown for confidentiality: all figures where n < 3, percentiles where n < 5. Means based on fewer than five records are directional.

“Other industries” combines insurance, government, manufacturing, education, energy, transportation and smaller sectors, so each level’s rows add up to its total.

INDUSTRY BREAKDOWN: AI PROFESSIONALS

Level	Industry	n	Base Salary		
			25th	Mean	75th
IC-1	Adv. / Marketing	0	—	—	—
	Consulting	2	—	—	—
	Financial Svcs.	0	—	—	—
	Healthcare / Pharma	4	—	$112,500	—
	Retail	0	—	—	—
	Tech / Telecom	4	—	$107,500	—
	Other industries	7	$87,600	$180,029	$170,000
IC-2	Adv. / Marketing	1	—	—	—
	Consulting	17	$140,000	$158,535	$175,000
	Financial Svcs.	14	$125,000	$146,429	$157,500
	Healthcare / Pharma	11	$117,500	$142,273	$165,000
	Retail	7	$140,000	$142,857	$170,000
	Tech / Telecom	27	$140,000	$176,744	$195,000
	Other industries	23	$137,500	$156,087	$170,000
IC-3	Adv. / Marketing	0	—	—	—
	Consulting	27	$160,000	$179,822	$187,500
	Financial Svcs.	13	$170,000	$191,938	$215,000
	Healthcare / Pharma	17	$170,000	$187,947	$200,000
	Retail	9	$200,000	$214,111	$240,000
	Tech / Telecom	34	$180,000	$202,500	$221,250
	Other industries	35	$170,000	$185,000	$195,000

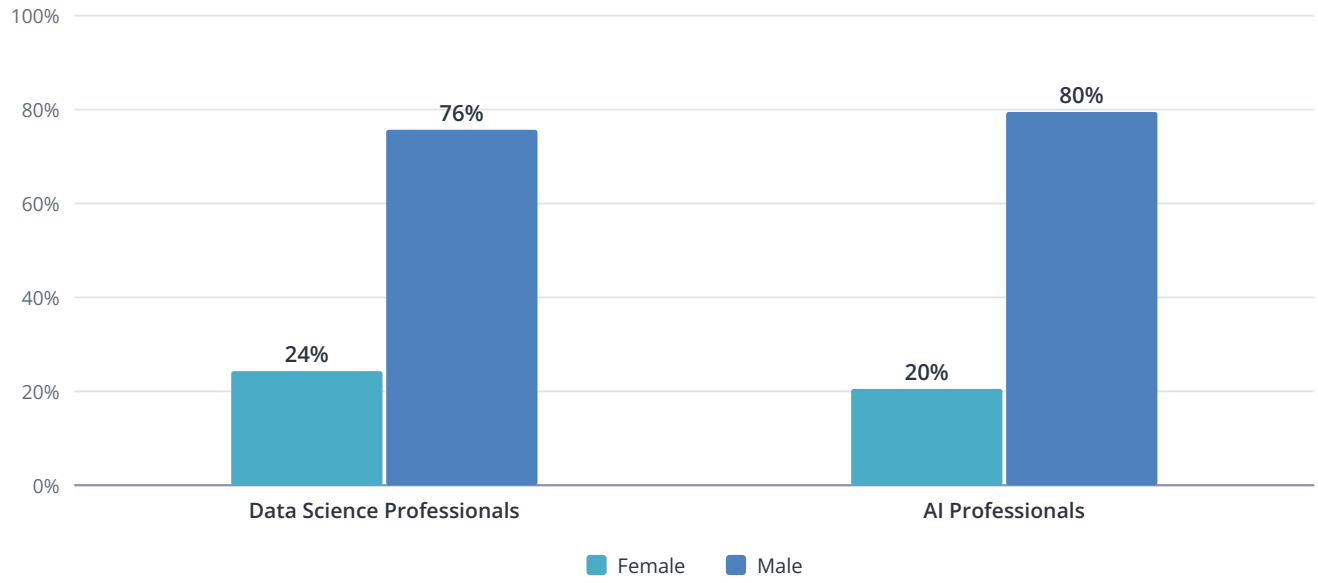
Level	Industry	n	Base Salary		
			25th	Mean	75th
MG-1	Adv. / Marketing	0	—	—	—
	Consulting	5	$175,000	$220,000	$240,000
	Financial Svcs.	4	—	$187,500	—
	Healthcare / Pharma	2	—	—	—
	Retail	0	—	—	—
	Tech / Telecom	2	—	—	—
	Other industries	6	$130,810	$148,569	$159,250
MG-2	Adv. / Marketing	2	—	—	—
	Consulting	18	$200,000	$231,250	$255,625
	Financial Svcs.	19	$200,000	$220,036	$240,000
	Healthcare / Pharma	9	$200,000	$209,900	$215,000
	Retail	8	$215,000	$251,250	$265,000
	Tech / Telecom	13	$195,000	$224,769	$250,000
	Other industries	26	$186,250	$204,923	$228,750
MG-3	Adv. / Marketing	1	—	—	—
	Consulting	1	—	—	—
	Financial Svcs.	14	$275,000	$306,429	$350,000
	Healthcare / Pharma	1	—	—	—
	Retail	1	—	—	—
	Tech / Telecom	9	$240,000	$338,444	$360,000
	Other industries	12	$225,000	$299,333	$312,500

n = 2026 records. — not shown for confidentiality: all figures where n < 3, percentiles where n < 5. Means based on fewer than five records are directional.

"Other industries" combines insurance, government, manufacturing, education, energy, transportation and smaller sectors, so each level's rows add up to its total. The AI IC-1 "Other industries" mean is lifted by the single exceptional IC-1 offer noted in Section 2.

