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CHRISTIAN & TIMBERS · ENTERPRISE AI TALENT INTELLIGENCE

# America's Most Wanted Enterprise AI Talent

*Only 2,000 people reliably turn enterprise AI into ROI.*

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Christian & Timbers · Enterprise AI Talent Intelligence · Elite AI Engineer Study · July 2026

# Table of Contents

|                              |    |
|------------------------------|----|
| A Letter from Jeff Christian | 3  |
| Executive Summary            | 4  |
| 01 The Surge                 | 5  |
| 02 The Shortage              | 8  |
| 03 The Payoff                | 10 |
| Research Methodology         | 13 |
| Appendix — Supporting Data   | 15 |
| Sources & References         | 18 |

DATA PROVENANCE

Christian & Timbers conducted a six-month study that included interviews with 250+ C-suite hiring executives across 180 companies, a focused survey of 80 Fortune 500 executives, and a study of 300+ Forward Deployed Engineers and Applied AI engineers. This primary research was conducted from January 1, 2026 through June 30, 2026.

Dear Reader,

We developed this study because we kept hearing from the C-suite of the world's largest companies about an intensifying race for one of the scarcest resources the enterprise has ever chased.

According to 250+ C-suite leaders, most from the Fortune 500—where the pressure to show ROI on AI is most acute—the biggest bottleneck to AI transformation isn't data centers or chips, it's about putting AI to work, applied AI.

**The bottleneck is talent.**

The market for forward-deployed engineers (FDEs) is enormously tight and will stay that way. But that isn't the whole story. For the last six months, we studied a role we've named the **elite FDE**, the rarest and most essential position in applied AI. Elite FDEs have actually carried enterprise AI from promise to production multiple times. They can sit with an operations team, learn the process, build the agentic workflow, and have already delivered ROI a board can measure.

And the most surprising finding is that the entire pool of America's most elite AI engineers is smaller than a single graduating class at a state university.

**Other findings from these conversations:**

- The total supply of elite FDEs is approximately 2,000 in the United States. Not 2,000 available. **2,000 total.**
- Approximately 80 percent of them, perhaps unsurprisingly, come from Palantir.
- Demand for FDEs will continue to surge, and by the end of 2026, will have increased more than 2,000 percent.

For the commitments Microsoft, OpenAI, Google, Anthropic, and so many others have made to pay off, the forward-deployed motion has to be led by the most elite AI engineers in the market—without them, the ROI may never arrive. And attracting, retaining, and compensating those engineers is the single most important question C-suite leaders face right now.

We wrote this study to name the bottleneck, put a number on it, and help leaders see what's coming and make their moves before the window closes.

And on compensation, hold tight. That story is coming, too.

Sincerely,

*Jeff Christian*

Founder, Christian & Timbers

Applied AI has arrived, and it has exposed a hard truth: the companies winning with AI aren't the ones with the best models, but the ones who can deploy them. That capability is the Forward Deployed Engineer, and Christian & Timbers projects a 2,100% surge in demand for FDEs by the end of 2026 — as every enterprise that spent on IT consulting without returns discovers that the forward-deployed motion is the only proven path to agentic AI that delivers.

But the talent doesn't exist at scale. Fewer than 2,000 truly elite FDEs exist worldwide — engineers who can master a business, deploy agentic workflows that generate real ROI, and command the room from the engineering floor to the boardroom. A 2,100% surge against a pool this small isn't a hiring challenge, it's the defining competitive bottleneck of the next decade: secure this talent now, or find there's no one left to hire.

## Q1 BASELINE

**5–10%**

Only 5–10% of companies were planning to hire FDEs at the start of 2026, and most early plans were limited to small pilot-oriented additions of two to three FDEs.

## END OF Q2

**~70%**

By the end of Q2, approximately 70% of companies in the structured executive study were planning to hire FDEs, indicating that the market had moved from awareness to action.

## SCALING SIGNAL

**10x**

The largest consulting and services firms reported needing at least 10x FDE headcount, with plans moving from two to three FDEs to dedicated teams of 20–100+ FDEs.

