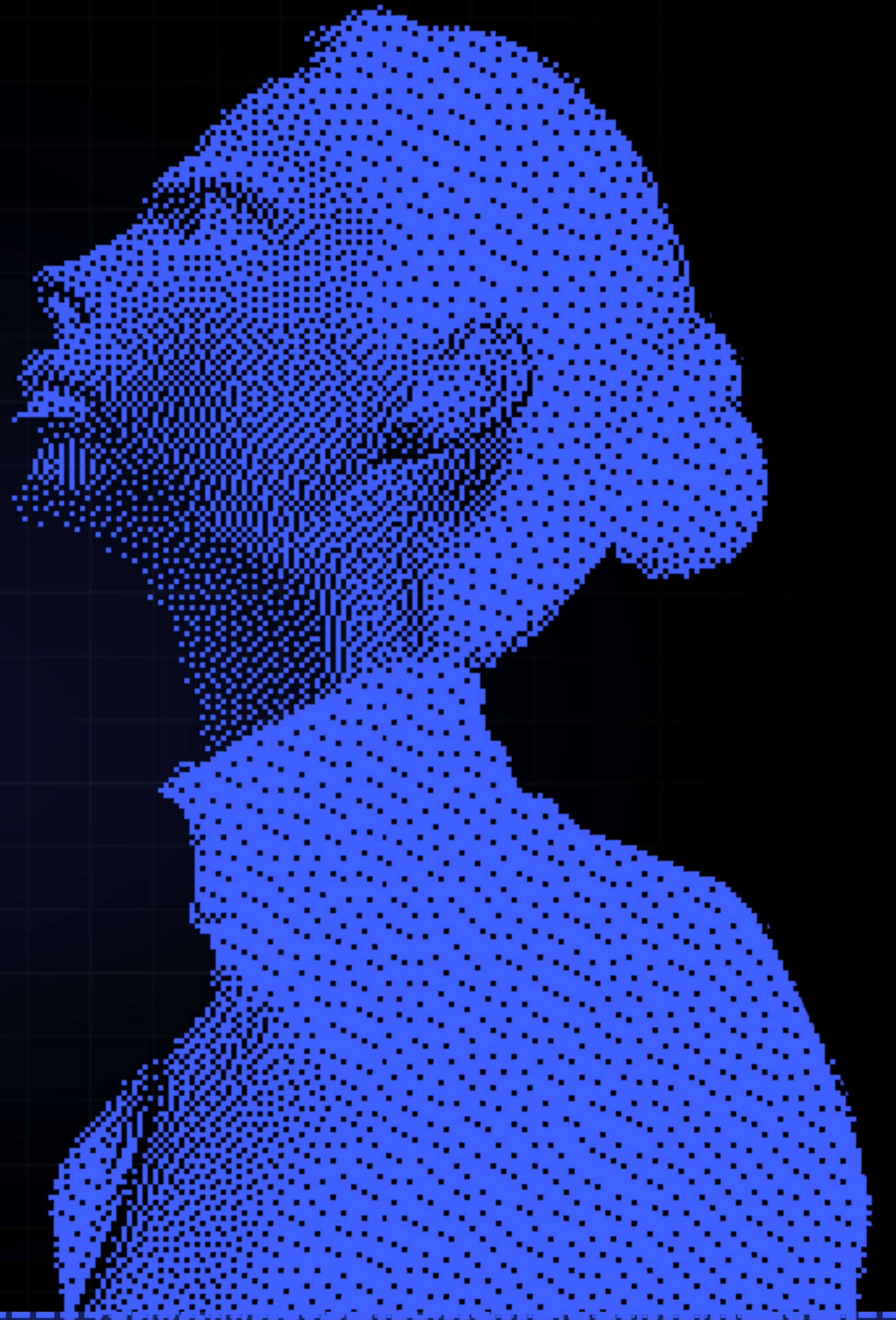




Helping
humans hire and
build the AI era



[HUMANAI.AU](https://humanai.au) →

INTRODUCTION

Welcome

Welcome to the first human market & insights report. We are excited to be building a boutique focused on the AI hiring ecosystem and AI services space.

About human...

human is an AI talent and services business built for companies that want to move forward with clarity and execution.

We operate across two distinct practices. Everything we build, whether it is a team or a system, is designed to create real, lasting impact.

Talent services

human is a completely AI-native recruitment business, built from the ground up. Every part of our workflow from CRM to sourcing to outreach, is powered by custom-built systems and agents. We remove the noise and creates one advantage that matters time.

Time spent on the human side of hiring. Judgement. Taste. Positioning. Conversations that offer real value. Our approach to attracting talent is content-led. We build narratives around companies that resonate with high quality, passive talent.

AI services

We help companies implement practical AI inside their business. This is not theory-led consulting and it is not engineers talking about tools for the sake of it. You are working with a business who understands where time gets lost and where leverage actually exists.

