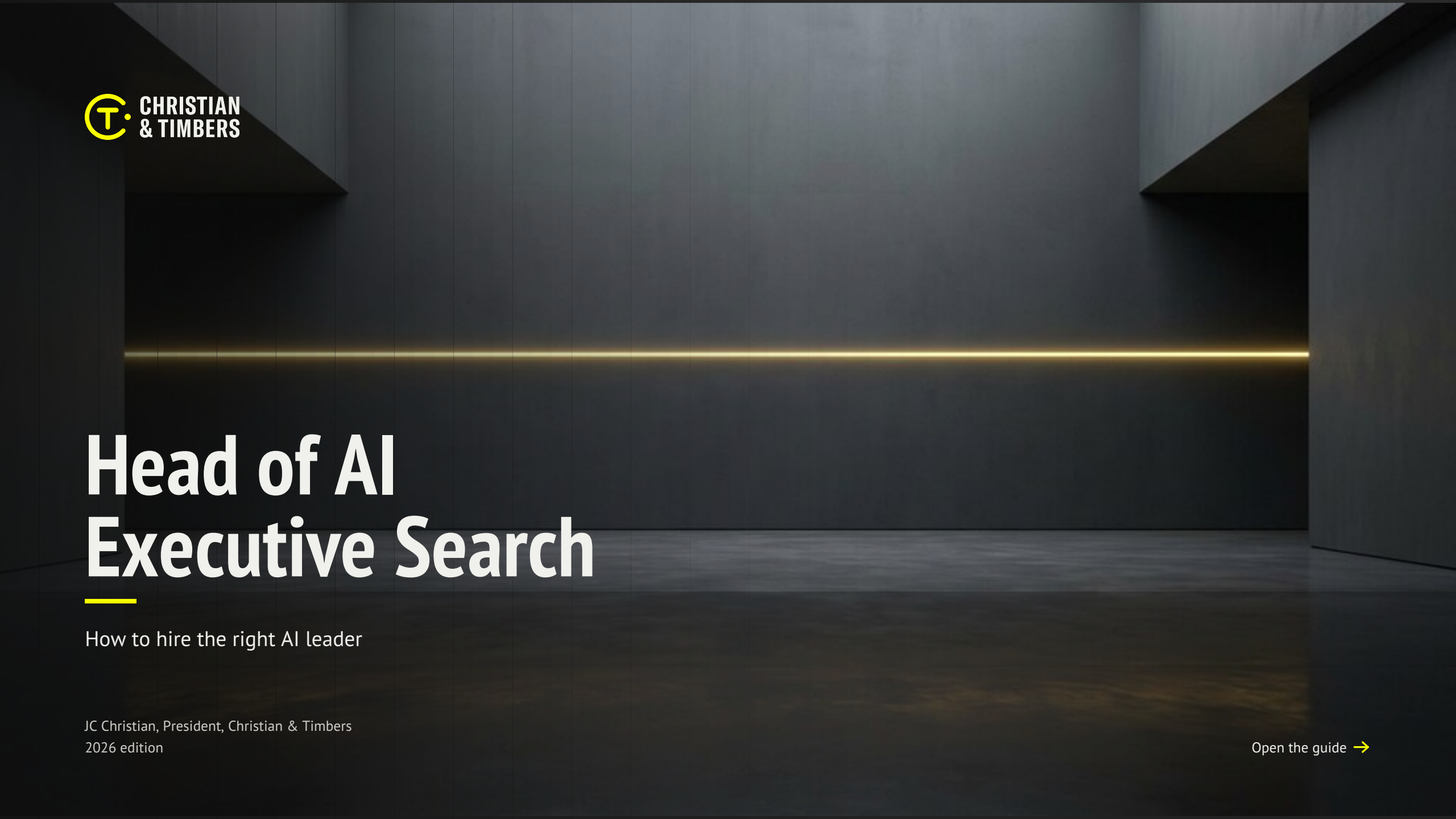


CHRISTIAN & TIMBERS

Head of AI Executive Search

How to hire the right AI leader

JC Christian, President, Christian & Timbers
2026 edition

Open the guide →

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How to use this guide

Section names at the top of every page and the lines above are links. The signal check on page 7, the compensation explorer on page 14, the interview sheet on page 18 and the scorecard on page 19 are fillable: open the file in Adobe Acrobat or Acrobat Reader for the live calculations. Sources on page 24 link out.

The AI leadership gap

As AI adoption grows exceptionally fast, companies are working tirelessly to keep up and turn technology into measurable results. According to Stanford's 2026 AI Index, during 2025, **88%** of surveyed organizations used AI in at least 1 business function. Yet McKinsey found that only about one-third had begun actually scaling AI across their businesses. These numbers show that companies know the importance of using AI, but they haven't figured out how to do it effectively.

The financial data tell a similar story. In IBM's CEO Study, CEOs reported that only **25%** of AI initiatives delivered the ROI they expected.