GENDER BREAKDOWN: DATA SCIENCE & AI

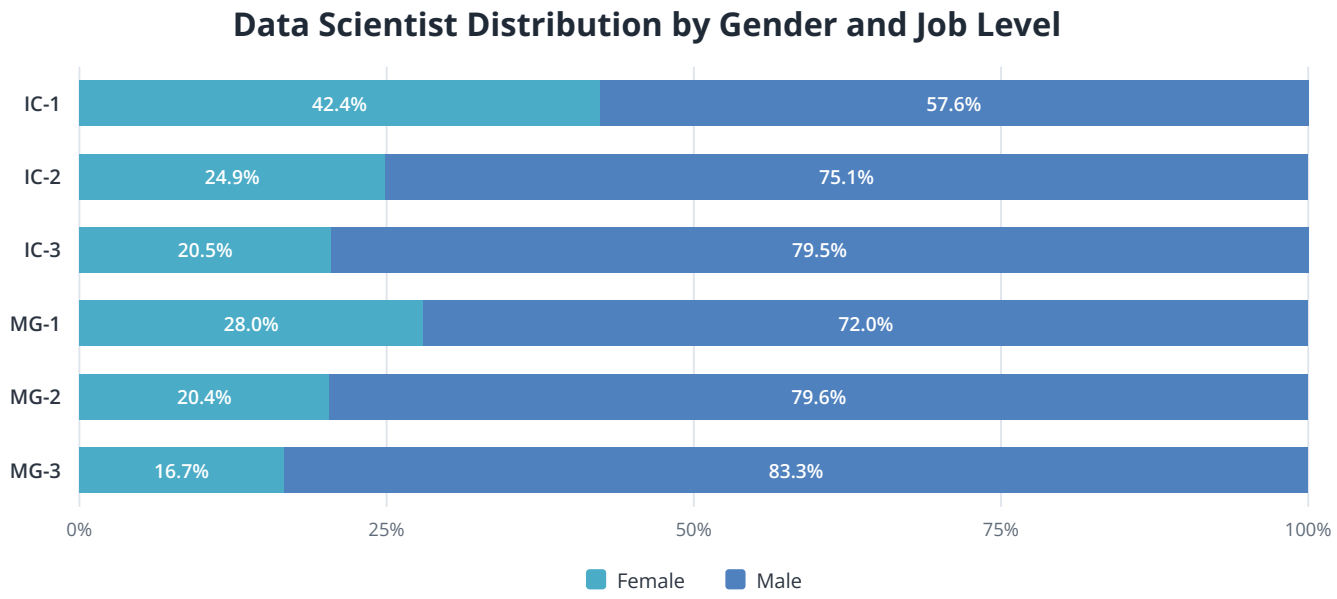
Women make up 24% of Data Scientists (26% in 2025) and 20% of AI Professionals (19%).

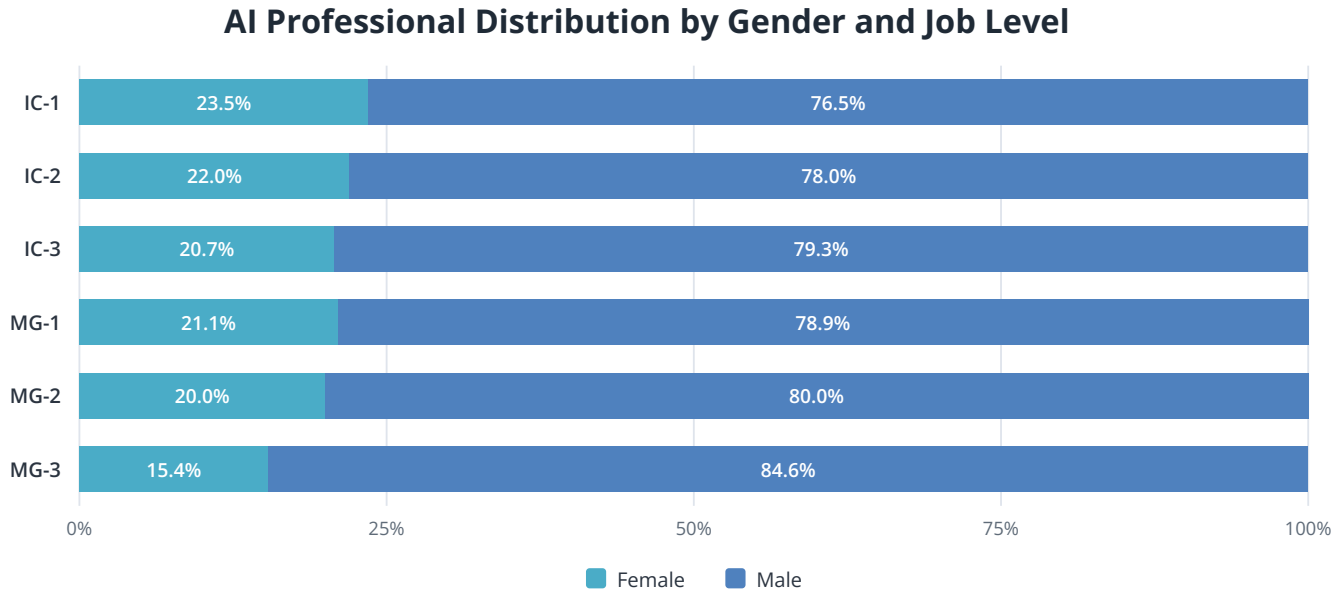




DISTRIBUTION OF DATA SCIENTISTS & AI PROFESSIONALS BY GENDER AND JOB LEVEL

Women's representation thins with seniority: from 42% of DS IC-1 to 17% of DS MG-3, and from 24% of AI IC-1 to 15% of AI MG-3.