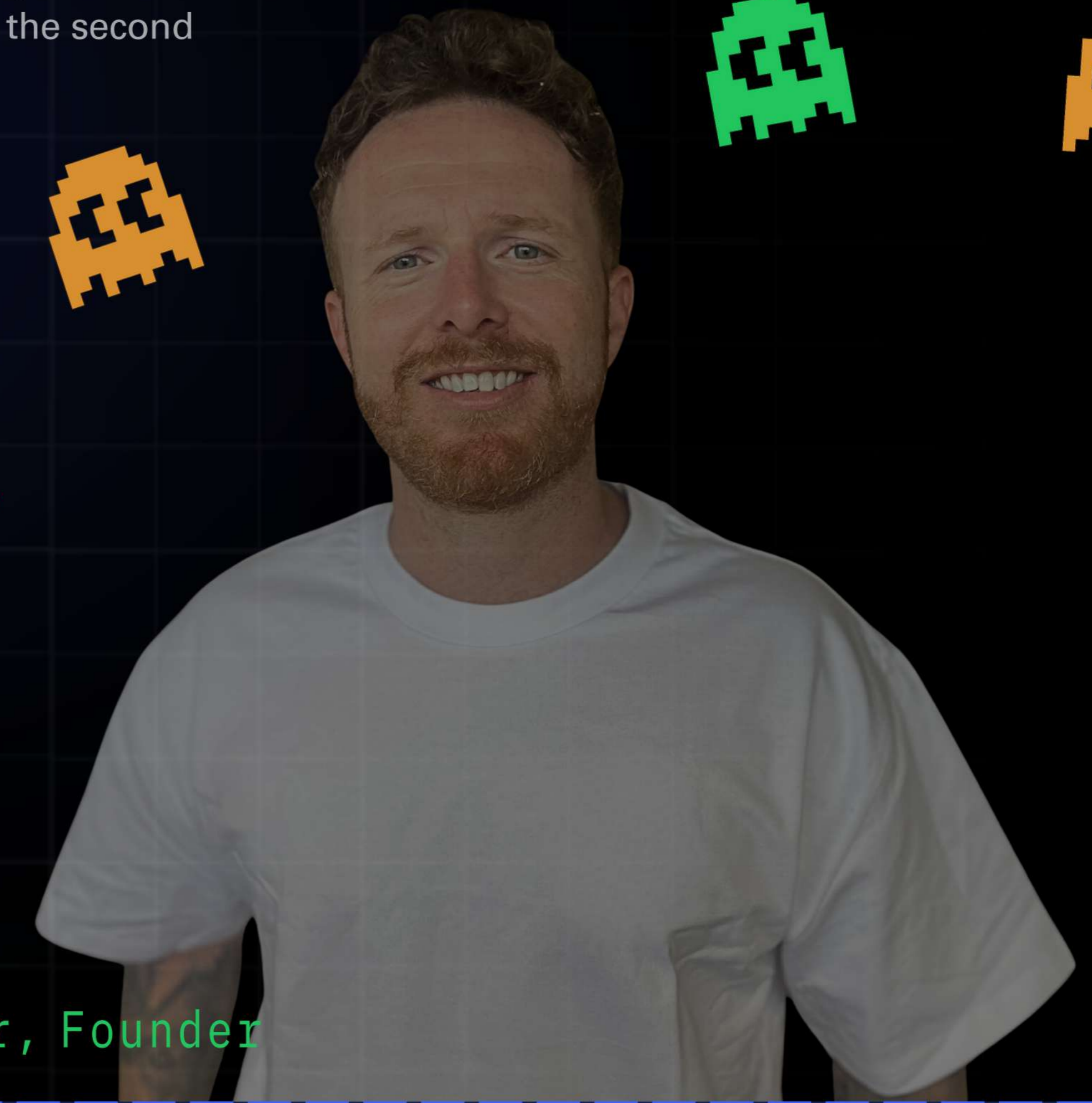
We design and deploy AI workflows, LLM-powered tools, and agent-driven systems that remove low-value work and create real efficiency across sales, operations, product, and growth. Everything we build is grounded in real use inside a live business environment.

Across both practices, the goal is simple. Let AI handle the noise. So people can focus on the work that adds true value.

With a trusted network across Australia, New Zealand, and the USA, human supports startups, scaleups, and established companies treating AI as a real capability for efficiency and productivity.

This is our first Market & Insights Report. It reflects what we are seeing on the ground across hiring conversations, client partnerships, and the broader landscape.

We hope it gives you a clear, honest, and useful view of where things stand heading into the second half of 2026.



~Joe Butler, Founder

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Introducing

human IQ

AI powered market intelligence for companies building modern teams.

human IQ gives you direct access to real time intelligence across salaries, hiring trends, talent strategy, role design, and the rapidly evolving technology market.

Built by human, trained on thousands of proprietary market data points, and designed specifically for companies building in the AI era.