Adopting AI used to be the challenge. Today, it's finding the leaders who can turn AI investments into actual business results and ROI. This is where a Head of AI comes in: the role develops AI strategies, builds technical teams, manages investments and measures outcomes.

This guide explains

- When to hire a Head of AI →
- Which qualifications matter most →
- What these executives earn →
- How to evaluate candidates →

Adoption is wide. Results are narrow.

88%

of organizations use AI in at least 1 business function

33%

have begun scaling AI across the business

25%

of AI initiatives delivered the ROI CEOs expected

16%

of AI initiatives scaled across the enterprise

Sources: Stanford AI Index 2026; McKinsey State of AI 2025; IBM Institute for Business Value CEO Study (2,000 CEOs, 33 countries).

The takeaway

Adopting AI used to be the challenge. Today it is finding the leader who turns the investment into results.

The role

What a Head of AI owns, why the role exists, when a company needs one, and how the title sits next to the Chief AI Officer and the CTO.

- What a Head of AI does
- Why a Head of AI matters
- When to hire: 5 signals
- From pilots to production
- Head of AI vs CAIO vs CTO
- Qualifications that matter



What a Head of AI does

A Head of AI is a senior executive who leads a company's artificial intelligence strategy, development and implementation. The person must be an expert in the technical work and able to connect that expertise to business goals.

Responsibilities often include

01 Developing an AI strategy that aligns with business objectives

02 Finding opportunities to improve products, operations and revenue

03 Building and leading AI engineering and machine learning teams

04 Overseeing AI development, deployment and performance

05 Evaluating AI models, infrastructure and technology vendors

06 Managing AI budgets, security and responsible use

07 Measuring the business value of AI investments

Most organizations agree on the #1 responsibility: making sure AI investments support measurable business objectives.

As with all executive roles, the mandate varies

AI startup

The Head of AI may lead development of the company's core technology: model work, infrastructure, engineering and the commercial requirements around them.

Established enterprise

The executive focuses on applying AI across departments, improving operations and coordinating teams, moving the business from experimentation to measurable outcomes.

As AI becomes more important to companies' operations and products, new leadership positions are being created. Experienced leadership is what moves a company from experimentation to measurable business outcomes.

Page 9 compares the titles →

The takeaway

Titles vary. The mandate, the team and the first-year goals matter more than the label.

Why a Head of AI matters

A Head of AI is in charge of turning AI investments into measurable business results. Without dedicated leadership for this initiative, AI goals can become fragmented, costly and disconnected from the company's goals.

A Head of AI is the person who provides strategic direction. They identify high-value opportunities and they oversee implementation. They hold the team accountable for the results. As companies continue to invest more heavily in AI, the Head of AI is becoming increasingly important for companies that are moving beyond AI experimentation and looking to achieve meaningful ROI.

What happens without dedicated leadership

Fragmented

Initiatives run in parallel across departments with no shared priority list.

Costly

Spend accumulates on tools and pilots that never reach production.

Disconnected

Results are measured in model metrics rather than revenue or efficiency.

What the leadership gap costs

25% of AI initiatives deliver the ROI CEOs expected

16% scale across the enterprise

64% of CEOs invested before fully understanding the value

IBM Institute for Business Value CEO Study, 2,000 CEOs across 33 countries.

The takeaway

The job is not to run AI projects. It is to make AI investment show up in the numbers the business already reports.

When to hire: 5 signals

When AI becomes central to a company's products, operations or growth strategy, it often needs dedicated leadership. Research suggests many organizations reach that point without fully developing the leadership structures needed to execute their plans. Tick the signals that describe your company.

- [ ] **AI investments aren't delivering expected results**

  IBM surveyed 2,000 CEOs across 33 countries: only 25% of AI initiatives had delivered expected ROI, just 16% had scaled across the enterprise, and 64% acknowledged investing in technologies before fully understanding their value because they feared falling behind. The Head of AI prioritizes investments, sets performance metrics and decides which initiatives receive funding.

- [ ] **AI projects aren't moving beyond pilots**

  McKinsey's 2025 State of AI found about two-thirds of organizations had not begun scaling AI across their businesses. A Head of AI coordinates teams, gives attention to implementation challenges and builds processes for deploying AI.

- [ ] **AI has become central to the product**

  Companies developing AI-powered products need executives who understand model development, engineering, infrastructure and commercial requirements.

- [ ] **The company needs specialized AI talent**

  Companies hiring machine learning engineers, AI researchers and other specialists need someone who can assess their technical ability and build an effective team.