Together, these signals show a shift from experimentation to permanent capability: companies are moving from asking whether they need FDEs to asking how quickly they can stand up dedicated teams of 20–100+ FDEs.

## WHAT IS AN FDE?

A Forward Deployed Engineer works directly inside an enterprise to identify high-value workflows, architect AI systems, deploy them into live operating environments, and remain accountable for measurable business outcomes.

**2,100%****Increase in Demand**

Driven by billions in new hiring commitments from Anthropic, OpenAI, Microsoft, and AWS alone — with an estimated 8,500–10,000 roles not yet reflected in public trackers. Companies from the Fortune 500 down to \$300 million in revenue are now competing for the same scarce talent.

**< 2,000****And guess what? There are less than 2,000 of them.**

Elite FDEs have either come from Palantir, Google, Anthropic, OpenAI, AWS, Microsoft, or AI-native software companies like Databricks or ServiceNow, or built this muscle independently by deploying agentic workflows with deep, industry-specific knowledge of a company's business processes, driving \$10M+ in ROI (a bar that keeps rising), and carrying the gravitas to work with anyone from engineers to the board.

That scarcity is the whole story: every company chasing this transformation is competing for a talent pool smaller than a single graduating class at a state school, and most of them don't even know it yet.

## CHAPTER 1

# The Surge

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Why demand for FDEs is outrunning every other role in tech.

WHAT IS AN ELITE FDE?

A Forward Deployed Engineer works inside an enterprise to find high-value workflows, architect the AI system, deploy it into live operating environments, and stay accountable for the business outcome. Of the roughly 17,000 FDEs in the United States, only a small fraction are elite. C&T defines elite FDEs as the engineers who have either built the craft at a company like Palantir, Google, Anthropic, OpenAI, AWS, or Microsoft, or independently delivered an agentic deployment that saved or generated \$10M+ within a specific industry. This bar is industry-specific by design, since an elite FDE in healthcare is not automatically one in legal. Barely 1 in 8 FDEs meets the requirement. That is the ~2,000.

Why Demand Is Surging

Demand is surging because enterprises have moved beyond AI pilots. Boards and executive teams now recognize that results require embedded engineers who can understand the business, build inside live workflows, and remain accountable for measurable outcomes. Four independent data sources converge on the 2,100% projection:

01 Public Job-Posting Data

Indeed **+729% YoY** (643 → 5,330 postings, Apr 2025–Apr 2026); Live Data Technologies **+1,165% YoY**; LinkedIn’s Economic Graph **42x growth** in FDE-related roles (2023–2025).

02 New Hiring Commitments

Microsoft and AWS disclosed at least **\$3.5B in direct corporate capital**; Ode with Anthropic announced a **\$1.5B investor-backed venture** (Blackstone, Hellman & Friedman, Goldman Sachs); OpenAI announced a **\$4B partnership** led by TPG, SoftBank, and 17 other investment firms and systems integrators—OpenAI Deployment Company (DeployCo); Google Cloud posted 59 open FDE roles. Combined, an estimated **8,500–10,000 roles** not yet reflected in public trackers.

03 C&T Primary Research

Among 80 Fortune 500 executives, recognition of the need for an FDE function rose from **10% to 40%**. Across 250+ executives at 180 companies, the share planning to hire rose from **5–10% in Q1 to ~70% by Q2** — shifting from two-to-three-FDE pilots to dedicated teams of 20–100+.

04 Consulting-Firm Multiplier

The largest IT and services firms reported needing **at least 10x** their current FDE headcount; smaller firms are building the function from near zero, because they can’t run agentic AI engagements without it.

MAY 2026

**Ode with Anthropic** — \$1.5B venture (Blackstone, H&F, Goldman Sachs).

MAY 2026

**DeployCo** — OpenAI \$4B venture (TPG, SoftBank, Bain, Goldman + 16 others).

JUNE 30, 2026

**AWS** — \$1B forward deployed AI initiative.

JULY 2, 2026 \*

**Microsoft** — Frontier Co., \$2.5B. 6,000 roles.

\* Post-study market development; see Methodology.