Ask better questions. Get better answers.

Instant insights across compensation benchmarking, hiring strategy, role design, talent availability, and changing market conditions.



Powered by real market intelligence.

Built on years of proprietary salary data, live hiring signals, and deep insight into how the technology market is evolving in real time.



Continuously learning. Always current.

Continuously learning from live market changes and hiring trends.



Building Australia's best AI teams since 2026

Ask anything about Australian tech salaries...

AI · Product Engineering · Data



What does a Senior AI Engineer earn in Australia?

Salary range for a Product Engineer with AI experience?

What's the going rate for a Senior ML Engineer?

How much does an AI Infrastructure / Platform Engineer earn?

LLM Integration Engineer salary — perm vs contract?

What do Prompt Engineers earn in 2026?

Senior Data Scientist salary in Sydney or Melbourne?

Data Engineer with AI/ML experience — what's the rate?

GenAI Engineer salary expectations in Australia?

What should I pay an AI Platform Specialist?

MLOps Engineer salary range?

How much does a Senior Data Engineer earn?

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The Economy of Two Speeds

Where to start? It feels like an economy moving at two different speeds.

We finished 2025 seeing signs of recovery. The second half of the year was busy. Confidence had started to return off the back of multiple interest rate cuts, local funding rounds, and a general thaw in pent up demand from companies that wanted to move but had been constrained by budget pressure. We expected 2026 to be the real recovery year following the 2023 to 2025 slowdown.

Then came the plot twist. Inflation ticked back up. Interest rates followed. The conflict in the Middle East created an energy shock the market had not seen in decades. As a result, consumer confidence is low and business confidence remains cautious.

In these conditions, leadership attention naturally shifts toward efficiency, productivity, and output. Doing more with less has been a recurring theme since 2023. But now, AI is accelerating the shift.

AI moves from theory to **practice**

The AI space is growing at light speed. 2023, 2024, and even much of 2025 felt like the theory phase. 2026 is where it starts becoming practice.

Companies are either internally building with AI to drive efficiency and productivity, or externally building AI products for customers. The pace of change in the space is extreme.

"Using ChatGPT does not mean a company is AI enabled."

The real shift is happening through strategic implementation. AI agents with humans in the loop. AI workflows. Custom LLMs trained on company specific data, systems, and content. It is an incredibly exciting time to be in technology.

In many ways, it feels similar to what the dot com era must have felt like during its early stages.

AI is not replacing great people

"AI is coming for your job." We hear this constantly. Watch one doomsday reel on Instagram and your feed is suddenly filled with them.

At human, we do not believe this is how the medium term plays out. From speaking with local founders, engineering leaders, and operators, along with following some of the top global voices in the space, we believe AI is far more likely to amplify strong people than replace them outright.

The rise of the orchestrator

The engineers creating the most value are increasingly the ones focused on orchestration, taste, systems thinking, and the utilisation of multiple agents working in sync toward a specific goal.