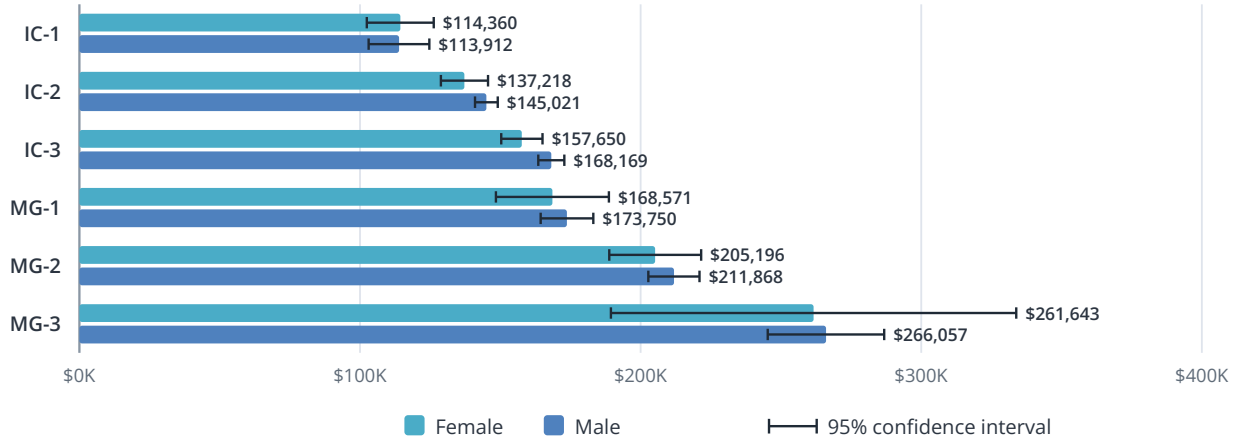




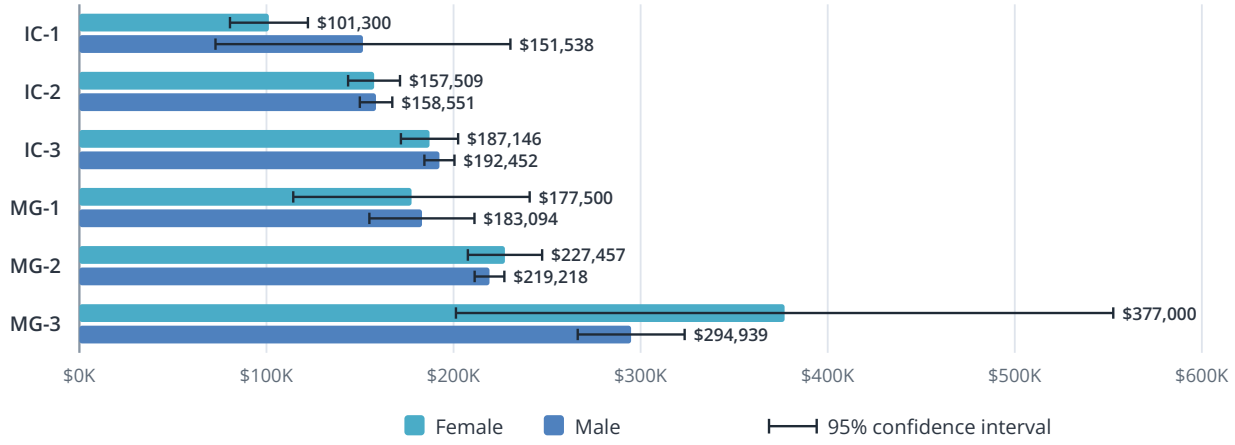
COMPARISON OF MEAN BASE SALARIES BY GENDER

In data science, a gap re-opened at the IC levels: women's mean base trails men's by 5% at IC-2 and 6% at IC-3 — statistically significant at IC-3 (p = 0.02), directional at IC-2 (p = 0.10) — as women's pay held flat year over year (−0.5% and +1.0%) while men's rose +3.1% and +5.4%. In AI, no gender difference is statistically significant at any level: pay is close to parity at IC-2 (−0.7%) and IC-3 (−2.8%), and women's mean is slightly higher at MG-2 (+3.8%).