- [ ] **AI responsibilities are spread across departments**

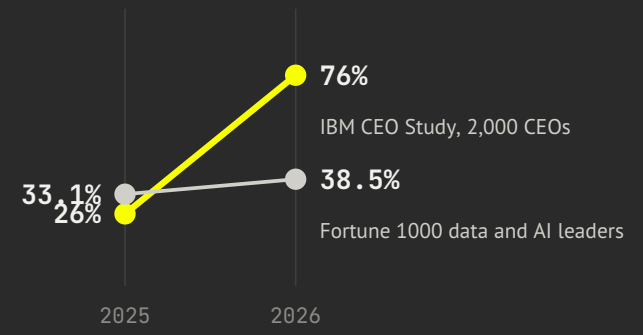
  A Head of AI establishes priorities and improves coordination between engineering, product, data and operations.

Your result

0 of 5

Tick the signals on the left.

Boards are moving: the Chief AI Officer seat

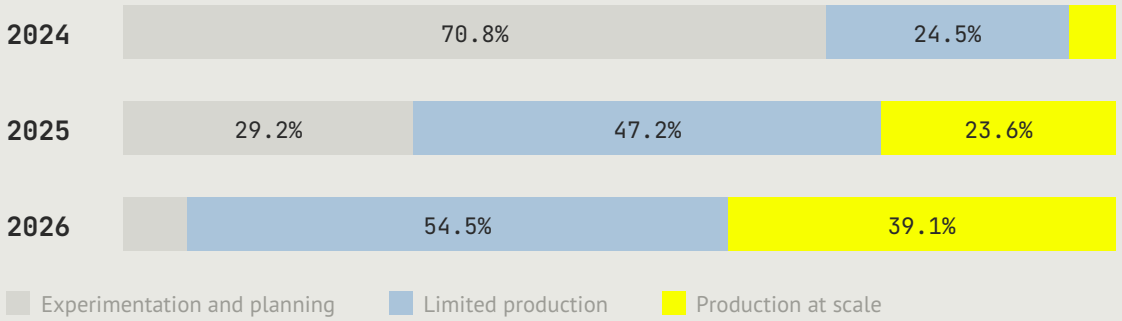


IBM's CEO panel reports 76% of organizations now have a CAIO, up from 26% in 1 year. The Data & AI Leadership Exchange, polling the most senior data and AI executives at Fortune 1000 firms, puts it at 38.5%, with 51.8% saying a CAIO should be appointed. Not every company needs a dedicated AI executive: businesses with limited AI needs may get by with a CTO or technology leader.

From pilots to production

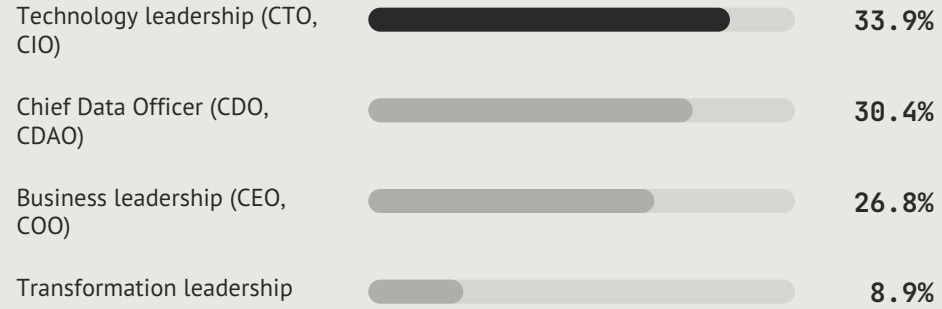
Among Fortune 1000 data and AI leaders, the share with AI in production at scale went from 4.7% to 39.1% in 2 years. The companies that made the jump did so with clearer ownership: IBM found that organizations with AI-first leadership structures scaled 10% more AI initiatives than peers.

State of AI implementation, 2024 to 2026



Source: Data & AI Leadership Exchange, 2026 AI & Data Leadership Executive Benchmark Survey (Randy Bean; about 110 Fortune 1000 and global firms).

Where Chief AI Officers report, 2026



No consensus yet. AI leadership reports in similar proportions into technology, data and business leadership. The same survey found 93.2% of firms name culture and change management, not technology, as the greatest impediment to AI adoption, which is why business fluency carries weight in the scorecard on page 19.

The takeaway

93.2% of firms name culture and change management, not technology, as the greatest impediment to AI adoption.

Head of AI vs CAIO vs CTO

These positions overlap, but they generally serve different purposes. A Chief AI Officer often focuses on how AI affects the entire company; a Head of AI oversees hands-on development and implementation; a CTO owns the broader technology strategy, which may include AI alongside software engineering, infrastructure and security.

Role	Primary responsibility	Scope	Typical reporting structure
Head of AI	Leads AI development, teams and execution	Hands-on development and implementation	CTO, CAIO or CEO
Chief AI Officer (CAIO)	Oversees enterprise-wide AI strategy, governance and investment	How AI affects the entire company	CEO or another C-suite executive
Chief Technology Officer (CTO)	Leads broader technology strategy, architecture and engineering	AI alongside software engineering, infrastructure and security	CEO
VP of AI	Leads a defined AI function or technical organization	1 function or technical organization	CTO, CAIO or CEO

Choosing between them

Head of AI

AI is being built and shipped, and the work needs an owner close to the engineering.