## From Pilot to Priority in Two Quarters



\* C&T proprietary data from primary executive research.

## Hiring Scope Shift



### OBSERVATION

The demand surge is not only more companies entering the market — it's hiring depth. In early 2026 the question was whether to add a few FDEs. By the end of Q2 it had become how quickly companies could stand up permanent teams large enough to deploy agentic AI across functions, business units, and client environments.

The 2,100% surge and the ~2,000-person supply are not the same number for the same people. The market is hiring FDEs by the thousands; the tier that actually turns AI into ROI numbers under 2,000. That gap is the shortage.

## CHAPTER 2

# The Shortage

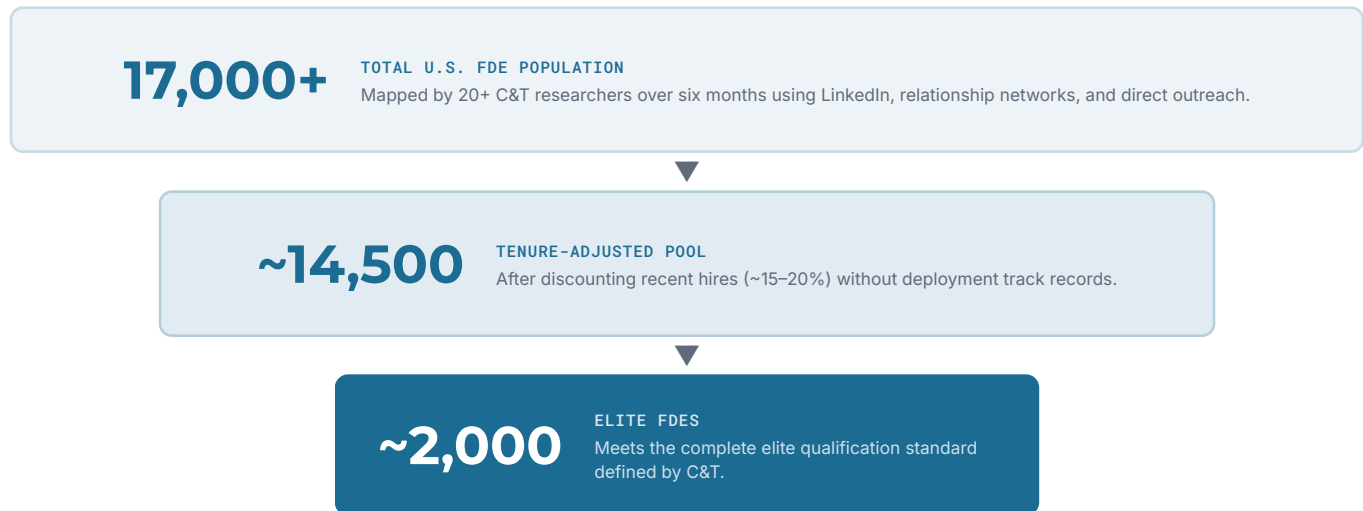
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Why only ~2,000 people can actually do this work.