Comparison by Gender of Data Science Mean Base Salaries



Comparison by Gender of AI Professionals Mean Base Salaries

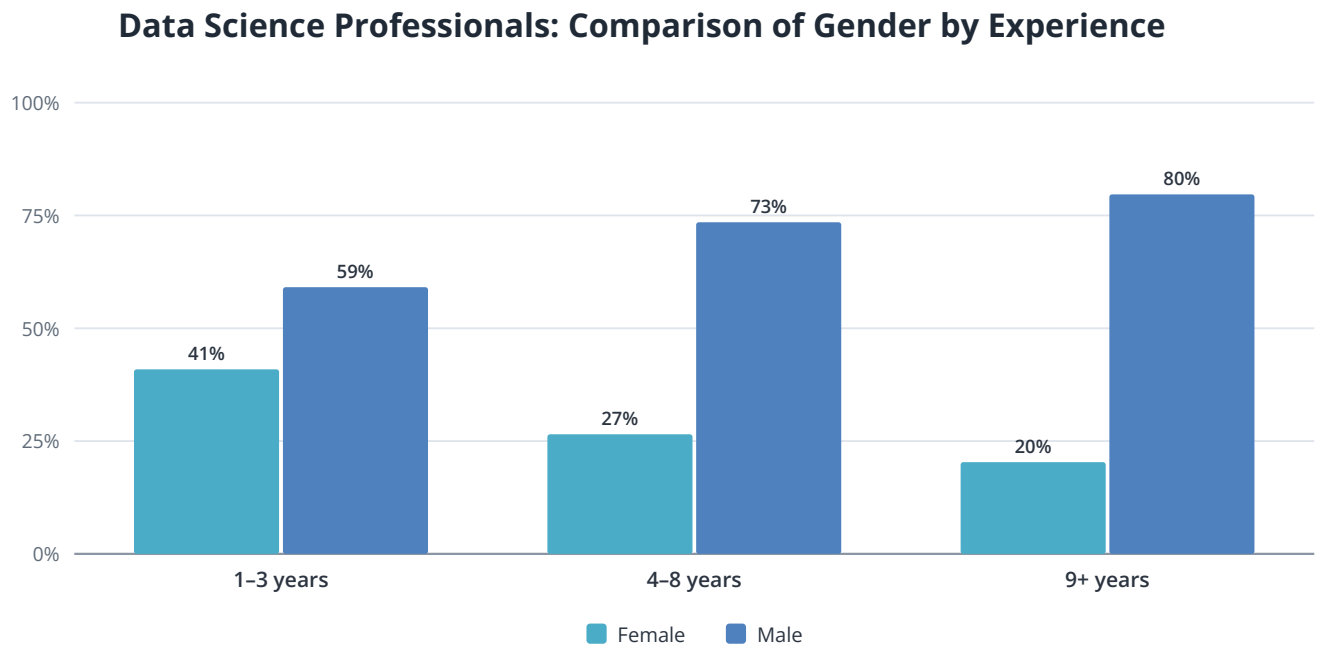


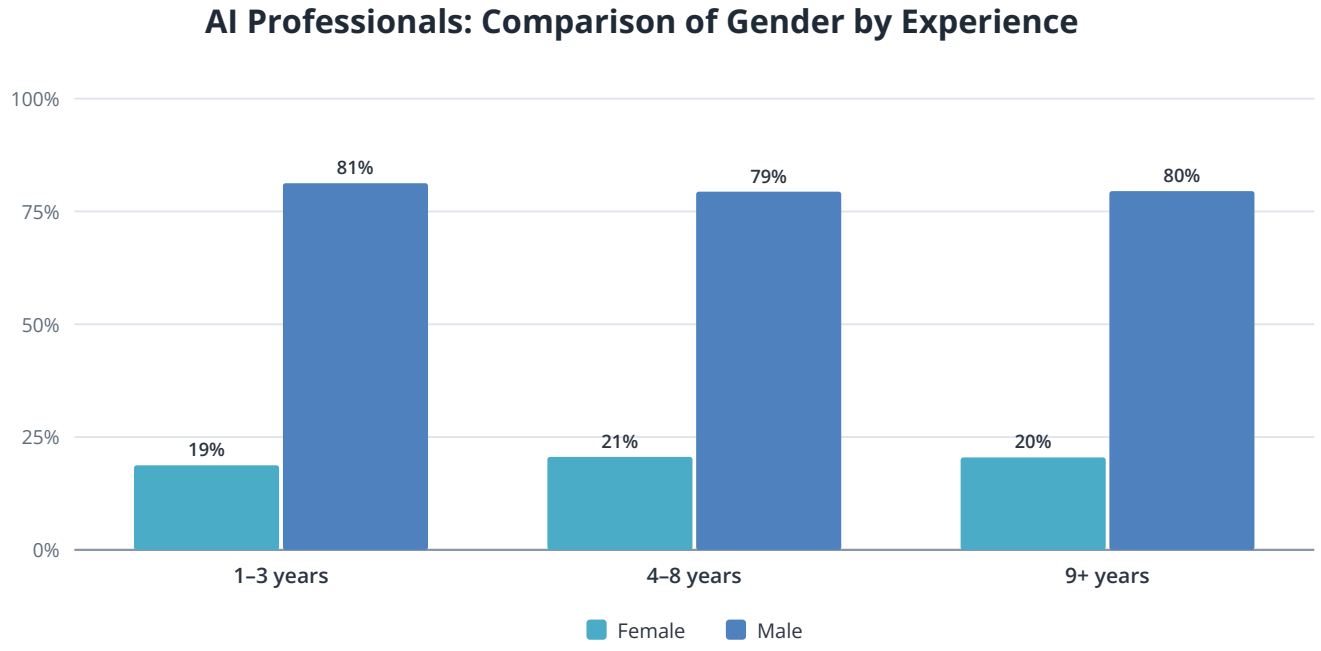
A CLOSER LOOK: WOMEN IN AI MG-3

The six women in AI MG-3 roles report a mean base of $377,000, well above men's $294,939, but we would not attribute the gap to AI. Three of the six work in Financial Services or Tech/Telecom — the industries that hold most AI MG-3 roles in our sample (23 of 39) — and a single salary at the top of the range lifts the mean; the median is $350,000. In other industries, women and men at this level earn about the same (means of $284,000 and $292,846). With six records the 95% confidence interval for the women's mean runs from about $201K to $553K, and the difference from men is not statistically significant (p = 0.29).

Unadjusted means within each level; differences can also reflect industry, region and tenure mix. Error bars: 95% confidence interval of each mean (wider bar, smaller sample). Tests: Welch two-sample t-test within level.