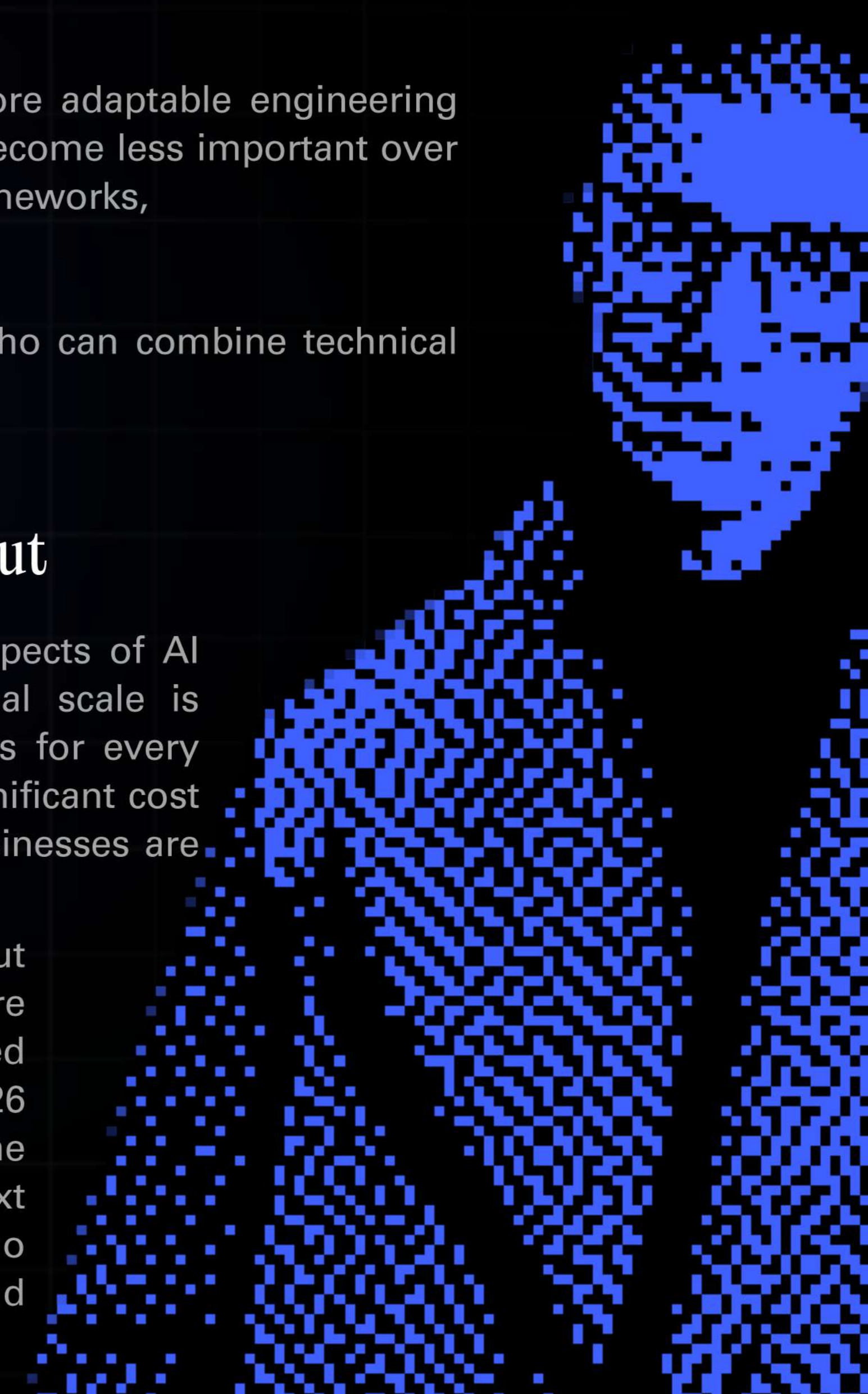
We also believe the industry is moving toward more adaptable engineering profiles. The highly specialised silo approach may become less important over time as AI lowers the barrier between languages, frameworks, and execution.

The engineers who thrive will likely be the ones who can combine technical depth with product thinking, communication, taste, judgement, and leverage.

The **tokenomics** nobody is talking about

Tokenomics remains one of the least discussed aspects of AI and one of the most important. Using AI at real scale is expensive, and costs are rising. Unrestricted access for every employee is not the future. These systems carry significant cost exposure and governance complexity that most businesses are only beginning to grasp.

Companies will need to be far more deliberate about who accesses advanced AI capability. Some are already burning through budgets faster than expected including Microsoft and Uber with their 2026 Anthropic spend. The productivity uplift is real, but the broad experimental phase is ending. What comes next requires strategy, discipline, and people who genuinely understand the systems, models, and commercial trade-offs at play.



TALENT DYNAMICS

The talent market itself remains highly fragmented. Outside of AI fluent roles, many traditional technology hiring markets are still subdued compared to the pre COVID norm. Companies are leaner, headcount approvals are slower, and hiring processes remain heavily scrutinised from a commercial perspective.

At the same time, demand inside AI related functions has accelerated rapidly.

We are seeing increasing demand for:

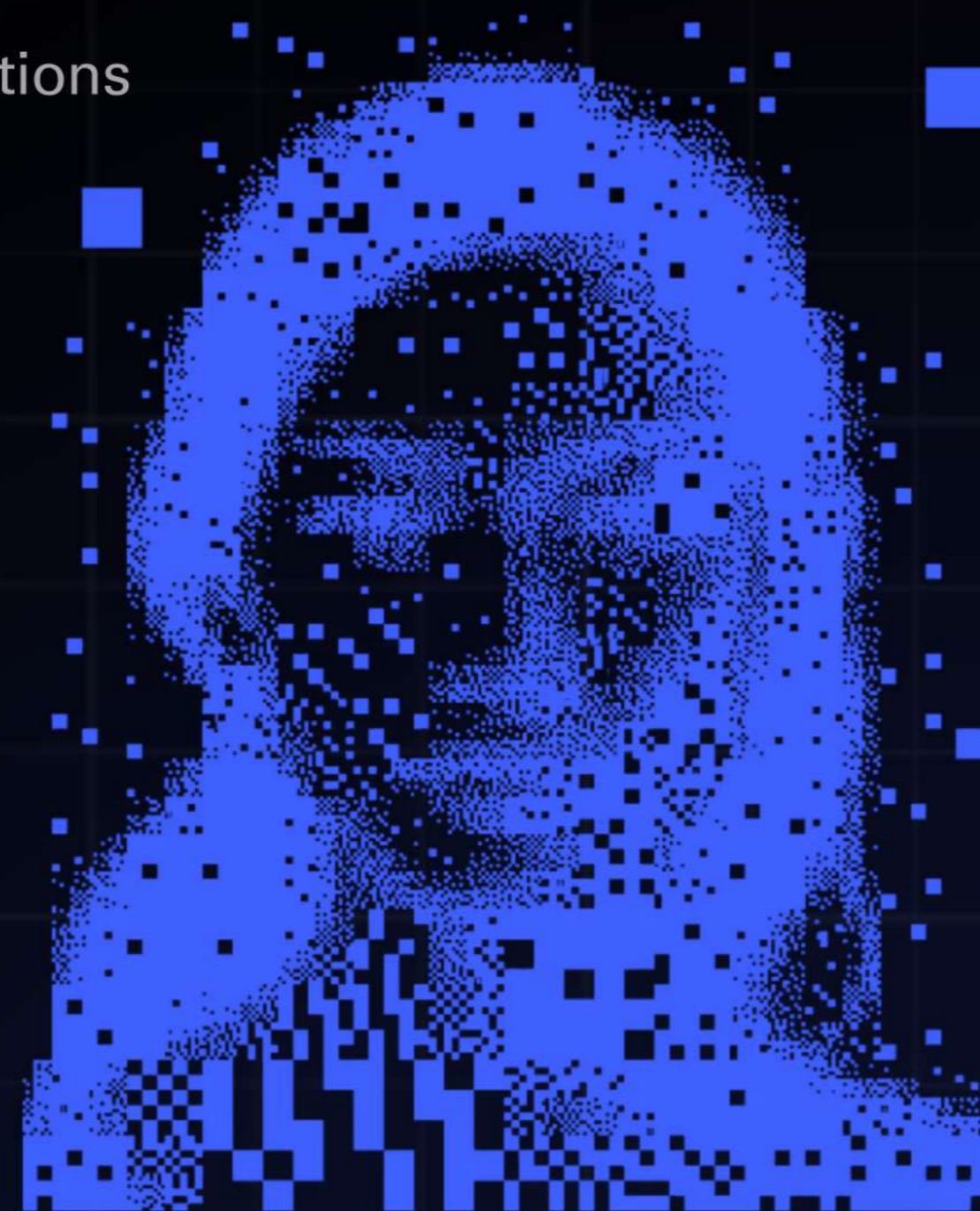
- AI Engineers
- Product Engineers with AI exposure
- Data & Machine Learning Engineers
- AI infrastructure and platform specialists
- Engineers capable of integrating LLMs and AI workflows into existing systems

Importantly, many of these companies are not necessarily looking for pure research academics.

The majority of hiring demand we are seeing locally is practical and commercially focused.

The strongest profiles in market are increasingly those who can combine strong software engineering fundamentals with product thinking, AI tooling familiarity, communication skills, and commercial awareness.

There has also been a noticeable shift toward smaller, more adaptable, high leverage teams. Rather than hiring large numbers of narrowly specialised engineers, many companies are now prioritising versatile builders who can operate across multiple layers of the stack, move quickly, and work effectively alongside AI systems. Founders are also becoming significantly more educated buyers in the hiring process



Twelve months ago, many businesses were still trying to understand what AI even meant for their organisation. Today, conversations are materially more sophisticated. Leaders are now discussing orchestration layers, agent workflows, retrieval systems, infrastructure costs, governance, model selection, and long term implementation strategy.

This is creating an interesting divide in the market.

Engineers who continue to evolve alongside the tooling are becoming dramatically more valuable.