Chief AI Officer

AI touches every function; the open questions are governance, investment and enterprise priorities.

CTO or VP of AI

AI is one part of a wider technology agenda, or the scope is a single defined function.

Who reports to whom

	CEO	CTO	CAIO
Head of AI	●	●	●
CAIO	●	·	·
CTO	●	·	·
VP of AI	●	●	●

For broader technology leadership needs, see Christian & Timbers' guide to hiring a CTO.

Qualifications that matter

Strong Head of AI candidates have technical knowledge, AI deployment experience, deep business knowledge and executive leadership experience. 5 capabilities to screen for.

01 Technical expertise

Machine learning, generative AI, LLMs, data infrastructure and how to evaluate models. Candidates need to distinguish when to build a custom AI solution internally and when to use existing technology.

02 Experience deploying AI systems

Operating an AI system at scale is a lot different from developing a prototype. Candidates who have transitioned AI projects into production, monitored performance and adapted to improve results over time are strong choices.

03 Business and financial judgment

A Head of AI needs to understand how technology supports the business. Important skills include estimating implementation costs, evaluating AI opportunities, and explaining to the C-suite and board how projects support revenue, efficiency and other measurable results.

04 Leadership experience

The executive must work across both technical and nontechnical teams and manage competing priorities. They also need to communicate complex decisions to boards and C-suite members.

05 Security and responsible AI

Candidates should understand privacy, cybersecurity, reliability and the risks associated with deploying AI. The NIST AI Risk Management Framework is a useful reference for identifying and managing these risks.

A note from the search desk

Familiarity with AI tools is usually less relevant than delivering results. Ask every candidate what they built, how it performed and what business impact it had. The interview questions on page 18 are built around that test.

The takeaway

Candidates who moved AI from prototype to production, and can explain the business impact, outrank candidates who know more tools.

Compensation

What a Head of AI earns in 2026, by company size, region and percentile, with an explorer built on Christian & Timbers' closed-offer data.

- Compensation in 2026
- Pay by company size
- Compensation explorer

Compensation in 2026

Company size, location, experience, technical responsibilities and equity opportunities all influence Head of AI compensation.

$335,000

Median Head of AI salary, 2026

According to JC Christian, President at Christian & Timbers, Head of AI positions have a median salary of $335,000. Compensation packages often add performance bonuses, stock options, restricted stock units or other long-term incentives on top of base.

Benchmark against responsibilities, not titles

Job responsibilities for the same title vary company to company, so compare offers against positions with a similar mandate, team and budget rather than relying on the job title alone.

Senior AI executive pay, Burtch Works 2026

Compensation metric	Reported figure
Median base salary	$300,000
Median total cash compensation	$400,000
Executives receiving equity	67%
Median equity grant at hire, among those with equity	$210,000
Said AI expanded their responsibilities in the prior 12 months	91%

243 VP-level and higher data and AI executives surveyed, about 82% US-based. Sample includes CDOs, CDAOs, CAIOs, VPs and other senior data and AI executives, not exclusively Heads of AI.

Why AI talent commands higher compensation

PwC's 2025 AI Jobs Barometer found that workers with AI skills commanded an average **56%** wage premium in 2024, up from 25% the previous year. That premium applies to AI-skilled workers broadly, not specifically to executive positions.

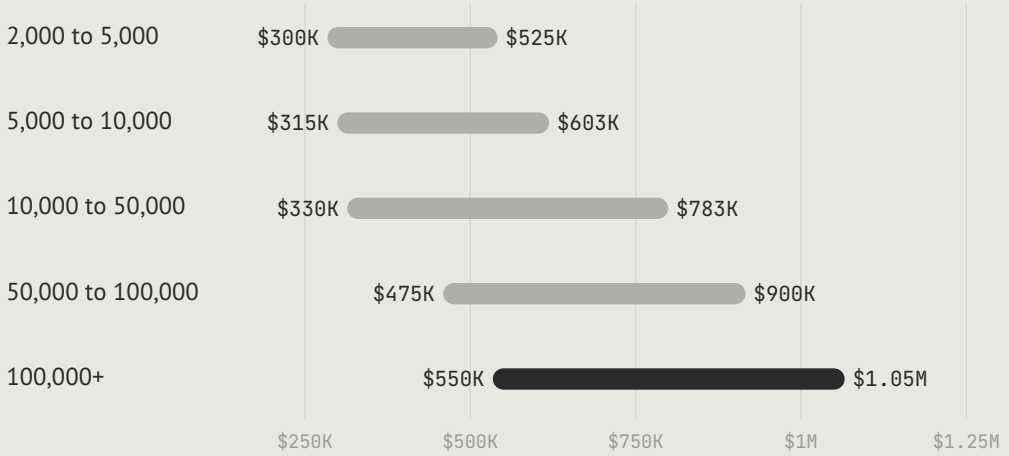
The takeaway

Benchmark the offer against the mandate, the team and the budget. The same title pays very differently from one company to the next.