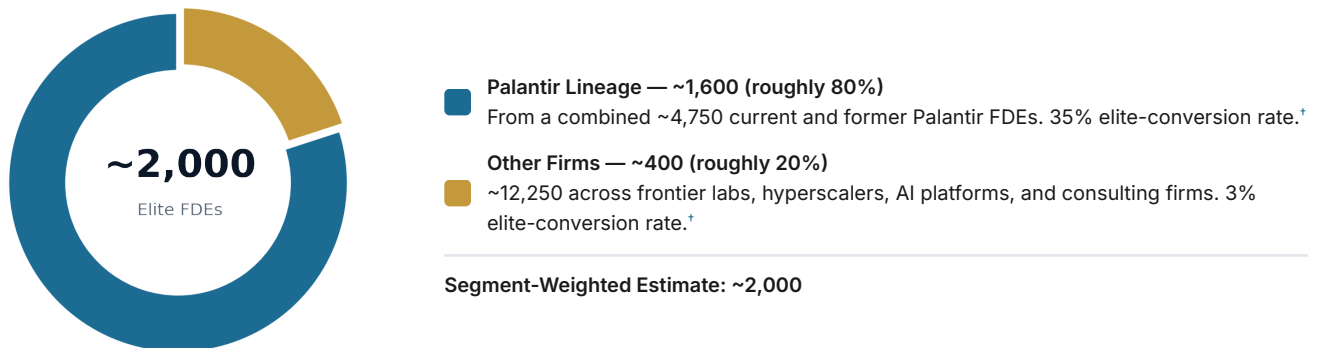
## Approximately 2,000 Elite FDEs

Using the elite standard defined in Chapter 1, here is how C&T counted the pool.



These figures are effectively both national and global. Outside the United States, agentic FDE activity remains negligible (with the possible exception of China, where visibility is limited). The conclusion is that the U.S. and worldwide counts are essentially the same.

### How the Pool Breaks Down



### A Second Method, Same Answer

Independently, ~43 of the 300+ engineers we interviewed met the elite standard. Applied to the tenure-adjusted population, that rate lands near 2,000 — a second method converging on the same number.

\* 35% (Palantir lineage): C&T proprietary estimate. Reflects that Palantir and its alumni carry the industry's original apprenticeship-style FDE training model; discounted below a majority because a meaningful portion are still early- or mid-career without a proven, tenured deployment track record. 3% (all other firms): C&T proprietary estimate. Anchored to the observed interview hit rate (~1-in-15 to 1-in-20), reflecting that outside the Palantir lineage, elite-level deployment experience is rare and thinly distributed.

C&T proprietary ecosystem research, 20+ researchers, LinkedIn research, December 2025 – June 2026

## CHAPTER 3

# The Payoff

Why the companies that have them are the only ones seeing ROI.

### The Elite FDE Operating Model

Elite FDEs do more than implement a defined solution. They enter without a playbook, learn the business, identify a small number of high-value workflows, architect the system end to end, deploy it into production, and document the financial outcome.

| STEP | PHASE                   | DESCRIPTION                                                                                                                |
|------|-------------------------|----------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| 01   | Enterprise entry        | Walks in. No playbook. No prior context required. Maps who owns the budget and defines success on day one.                 |
| 02   | Domain discovery        | Sits with domain experts. Maps every workflow. Finds two or three AI leverage points that create measurable EBITDA impact. |
| 03   | Agentic workflow design | Selects frontier models. Architects the system end to end. One FDE owns the full stack. No handoff.                        |
| 04   | Production deployment   | Builds into live enterprise systems and existing data. Iterates in production until the outcome is confirmed.              |
| 05   | \$10M+ ROI documented   | Documents the financial outcome. Quantifies what was generated. Presents the result to the C-suite.                        |

Awareness Is Up. Outcomes Aren't.

COMPANIES WITH A \$100M AI DEPLOYMENT

1 in 100

Of 180 companies across 250+ interviews, only ~1% can point to an AI deployment that generated or protected \$100M+. The elite FDE is the single most consistently present variable in those outcomes.

THE PALANTIR TALENT SIGNAL

40%

Of 60 Palantir enterprise clients interviewed, 24 (40%) engaged Palantir primarily to access its FDE talent rather than its software — a signal of where the real scarcity sits.

Market Adoption Remains Low

ELITE FDE TEAMS

<5%

Fewer than 5 in 100 companies surveyed have deployed an elite FDE team meeting C&T's criteria.

ACTIVELY HIRING ELITE FDES

<10%

The gap between awareness and active hiring reflects sourcing difficulty and the reality that most companies have yet to identify this profile through standard channels.