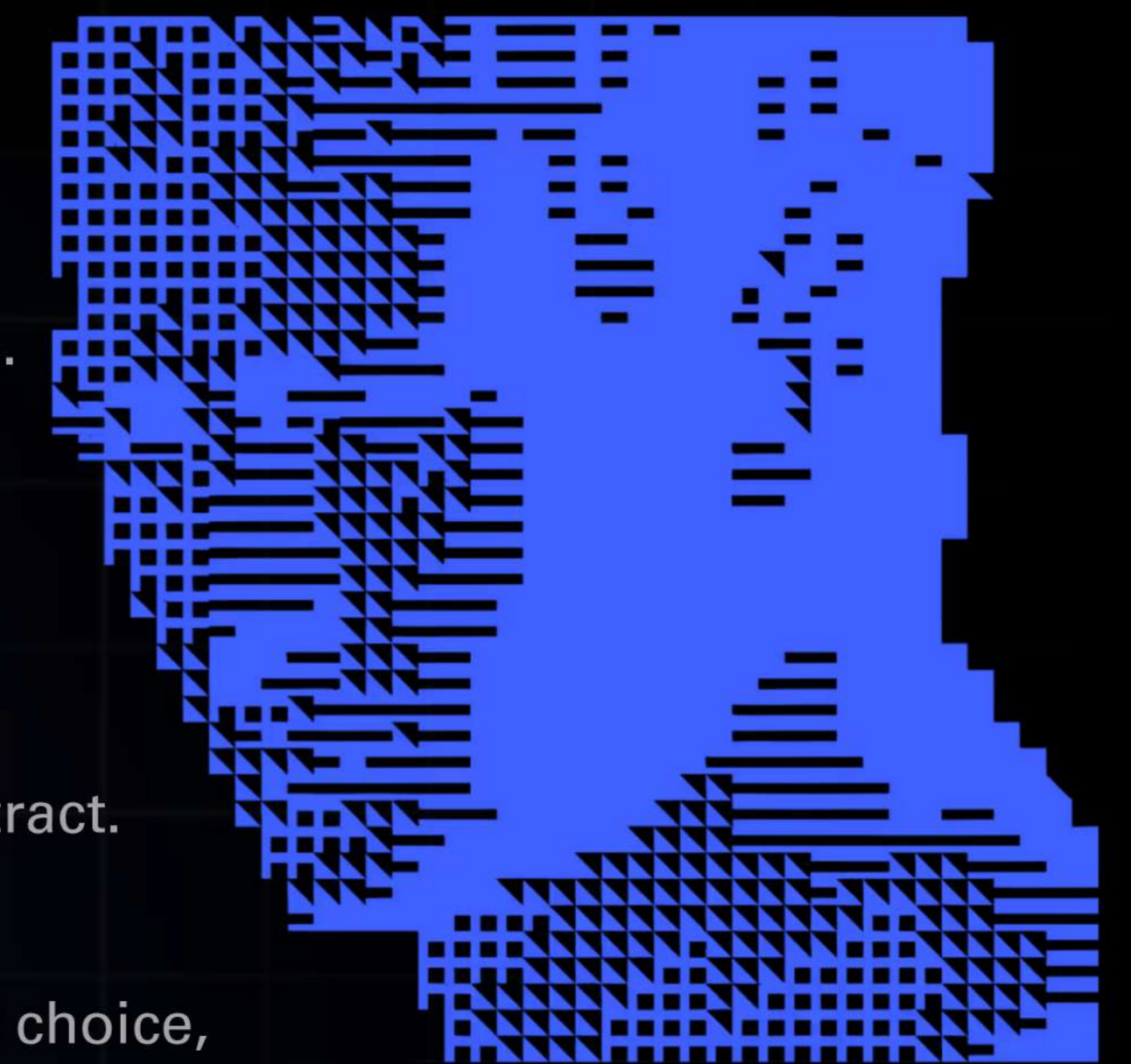
Those who resist adaptation may find the market increasingly difficult over time.

One thing that remains clear is that exceptional technical talent is still exceptionally difficult to attract.

The strongest talent in market still has significant choice, particularly those with product depth, communication ability, and proven commercial impact.

While the broader market has softened from the post COVID peak, top tier talent remains highly selective about where they go, who they work with, and what they build.

Employer brand, technical credibility, flexibility, mission alignment, and leadership quality continue to play an enormous role in successful hiring outcomes. The companies winning talent right now are generally not the loudest. They are the clearest. Clear mission. Clear technical direction. Clear leadership. Clear opportunity. In a noisy market, clarity is becoming a competitive advantage.



AI ENGINEERING

ROLE TYPE	Mid	Senior	Staff/Principal
AI Engineer contract	\$160k-\$180K \$1,050/day	\$200K-\$220K \$1,300/day	\$250K-\$270K \$1,600/day
AI Product Engineer contract	\$170K-\$190K \$1,010/day	\$210K-\$230K \$1,360/day	\$260K-\$280K \$1,660/day
AI Workflow Engineer contract	\$140K-\$160K \$950/day	\$180K-\$200K \$1,200/day	\$200K-\$220K \$1,300/day
AI Engineering Manager contract	N/A N/A	N/A N/A	\$240K-\$260K \$1,540/day