Pay by company size

Christian & Timbers' 2026 Corporate AI Compensation Study, drawn from closed offers between Q3 2025 and Q1 2026, shows Head of AI base salary scaling steeply with company size. Bonus targets stay at 30 to 100% across tiers; equity is where the spread opens.

VP AI Engineering / Head of AI, base salary by employees



US public companies. Equity, annualized, runs $350K to $2M at the smallest tier and $1M to $6M at 100,000+. The 2027 forecast for the role is +5 to 7% base growth.

AI leadership roles by company size

Employees	2K-5K	5K-10K	10K-50K	50K-100K	100K+
Chief AI Officer	500-750	525-862	551-1120	650-1250	800-1500
SVP AI	450-650	472-747	495-971	600-1100	700-1300
VP AI / Head of AI	300-525	315-603	330-783	475-900	550-1050
Director AI Engineering	275-475	288-546	302-709	400-825	450-925
Director AI Governance	250-500	262-575	275-747	360-725	415-815

Base salary in $ thousands. US public companies. Source: Christian & Timbers, 2026 Corporate AI Compensation Study.

Outside the public-company set

Mid-market and private companies price below these bands, and fractional arrangements are common at the small end. Recruiters report Head of AI base salaries of $325K to $425K+ in mid-market engagements in 2026.

The takeaway

Base roughly doubles from the smallest tier to the largest. Equity roughly triples. Bonus targets barely move.

Compensation explorer

Choose a company size and a role. The fields update with the 2026 base salary, bonus and annualized equity ranges from the Christian & Timbers study. Live calculation needs Adobe Acrobat or Acrobat Reader.

Company size, employees

2,000 - 5,000

Role

VP AI Engineering / Head of AI

Base salary

$300K - $525K

Target bonus

30 - 100%

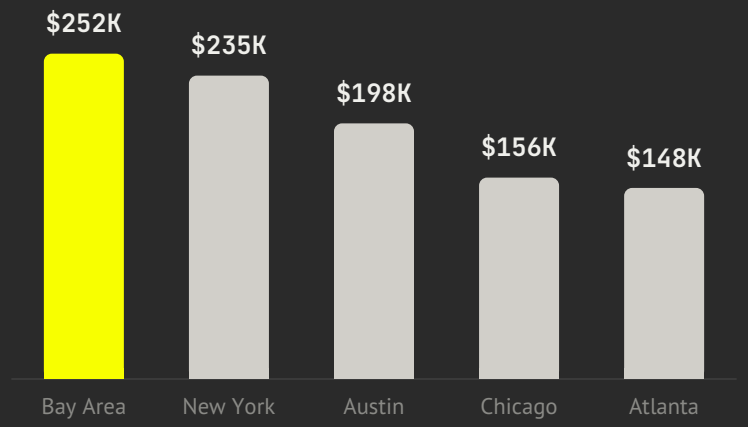
Equity, annualized

$350K - $2M

Reading

Head of AI base scales about 1.8x from the smallest to the largest public-company tier; equity scale