ACHIEVING MEANINGFUL AI ROI

<20%

INDEPENDENT INDUSTRY BENCHMARK

C&T's findings are consistent with independent research. Boston Consulting Group's October 2024 study of global AI adoption found that **74% of companies** struggle to achieve and scale AI value. Only **4% consistently generate significant returns** — a figure that closely mirrors this study's finding that fewer than 5% of companies surveyed have deployed an elite FDE team.

THE PRIMARY FINDING

Of the 180 companies studied, fewer than 20% are achieving meaningful ROI through agentic AI. The ones that are share a defining characteristic: one or more engineers with the elite FDE profile operating inside the deployment. Across our sample, elite FDE presence was the single most consistent marker of documented AI ROI — the primary finding of this study.

C&T Executive Survey, 180 companies, 250+ structured interviews, January 1 – June 30, 2026

## RESEARCH

# Research Methodology

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Primary interviews, data sources, scope, calculation notes, and the two independent models that converge on the same conclusion.

Christian & Timbers’ six-month study was conducted from **January 1 through June 30, 2026**. The study included interviews with 300+ FDEs and Applied AI engineers and 250+ C-suite hiring executives across 180 companies. A separate focused survey of 80 Fortune 500 executives measured recognition of the need for an FDE function and hiring intent. Research was informed by multiple Fortune 500 FDE stand-ups across industry sectors.

300+

FDE & Applied AI  
engineer interviews

250+

C-suite hiring  
executive interviews

180

Companies surveyed

6 mo.

Jan 1 – Jun 30, 2026

SUPPLY METHODOLOGY

The ~2,000 estimate was built two independent ways. C&T’s 20+ researchers mapped a U.S. FDE universe of 17,000+ using LinkedIn, relationship networks, direct outreach, and verified deployment records. A public LinkedIn title search returns only ~990 profiles. Since most ex-Palantir engineers now carry different titles, ~990 underestimates the true population.

The segment-weighted model (Palantir lineage ~4,750 at 35% elite-conversion → ~1,600; other ~12,250 at 3% → ~400) totals ~2,000. Separately, a tenure-adjusted pool of ~14,500 with the interview-observed elite rate (~43 of 300+) independently lands near 2,000.

Both conversion rates (35% and 3%) are C&T proprietary estimates derived from placement experience and sourcing data.

DEMAND METHODOLOGY

The 2,100% figure is a **composite demand index**, not a job-postings growth rate. It deliberately combines measured public postings with committed-but-unposted hiring. C&T layered the roughly 8,500–10,000 roles committed after the data window (Ode with Anthropic, DeployCo, AWS, and Microsoft’s post-April programs) onto Indeed’s April 2026 count of 5,330 postings, then measured the total against the 2025 baseline of 643. This yielded approximately 2,100–2,200%.

The committed roles are added to measured postings on the reasoning that internal reassignment and direct sourcing at companies like Microsoft and AWS mean much of this hiring never surfaces in public trackers, so postings alone understate demand.

The estimate is corroborated by three further signals: Indeed (+729% YoY) and Live Data (+1,165% YoY) posting growth; C&T’s executive research (recognition of the need quadrupling from 10% to 40%); and the 2022–2024 generative-AI hiring wave, when comparable AI-skilled postings grew 600%–3,400% (7x–35x) — a range within which, and conservative relative to which, the 2,100% sits.

EXTERNAL MARKET-DATA NOTE

Microsoft’s July 2, 2026 announcement fell after the Jan 1 – Jun 30 research window and is included as a **post-study market development**, not primary research.

## APPENDIX

# Supporting Data

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Raw metrics, commitment details, executive research results, and supply-model inputs.