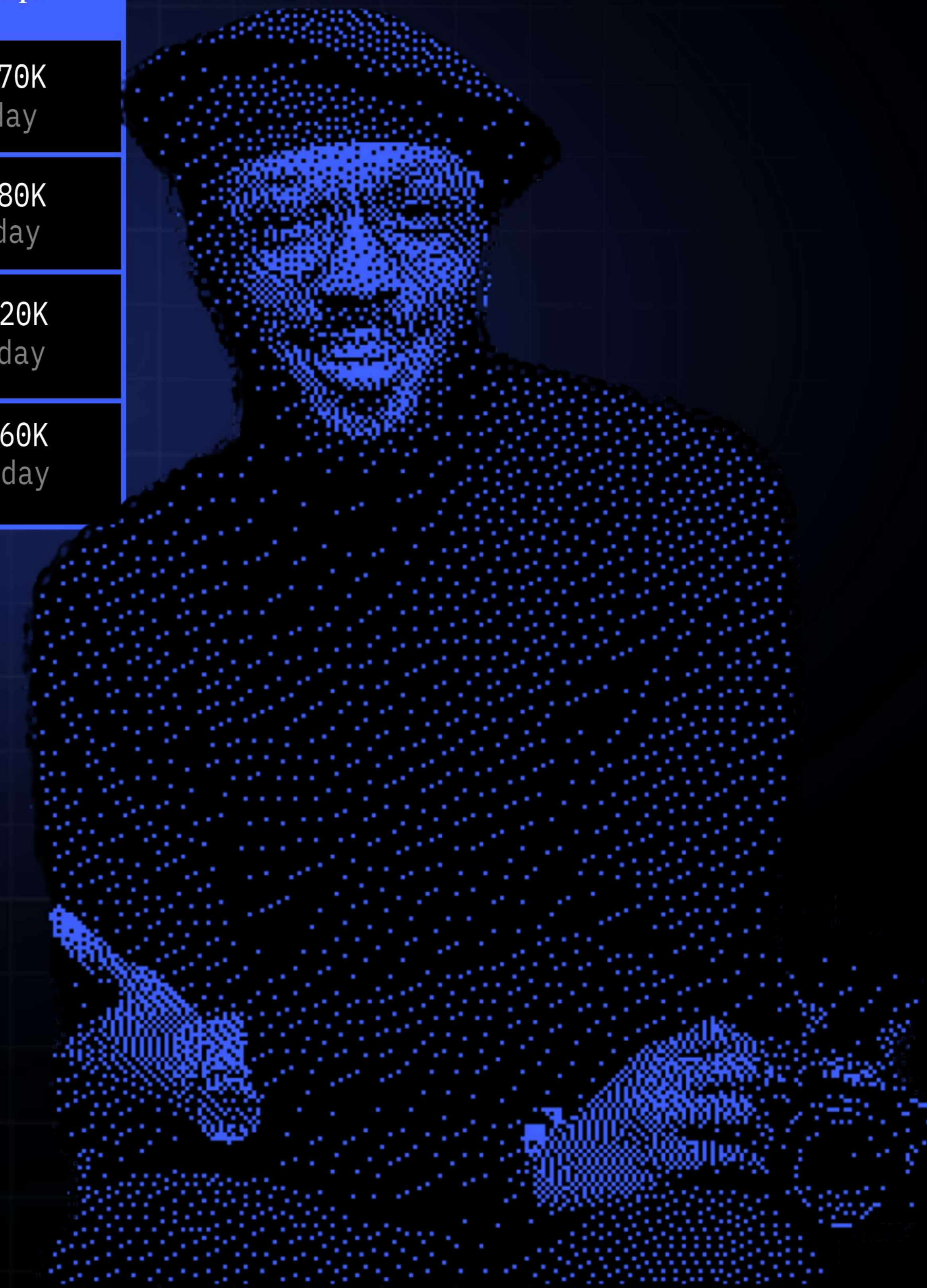
Key Technologies

OpenAI • Claude • Gemini • LangGraph • LangChain • MCP
Python • AWS • Vector Databases • RAG • Agent Frameworks



*Salaries and contract rates shown represent common market ranges. Actual compensation may vary based on company stage, scope, technical complexity, and individual experience.

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PRODUCT ENGINEERING

ROLE TYPE	MID	Senior	Staff/Principal
Product Engineer contract	\$140K-\$160K \$950/day	\$170K-\$190K \$1,130/day	\$240K-\$260K \$1,540/day
Full Stack Engineer contract	\$130K-\$150K \$890/day	\$160K-\$180K \$1,070/day	\$220K-\$240K \$1,420/day
Front End Engineer contract	\$120K-\$140K \$830/day	\$155K-\$175K \$1,010/day	\$200K-\$220K \$1,300/day
Forward Deployed Engineer contract	\$150K-\$170K \$1,010/day	\$170K-\$190K \$1,130/day	\$230K-\$250K \$1,480/day
Engineering Manager contract	N/A N/A	N/A N/A	\$250K-\$270K \$1,600/day

Key Technologies:

TypeScript • React • Next.js • Node.js • Java • Kotlin

Go • AWS • PostgreSQL • GraphQL • Docker • Kubernetes



*Salaries and contract rates shown represent common market ranges. Actual compensation may vary based on company stage, scope, technical complexity, and individual experience.