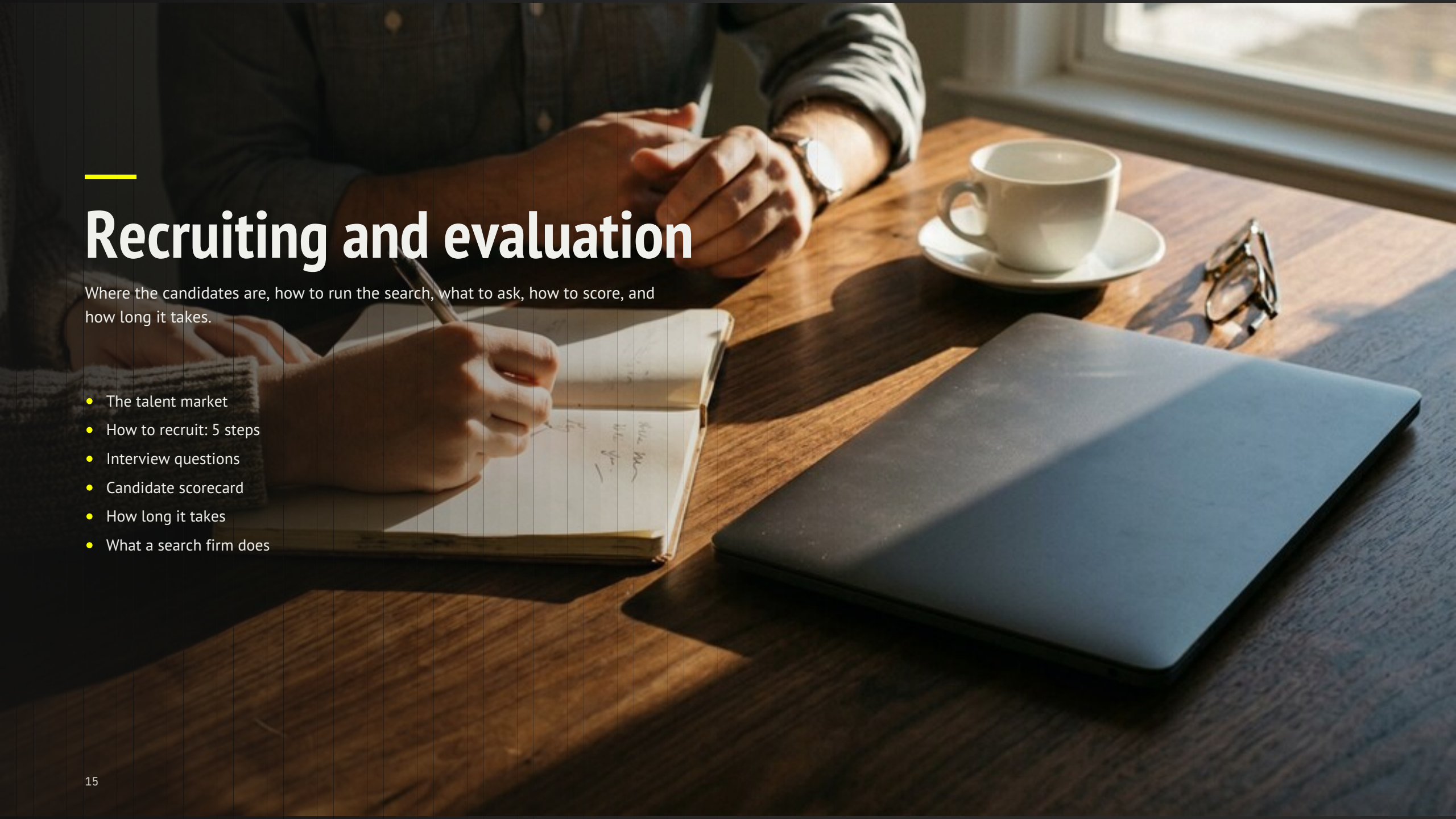
Location still moves the number



Senior AI engineer base pay by metro, Glassdoor Q1 2026. The Bay Area figure is up 14% on 2024. At the executive level the gap persists: Comparably puts the average Chief AI Officer in San Jose at $512K total compensation against national averages of $176K to $352K.

The takeaway

Set the band from company size first, then adjust for location. Doing it the other way round overprices most searches.



Recruiting and evaluation

Where the candidates are, how to run the search, what to ask, how to score, and how long it takes.

- The talent market
- How to recruit: 5 steps
- Interview questions
- Candidate scorecard
- How long it takes
- What a search firm does

The talent market

The strongest Head of AI candidate may not currently have the title Head of AI. The market is growing fast, the pool is narrow and the search has to look sideways.

Where candidates come from

- VP of Machine Learning
- Director of AI Engineering
- Head of Applied AI
- VP of Artificial Intelligence
- AI Research Director
- CTO at an AI-focused company

Relevant experience could come from a variety of places, so keep your options open. The right leader might come from an AI startup, a software business, a research organization, or a company implementing AI within your specific industry.

AI job postings on LinkedIn

+156%

growth from 2024 to 2025, after +14% the year before. Ravio counts AI/ML hiring up 88% in 2025, with distinct AI/ML job titles up 50%.

Women as a share of new hires, 2025

Head of AI hires	20%
Director of AI hires	26%
Technical staff hires	18%
All AI hires	26%
Non-AI hires	50%

Consider the full talent pool

AI leadership recruitment presents representation challenges. LinkedIn research found that women accounted for just 20% of Head of AI hires, reported by Fortune in 2026. Companies can broaden their Head of AI executive searches by considering candidates with comparable responsibilities who may be under different titles, and by ensuring that their evaluation criteria focus on relevant skills and experience.

Sources: LinkedIn Economic Graph research reported by CNBC and Fortune, August to September 2026; Ravio 2026 Compensation Trends Report.

How to recruit: 5 steps

An effective Head of AI executive search begins with identifying the challenges the business is facing currently and predicting what is going to come ahead that the Head of AI will need to solve.

01

Define the role

Determine whether the executive needs to focus on building AI products, implementing AI internally, developing a technical organization, or coordinating enterprise-wide initiatives. Establish first-year goals, budget, team size and reporting structure.

02

Identify relevant talent

Look for executives who have already developed or deployed AI systems similar to those your company needs. Keep your options open on where that experience comes from.

03

Assess measurable results

Ask candidates what process or AI they built, how it performed and what business impact it achieved. Familiarity with AI tools is usually less relevant than delivering results.