Job-Posting Metrics

| SOURCE                  | METRIC                                  | VALUE   |
|-------------------------|-----------------------------------------|---------|
| Indeed                  | FDE postings, April 2025 (base)         | 643     |
| Indeed                  | FDE postings, April 2026                | 5,330   |
| Indeed                  | Year-over-year growth                   | +729%   |
| Live Data Technologies  | Year-over-year growth in FDE postings   | +1,165% |
| LinkedIn Economic Graph | FDE-related role growth, 2023–2025      | 42x     |
| Google Cloud            | Open FDE roles (CIO Dive, May 14, 2026) | 59      |

New FDE Hiring Commitments

| COMPANY            | COMMITMENT                                                                                                                       | ANNOUNCED      | DISCLOSED ROLES   |
|--------------------|----------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|----------------|-------------------|
| Ode with Anthropic | \$1.5B venture (Blackstone, H&F, Goldman Sachs)                                                                                  | May 2026       | Undisclosed       |
| OpenAI (DeployCo)  | \$4B venture — TPG, SoftBank, Bain, Goldman + 16 others                                                                          | May 2026       | \$4B              |
| AWS                | \$1B forward deployed AI initiative                                                                                              | June 30, 2026  | Undisclosed       |
| Microsoft          | Frontier Co., \$2.5B                                                                                                             | July 2, 2026 * | 6,000             |
| Combined           | Microsoft and AWS disclosed at least \$3.5B direct corporate capital; Ode with Anthropic separate \$1.5B investor-backed venture | May–July 2026  | 8,500–10,000 est. |

\* Post-study external market development.

Executive Research

| METRIC                               | Q1 2026                                  | END OF Q2 2026                  |
|--------------------------------------|------------------------------------------|---------------------------------|
| Recognize need for an FDE function   | 10%                                      | 40%                             |
| Planning to hire FDEs                | 5–10%                                    | ~70%                            |
| Planned hiring scope                 | Two to three FDEs                        | Dedicated teams of 20–100+ FDEs |
| Largest consulting-firm scaling need | Small existing or near-zero FDE function | At least 10x FDE headcount need |



| METRIC                                                            | VALUE         |
|-------------------------------------------------------------------|---------------|
| Estimated total U.S. FDE population                               | 17,000+       |
| Public LinkedIn title-based search (floor)                        | ~990          |
| Recent-hire discount (no track record)                            | ~15–20%       |
| Current Palantir FDEs                                             | ~1,750        |
| Former-Palantir diaspora                                          | ~3,000        |
| Combined Palantir lineage                                         | ~4,750        |
| Palantir-lineage elite-conversion rate (C&T proprietary estimate) | 35%           |
| Estimated elite Palantir-lineage FDEs                             | ~1,600        |
| Other FDE population                                              | ~12,250       |
| Other-population elite-conversion rate (C&T proprietary estimate) | 3%            |
| Estimated elite FDEs from other firms                             | ~400          |
| Segment-weighted estimate                                         | ~2,000        |
| Tenure-adjusted pool                                              | ~14,500       |
| Engineer interviews                                               | 300+          |
| Interviews meeting elite standard                                 | ~43           |
| Interview-validation estimate                                     | ~2,000        |
| <b>Rounded headline estimate</b>                                  | <b>~2,000</b> |

## SOURCES & REFERENCES

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Third-party sources cited in the study. C&T primary research data is documented in Research Methodology (p. 14).

### A Corporate Hiring Commitments

**1 TechCrunch · May 4, 2026** — “Anthropic and OpenAI Are Both Launching Joint Ventures for Enterprise AI Services”

Used for: Ode with Anthropic \$1.5B FDE venture (Blackstone, H&F, Goldman Sachs); OpenAI Deployment Company (DeployCo) \$4B venture.  
[techcrunch.com/2026/05/04/anthropic-and-openai-are-both-launching-joint-ventures-for-enterprise-ai-services/](https://techcrunch.com/2026/05/04/anthropic-and-openai-are-both-launching-joint-ventures-for-enterprise-ai-services/)

**2 CNBC + TechCrunch · June 30, 2026** — “AWS Launches \$1 Billion Forward Deployed AI Engineering Initiative”

Used for: AWS \$1B direct corporate commitment to forward deployed AI engineering capacity.  
[cnbc.com/2026/06/30/aws-amazon-ai-forward-deployed-engineers.html](https://cnbc.com/2026/06/30/aws-amazon-ai-forward-deployed-engineers.html)