COMPARISON OF GENDER BY YEARS OF EXPERIENCE

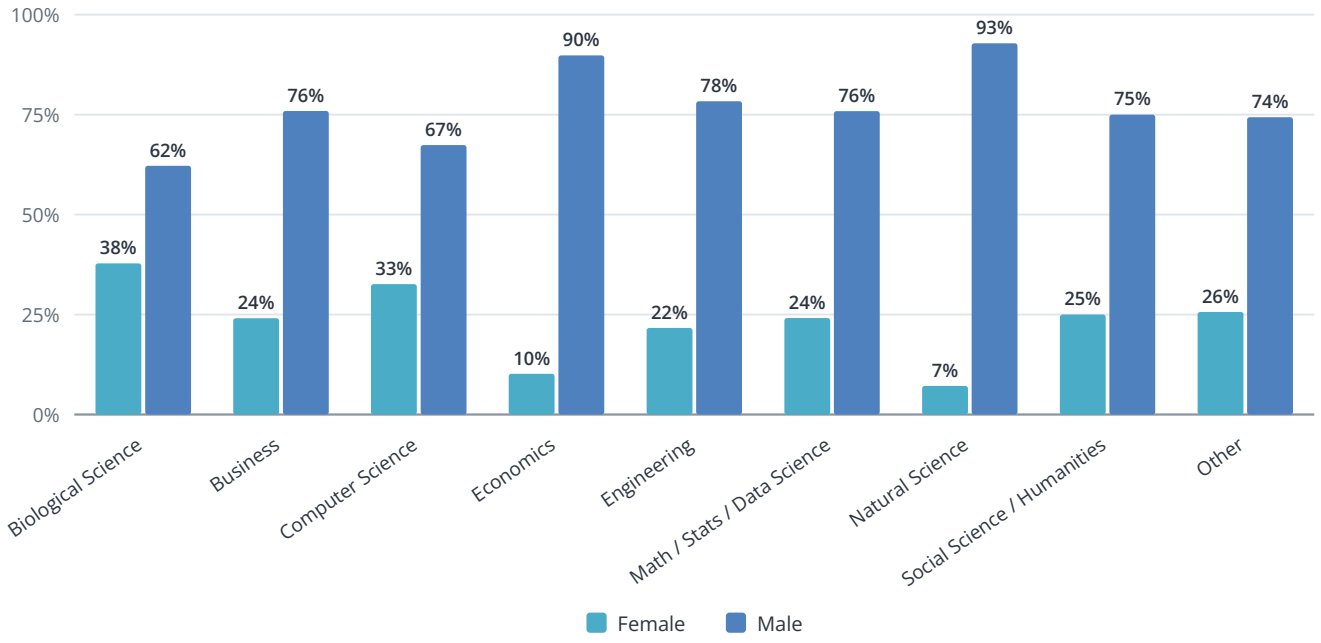




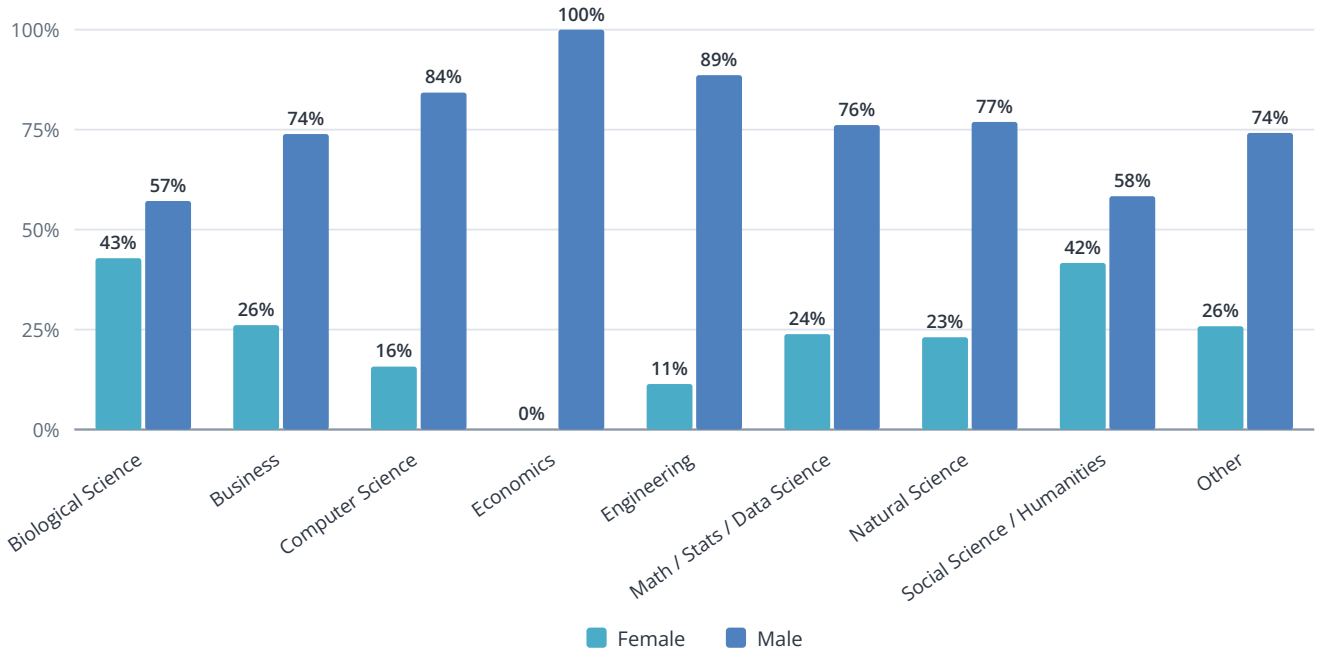
Share of each experience band by gender.