04

Evaluate leadership and judgment

A Head of AI makes key decisions as technology, costs and business requirements change. Evaluate how candidates prioritize projects, handle setbacks and communicate with other executives, including C-suite, board members and investors.

05

Conduct references

Whenever possible, speak with former colleagues who can assess the candidate's technical judgment, leadership style and ability to deliver results.

Agree on the criteria before the first interview

Companies can improve their hiring process by agreeing on candidate requirements and evaluation criteria before beginning interviews. Use the interview set on page 18 and the weighted scorecard on page 19 as the shared yardstick across the panel.

3 places searches go wrong

Screening for tool familiarity instead of delivered results. Matching on the title rather than the mandate. Letting each interviewer apply a different standard, so the strongest candidate loses to the most familiar one.

How long each step takes: the 7-stage plan on page 20 →

Interview questions

A strong Head of AI interview process should assess the candidate's technical expertise, business judgment, leadership and experience delivering results. Tick each question as you cover it and keep notes in the field.

	Interview question	What to evaluate	Notes
☐	**Tell us about an AI system you deployed. What results did it produce?**	Production experience and measurable outcomes	
☐	**How do you decide whether to build or buy an AI solution?**	Technical and financial judgment	
☐	**How would you identify our highest-value AI opportunities?**	Business strategy	
☐	**Describe an AI project that failed. What did you learn?**	Accountability and problem-solving	
☐	**How do you measure AI return on investment?**	Financial understanding	
☐	**How would you build an AI team from the ground up?**	Leadership and hiring ability	
☐	**How do you manage AI security and reliability?**	Risk management	
☐	**What would you prioritize in your first 90 days?**	Strategic planning and execution	

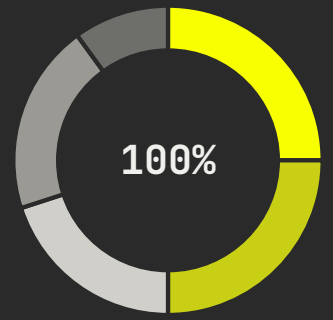
Ask Head of AI candidates to provide specific examples that demonstrate their previous contributions and successes at a company. For senior executive positions, consider a practical case study based on an actual business challenge.

Candidate scorecard

A structured interview scorecard helps companies assess candidates using consistent criteria. Score candidates from 1 to 5 in each category and the weighted total calculates automatically (max 5.00). The weighting should reflect the company's specific needs.

Criterion	Weight %	Candidate A	Candidate B	Candidate C
	names			
Technical AI expertise	25			
Proven AI deployment experience	25			
Business strategy and ROI	20			
Leadership and team building	20			
Security and AI governance	10			
Weighted total	100	0.00	0.00	0.00

Suggested weights



- Technical AI expertise 25%
- Proven AI deployment experience 25%
- Business strategy and ROI 20%
- Leadership and team building 20%
- Security and AI governance 10%

Weighted total = sum of (score × weight) ÷ 100. For example, an AI startup might emphasize technical expertise, while an established enterprise may prioritize organizational leadership and business transformation experience.

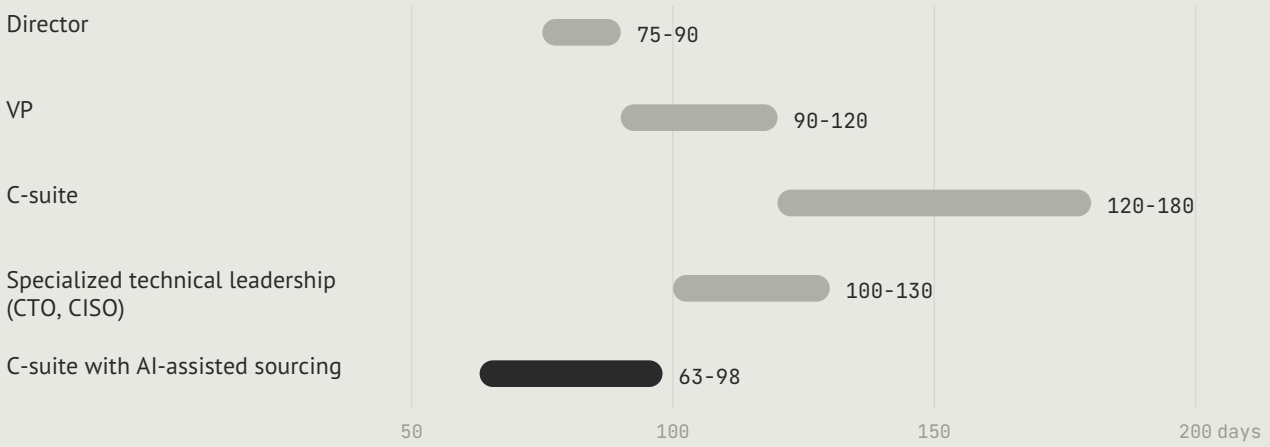
The takeaway

Agree the weights before the first interview. A scorecard filled in afterwards just ratifies the decision the panel already made.