**3 TechCrunch · July 2, 2026** — “Microsoft Launches Its Own AI Deployment Company with \$2.5 Billion Commitment”

Used for: Microsoft Frontier Co.: \$2.5B committed, 6,000 FDE target — the only post-April program with a publicly disclosed headcount.  
[techcrunch.com/2026/07/02/microsoft-launches-its-own-ai-deployment-company-with-2-5-billion-commitment/](https://techcrunch.com/2026/07/02/microsoft-launches-its-own-ai-deployment-company-with-2-5-billion-commitment/)

**4 CIO Dive · May 14, 2026** — “Google Cloud Opens Forward Deployed Engineering Roles”

Used for: Google Cloud 59 open FDE roles — point-in-time corroborating demand signal.  
[ciodive.com/news/google-cloud-forward-deployed-engineering-jobs/820233/](https://ciodive.com/news/google-cloud-forward-deployed-engineering-jobs/820233/)

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### B Job Posting & Demand Data

**5 Business Insider / Indeed · April 2026** — “Job Postings for This Tech Role Have Grown 729% in a Year”

Used for: +729% YoY growth (643 to 5,330 postings, Apr 2025 to Apr 2026). Primary public tracker baseline for the ~2,100% composite.  
[aol.com/articles/job-postings-tech-role-grown-185134000.html](https://aol.com/articles/job-postings-tech-role-grown-185134000.html)

**6 Paraform Blog / Live Data Technologies · April–May 2026** — “Forward Deployed Engineer Demand Quadrupled”

Used for: +1,165% YoY growth in FDE postings. Independent cross-check against Indeed.  
[paraform.com/blog/forward-deployed-engineer-demand-quadrupled](https://paraform.com/blog/forward-deployed-engineer-demand-quadrupled)

**7 LinkedIn Economic Graph (Jan 2026) via Computerworld (May 15, 2026)** — “FDE Roles Grew 42x from 2023 to 2025”

Used for: 42x growth in FDE-related roles on LinkedIn (2023–2025). Third independent demand signal.  
[computerworld.com/article/4171867/](https://computerworld.com/article/4171867/)

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### C Research & Industry Reports

**8 Lightcast · 2025** — “The Generative AI Job Market: 2025 Data Insights”

Used for: 600%–3,400% growth in AI-skilled role postings during the 2022–2024 generative AI wave. Historical precedent benchmark for the ~2,100% FDE estimate.

**9 Boston Consulting Group · October 24, 2024** — “AI Adoption in 2024: 74% of Companies Struggle to Achieve and Scale Value”

Used for: 74% of companies unable to move beyond proofs of concept; only 26% generating tangible value; just 4% consistently generating significant returns. Independent benchmark for the AI-ROI gap cited on p. 12.  
[bcg.com/press/24october2024-ai-adoption-in-2024-74-of-companies-struggle-to-achieve-and-scale-value](https://bcg.com/press/24october2024-ai-adoption-in-2024-74-of-companies-struggle-to-achieve-and-scale-value)

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### D LinkedIn Data — Supply Methodology