COMPARISON OF GENDER BY AREA OF STUDY

Data Science Professionals: Comparison of Gender by Area of Study

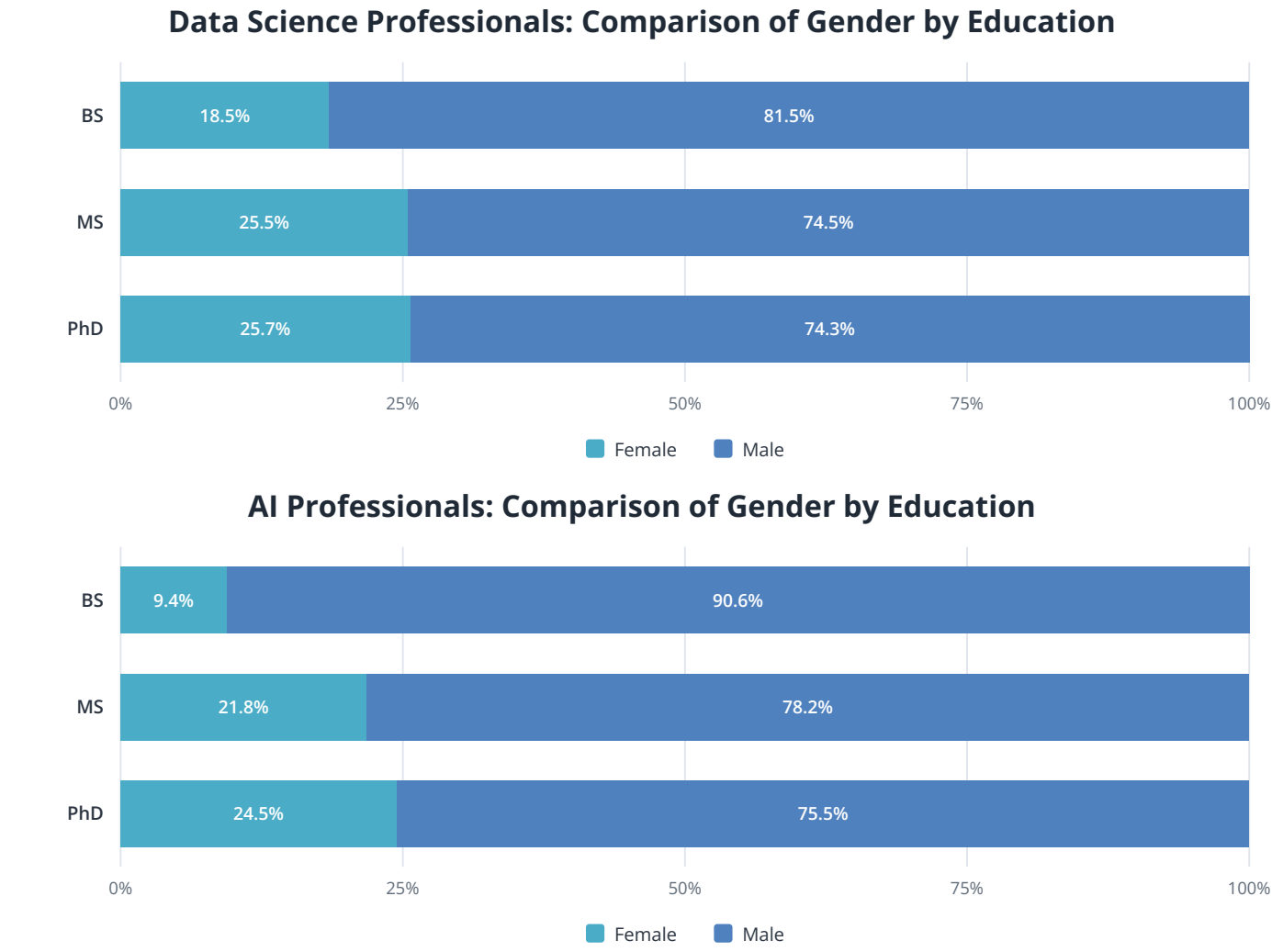


AI Professionals: Comparison of Gender by Area of Study



Share of each field by gender (interview sample). Small fields — AI Biological Science (n = 7), Economics (n = 8) — are directional.

COMPARISON OF GENDER BY EDUCATION LEVEL

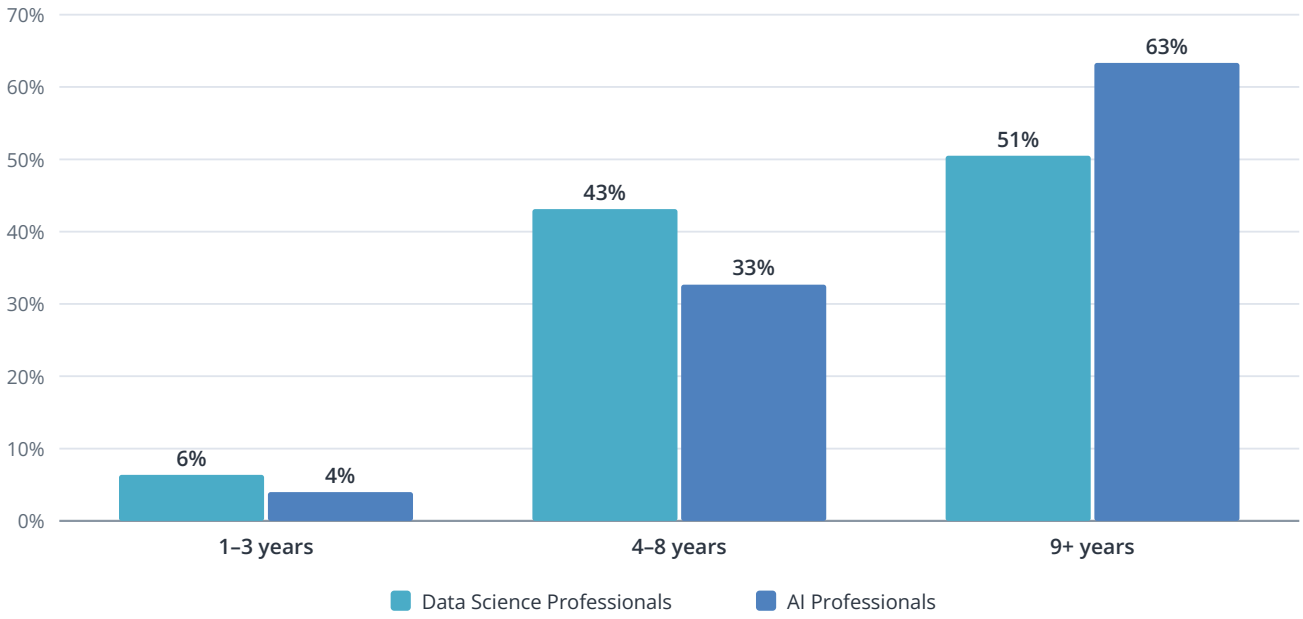




YEARS OF EXPERIENCE

The AI cohort skews senior: 63% have nine or more years of experience (45% in 2025) and just 4% have three or fewer (11%). Among Data Scientists the figures are 51% and 6% (46% and 9% in 2025).

Distribution of Data Science and AI Professionals by Years of Experience







SECTION 4

APPENDICES

4.1 Report Objective & Methodology

This report is a follow-up to last year's *Burtch Works AI & Data Science Compensation Report, 2025 Edition*, published in August 2025. Its goals are to show (1) the current compensation of Data Scientists and AI Professionals and how it varies, and (2) how their compensation has changed since last year's report. By interviewing large numbers of data scientists and AI professionals every year, Burtch Works can show both short-term and long-term trends in their demographics and compensation, and analyzing the two groups side by side highlights the distinctions that affect salary.