How long it takes

There is no universal timeline for a Head of AI executive search. The process depends on the level of specialization required, candidate availability, compensation, location and the company's hiring requirements.

Executive time-to-fill benchmarks, 2026



Industry benchmarks compiled from Talentfoot, Richmond Group, Corporate Navigators and KORE1 (2026); Christian & Timbers, 11 Executive Search and Talent Acquisition Trends Shaping 2026. AI leadership markets run longer than the general C-suite average.

7 stages of a Head of AI search

- Role research and definition — Weeks 1 to 2
- Talent mapping — Weeks 2 to 4
- Candidate outreach — Weeks 3 to 6
- Interviews — Weeks 6 to 10
- Technical evaluation — Weeks 8 to 11
- Reference checks — Weeks 10 to 12
- Offer negotiation — Weeks 11 to 14

Illustrative plan for a 14-week search; stages overlap. Agreeing on candidate requirements and evaluation criteria before interviews begin is the single biggest accelerator.

The takeaway

Budget 90 to 180 days. The clock usually starts later than the kickoff meeting suggests.

What a search firm does

A Head of AI executive search firm identifies, evaluates and recruits senior AI leaders. Services commonly include:

01 Define

Executive responsibilities and candidate requirements

02 Map

Researching the market and identifying potential candidates

03 Engage

Engaging experienced AI executives, most of whom are not looking

04 Evaluate

Evaluating technical expertise and leadership capabilities

05 Benchmark

Providing compensation benchmarks from closed offers, not job postings

06 Close

Conducting references and supporting offer negotiations

How to choose one

When selecting an executive search firm for Head of AI, companies should evaluate its experience with recruiting senior technology executives, its approach to assessing AI expertise, and its ability to identify candidates with relevant business experience. Ask to see closed searches in your sector, who on the team has operated inside an AI company, and how the firm benchmarks compensation.

Christian & Timbers

40+ years in retained executive search for AI and technology, with more than 5,000 executive placements.
hello@christian-timbers.com, +1 415-622-3193.

The takeaway

Ask any firm for closed searches in your sector and the compensation data behind them.

Frequently asked questions

Does every company need a Head of AI?

No. A dedicated Head of AI is most useful when AI plays a significant role in products, operations or business strategy. Smaller initiatives may be managed by an existing technology leader.

Who should the Head of AI report to?

A Head of AI commonly reports to the CTO, Chief AI Officer or CEO. The best structure depends on the role's responsibilities. Among Fortune 1000 firms with a CAIO, reporting lines split almost evenly between technology, data and business leadership.

Should a Head of AI have a PhD?

Not necessarily. A PhD may be valuable for companies conducting advanced AI research. For organizations focused on implementing existing AI technology, production experience and leadership skills may be more important.

How much does a Head of AI earn?

JC Christian, President at Christian & Timbers, puts the 2026 median Head of AI salary at $335,000. Actual compensation varies by company size, responsibilities, location and equity. At US public companies, base salary for the role runs $300K to $525K at 2,000 to 5,000 employees and $550K to $1.05M at 100,000+, before bonus and equity.

How much does it cost to recruit a Head of AI?

Recruiting costs depend on compensation, search firm fees, the position's complexity and the time required to hire. Companies should also consider the potential cost of leaving a critical leadership role unfilled.

How long does the search take?

Structured VP-level searches run 90 to 120 days and C-suite searches 120 to 180. AI leadership markets run longer than average, and AI-assisted sourcing is compressing timelines at the firms that use it.

The takeaway

Define the mandate, set the band from company size, and agree the scorecard. The search gets easier after that.

Hiring the right Head of AI

Finding the right Head of AI starts with understanding what the company needs to accomplish. Technical expertise is important, but strong AI executives also know how to build teams, prioritize investments, manage risk and deliver measurable business results.

Before the search starts: 6 things to settle

- [ ] The mandate: build AI products, implement internally, build the organization, or coordinate enterprise-wide
- [ ] First-year goals and the metrics that prove them
- [ ] Budget, team size and hiring plan for the first 12 months
- [ ] Reporting line (CEO, CTO or CAIO) and decision rights
- [ ] Compensation band benchmarked to responsibilities, not title
- [ ] Evaluation criteria and scorecard weights agreed by every interviewer

0 of 6 settled

About the author

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JC began his career as a software engineer at Amazon Web Services and Uber and has founded 2 startups. At Christian & Timbers he leads executive searches across AI and emerging technology for venture-backed startups, enterprise technology organizations and investors, helping clients define the leadership profile they need and identify executives who can move the business forward.

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Statistics are quoted as reported by each source at the time of writing, November 2026. Compensation figures are market benchmarks, not offer targets.

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