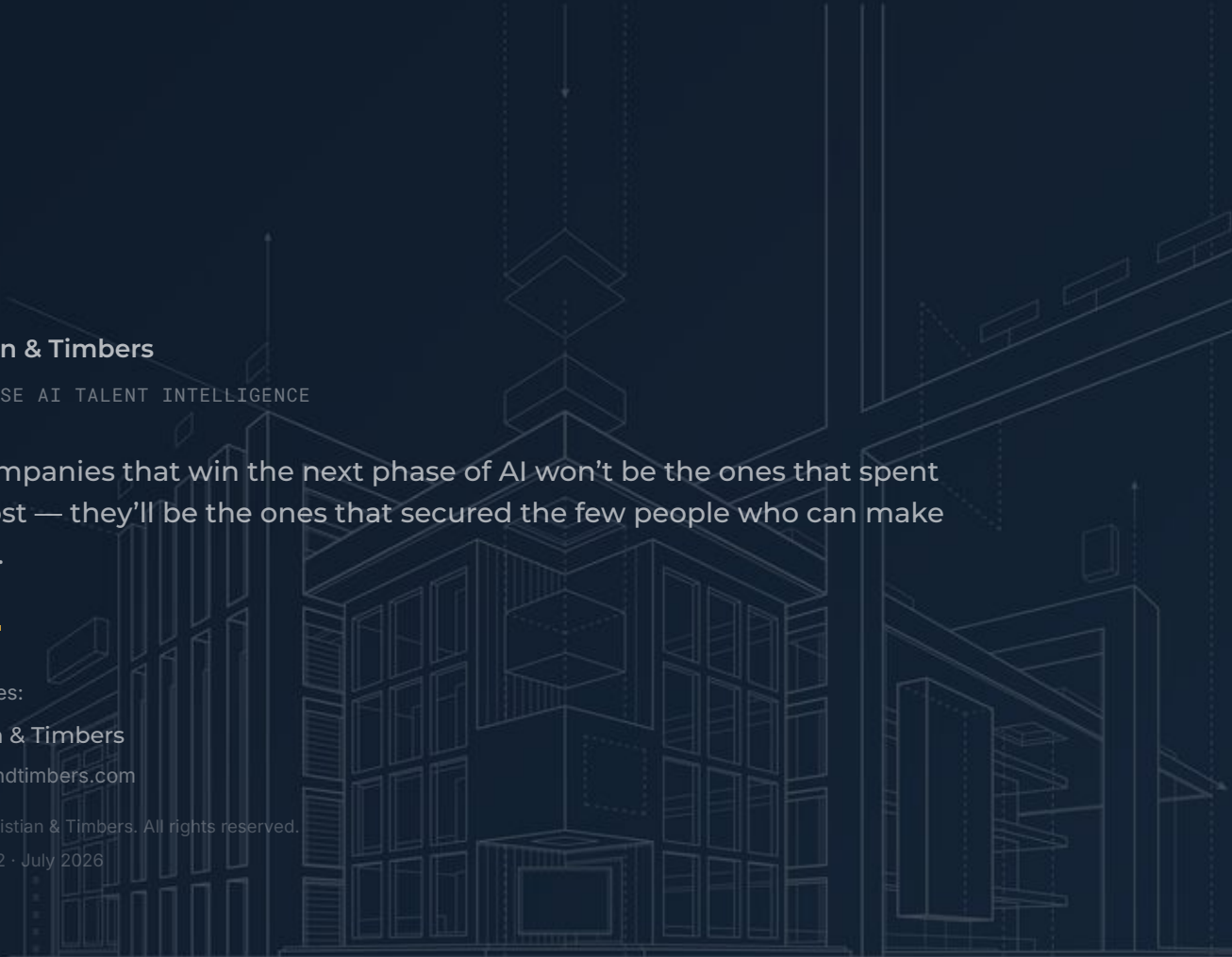
**D.1 Public LinkedIn Search — Title-Based Count**

A public LinkedIn search for “Forward Deployed Engineer” returns ~990 profiles — a floor, as most ex-Palantir engineers carry titles that omit those words.  
Source: C&T LinkedIn research, Q1 2026.

**D.2 Ecosystem Mapping**

C&T’s 20+ researchers used LinkedIn profiles alongside relationship networks, direct outreach, and verified deployment track records to map ~17,000 U.S. FDEs over six months (Dec 2025 – Jun 2026). After discounting recent hires (~15–20%), the tenure-adjusted pool is ~14,500.

Source: C&T proprietary ecosystem research, 20+ researchers, December 2025 – June 2026.



## Christian & Timbers

ENTERPRISE AI TALENT INTELLIGENCE

The companies that win the next phase of AI won't be the ones that spent the most — they'll be the ones that secured the few people who can make it work.

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For inquiries:

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Report 1 of 2 · July 2026