2026 data. The core sample is 1,054 records from one-on-one recruiter interviews whose salaries were recorded May 1, 2025 – May 31, 2026. Ten of 1,064 exported records were excluded: seven with no salary classification, two outside data science and AI, and one without a reported gender. Salaries outside $10,000–$2,000,000 are treated as invalid; genuine outliers inside those bounds are retained untrimmed, which is why we report medians and percentiles beside means. Each professional is assigned to Data Science or AI by primary day-to-day work (Section 2). All figures are annual base salary; bonus and equity are not included.

Management supplement. For the first time, the MG-1 to MG-3 tiers are supplemented with 42 U.S. records from the 2026 Data, AI & Analytics Executive Benchmark Survey — respondents who were not included in our executive report because they sit below the VP level or responded after it closed. Section 4.3 documents how they were selected and leveled.

4.2 How Changes in Compensation Were Measured

Year-over-year changes compare each 2026 segment mean with the 2025 mean for the same segment. The job-level means in Section 2 match the tables published in the 2025 edition. For groups that pool all job levels (industry, region, gender, education and others), the 2025 baselines come from Burtch Works' 2025 dataset and are listed in the companion workbook. These pooled comparisons use 2026 interview records only, so they are like-for-like with 2025; they also reflect any shift in the level mix (the 2026 AI sample is more senior), which makes the level-specific changes in Section 2 the cleaner read of pay movement.

Significance is tested with Welch's two-sample t-test at the 5% level, using each year's count, mean and standard deviation; changes are marked * ($p<0.05$) or ** ($p<0.01$). Segments with fewer than ten records in either year are treated as thin samples. In published tables, cells with fewer than three records are suppressed and percentiles are shown only for cells with five or more records; in the gender comparison charts, error bars show the 95% confidence interval of each mean. The 2022–2024 points in the trend charts are as charted in the 2025 edition.

Because the management supplement adds records only at MG-1 to MG-3, individual-contributor results are unchanged by it. The table below shows its effect on the management means.

Mean base salary	Interview records only	Including survey supplement	Records added
Data Science MG-1	$172,300	**$172,300**	0
Data Science MG-2	$210,055	**$210,510**	10
Data Science MG-3	$262,029	**$265,321**	4
AI MG-1	$185,417	**$181,916**	7
AI MG-2	$222,189	**$220,866**	15
AI MG-3	$315,788	**$307,564**	6

4.3 Supplementing the Management Tiers

The 2026 Data, AI & Analytics Executive Benchmark Survey (fielded May–October 2026) collected compensation from data, analytics and AI leaders at every level. Our executive report used only VP-and-above respondents. We reviewed every remaining response and added those that meet the definitions used in this report:

Rule	Detail
Not in the executive report	Respondent was not part of the executive report's 243-record analytic dataset.
Management role	Manager, Senior Manager/Director, or (if received after the executive report closed) VP or SVP; at least one report. C-suite levels and chief-officer titles are excluded — they are benchmarked in the executive report.
Data science or AI scope	Oversees Data Science / Machine Learning and/or Artificial Intelligence / Generative AI.
U.S.-based, valid pay	Works in the United States; base salary of at least $10,000 after correcting entries made in thousands; gender reported as female or male (the same rule applied to interview records).
Credibility screen	Survey salaries are self-reported and cannot be clarified by a recruiter, so a record was added only if its base fell within 1.5× the interquartile range of interview records at the same level and sector. Two of 44 qualifying records were held out.
No duplicates	Checked against interview records and other survey responses.

Level assignment

Survey tier	1–5 reports	6–15	16+
Manager (manages ICs)	MG-1	MG-2	MG-2
Senior Manager / Director	MG-2	MG-2	MG-3
VP	MG-2	MG-2	MG-3
SVP / EVP	MG-3	MG-3	MG-3

Calibrated against how Burtch Works recruiters level interview candidates with the same title tier and span of control.

Data Science vs. AI

Respondents overseeing AI / Generative AI but not Data Science / ML were classified as AI Professionals, and the reverse as Data Scientists. Leaders overseeing both were classified as AI Professionals when AI had *significantly* expanded their responsibilities in the past year, and as Data Scientists otherwise.

Fields not collected by the survey (area of study, residency status, and experience bands that straddle our groupings) are reported as "not reported" and excluded from those tables.

Records added	MG-1	MG-2	MG-3
Data Science	0	10	4
AI Professionals	7	15	6

4.4 Why Burtch Works Reports Are Unique

The Burtch Works reports on the compensation of Data Scientists and Artificial Intelligence (AI) Professionals contain highly anticipated salary and demographic data and are unique because:

- **They focus solely on Data Scientists and AI Professionals.** The samples include only professionals who currently work as data scientists or AI professionals, and exclude professions that other salary reports may include, such as business intelligence, information technology and consumer insights.
- **They distinguish between Data Scientists and AI Professionals.** The report separates AI Professionals, who build and operate ML- and LLM-powered systems, from Data Scientists because of their more specialized skill set. Comparing the two groups shows how the distinction affects salary.
- **The data comes from interviews.** Instead of relying on HR-department data or an open online survey, Burtch Works recruiters interview professionals individually. Interviews capture information HR data usually omits — such as education and residency status — and let recruiters obtain corrections or clarifications when information does not seem credible. In 2026, 42 survey records supplement the management tiers; because they could not be clarified in an interview, they passed an additional credibility screen (Section 4.3).
- **They show how compensation varies** by job level, region, industry, gender and education. The sample is large enough to show compensation collected over the past year at a granular level, and long-term trends emerge with each consecutive report.

1,054	42	13	5%	n<3
one-on-one recruiter interviews	screened survey records (MG tiers only)	months of data, May 2025 – May 2026	significance level for every year-over-year test	cells suppressed to protect confidentiality

USING THESE BENCHMARKS

- **Benchmarks, not offers.** Figures describe the market for a segment; any individual offer depends on scope, skills and location.
- **Base salary only, IC-1 to MG-3.** Bonus and equity are not included, and MG-3 includes some leaders with VP or chief titles, so match on scope rather than title. VP-and-above total compensation is covered in our 2026 Data & AI Executive Compensation Report, which uses a different survey and pay measure; don't combine the two to price a move between tiers, such as MG-3 to VP.
- **Small cells are directional.** Check the n beside every figure; a mean based on fewer than five records can move with a single salary.
- **Where the numbers come from.** Burtch Works recruiter interviews and our 2026 benchmark survey. Burtch Works provides executive search, staffing and managed services in this market.

To benchmark an offer, size a team or plan next year's compensation bands, talk to your Burtch Works partner.

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4.5 2026 Role & Title Glossary

What you'll see more of in 2026

- **Forward Deployed Engineer (FDE):** Embeds with business teams to turn models into working workflows; owns integration, evaluation and adoption on site.
- **Agent / Orchestration Engineer:** Designs multi-step agents with tool use, memory and human-in-the-loop controls; owns agent reliability in production.
- **Context Engineer:** Curates what models see — retrieval, chunking, re-ranking, memory and tool definitions — to raise accuracy and lower token cost.
- **AI Evaluation Engineer:** Builds automated evaluation harnesses and regression suites; partners with product and risk teams on release gates.
- **AI FinOps / Cost Engineer:** Owns AI unit economics — cost per task, caching, routing and model selection — between the platform team and finance.
- **AI Governance Lead / Privacy Engineer:** Turns regulation and policy into technical controls, risk assessments and audit trails.

AI Team Build-Out (Center of Excellence)

Role families & titles: Head of AI / AI CoE Director (Director/VP), AI Product Lead, AI Technical Program Manager, AI Solutions Architect, AI Governance & Risk Lead, Evaluation Lead.

What they do: Run AI as a portfolio with funding gates and value scorecards; own the reference architecture and model policy; staff IC-heavy pods before adding management layers.

Forward Deployed Engineering & Alignment

Role families & titles: Forward Deployed Engineer, AI Solutions Engineer, RLHF / Preference-Data Lead, Evaluation Engineer, Red-Team Lead.

What they do: Integrate models into customer and business workflows; fine-tune and align models to domain and policy; build evaluation sets from real traffic.

Gen-AI & Agentic Implementation

Role families & titles: Applied LLM Engineer, Agent / Orchestration Engineer, Retrieval & Context Engineer, AI Product Engineer.

What they do: Ship agents and copilots that act inside business systems; engineer retrieval and context; instrument quality, latency and cost, and run A/B tests.

Data Science & Analytics

Role families & titles: Product / Decision Scientist, Experimentation & Causal Inference Lead, Forecasting Scientist, Marketing Science / MMM Analyst, Pricing Scientist, Fraud & Risk Scientist.

What they do: Drive decisions through experimentation, causal models, forecasting, segmentation and predictive scoring; measure the real lift of AI programs.

AI Infrastructure, MLOps & Platform Engineering

Role families & titles: AI/ML Platform Engineer, LLMOps / Inference Engineer, Data Platform & Streaming Engineer, AI Reliability Engineer, AI FinOps / Cost Engineer.

What they do: Provide the paved road — gateways, routing, vector and feature stores, CI/CD for models and prompts — with observability for quality, drift, cost and safety.

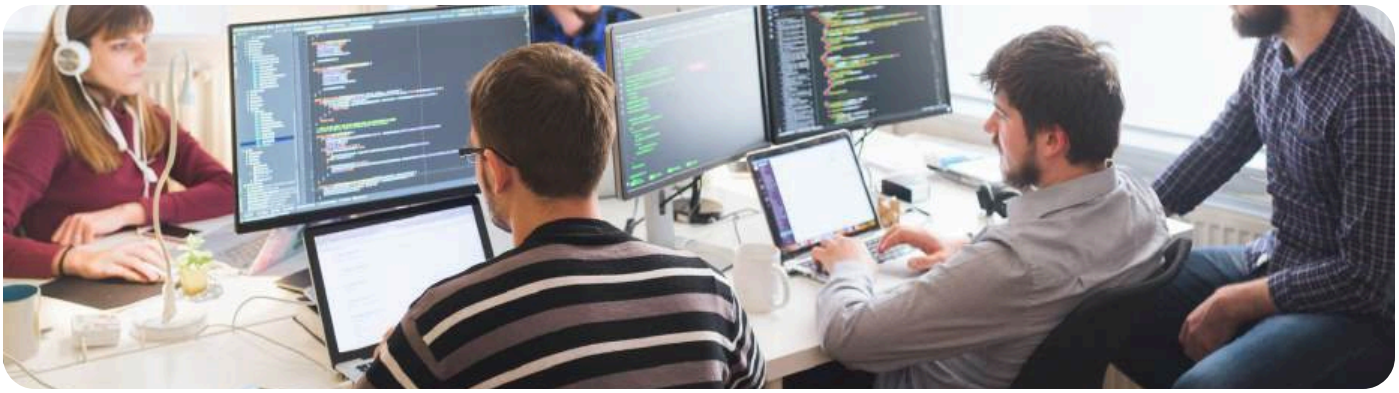
Data Privacy & AI Governance

Role families & titles: AI Governance Lead, Privacy Engineer, Responsible AI Lead, Model Risk Manager, Data Protection Officer.

What they do: Translate regulation into controls; run AI risk assessments, model inventories and audits; partner with platform teams on PII detection, access and retention.

Job levels

IC-1 0–3 years, learning the job · **IC-2** 4–8 years, advanced hands-on work · **IC-3** 9+ years, subject-matter expert · **MG-1** 1–3 reports, tactical team lead · **MG-2** 4–15 reports, leads a function · **MG-3** 15+ reports, senior/executive management.





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