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DATA & MACHINE LEARNING

ROLE TYPE	Mid	Senior	Staff/Principal
Data Engineer contract	\$130K-\$150K \$890/day	\$170K-\$190K \$1,130/day	\$220K-\$240K \$1,420/day
Machine Learning Engineer contract	\$150K-\$170K \$1,010/day	\$200K-\$220K \$1,300/day	\$250K-\$270K \$1,600/day
Data Scientist contract	\$140K-\$160K \$950/day	\$180K-\$200K \$1,200/day	\$230K-\$250K \$1,480/day
Data Analytics Engineer contract	\$130K-\$150k N/A	\$160k-\$190k N/A	\$200K-\$220K \$1,480/day
Head of Data contract	N/A N/A	N/A N/A	\$330K-\$350K \$2,070/day

Key Technologies:

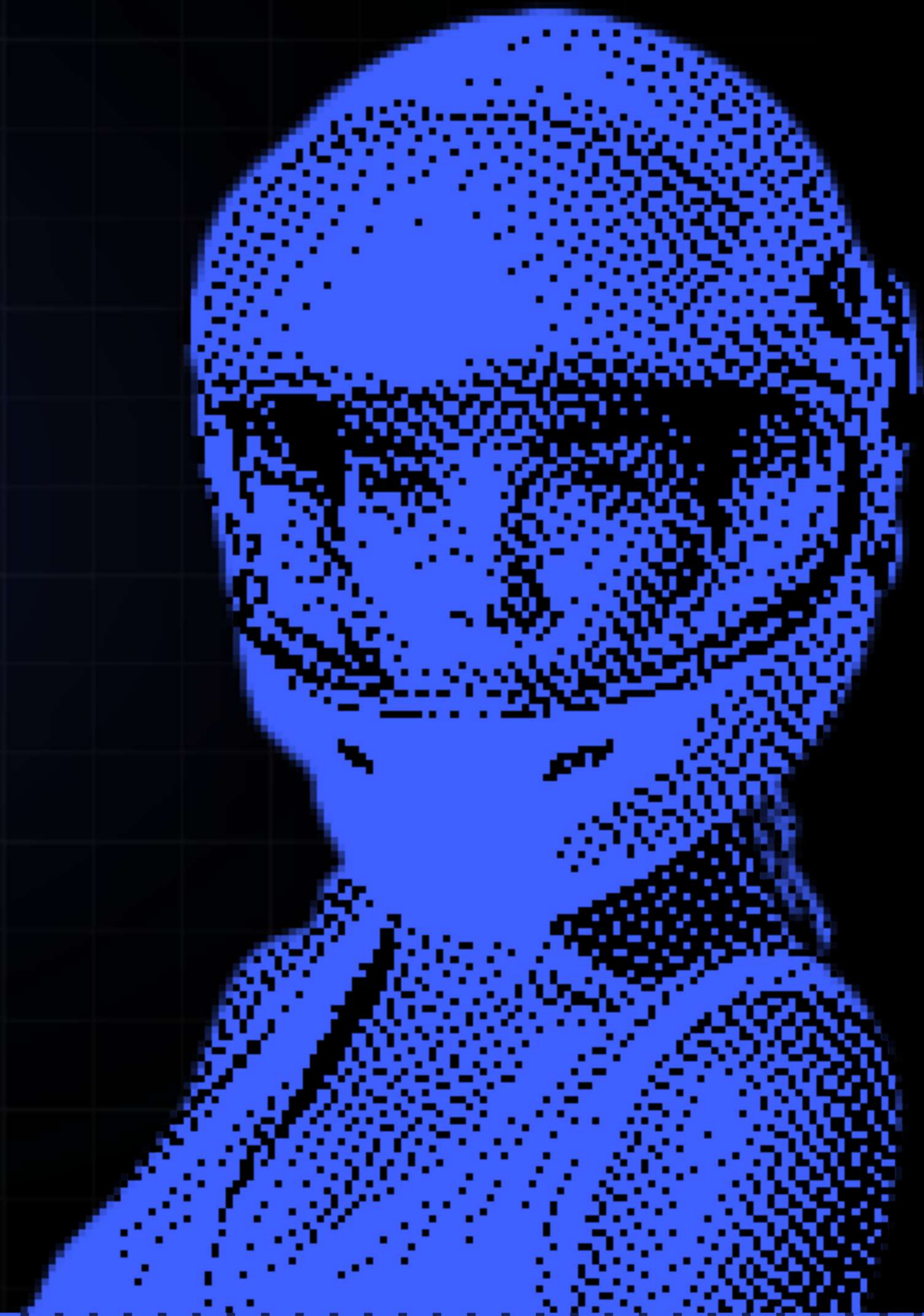
[Databricks](#) • [Snowflake](#) • [dbt](#) • [Apache Spark.js](#) • [Airflow](#)

[Python](#) • [SQL](#) • [MLflow](#) • [AWL](#) • [Azure](#) • [GCP](#)



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CONCLUSION

To wrap it up

The gap is widening. Not between companies that have AI tools and those that do not, almost everyone has the tools. The gap is between companies that have built genuine capability and those that have not. That distinction will define the next two years.

The economy is already moving at two speeds. The businesses pulling ahead are not necessarily the largest or the best funded. They are the ones that moved from experimentation to execution. The ones that stopped treating AI as a productivity add-on and started building it into the architecture of how they operate.

Talent Is Not Waiting

The talent market is reflecting this in real time. The best people are not available. They are already inside companies that are doing interesting things, solving hard problems, and giving them the environment to grow. Attracting them requires more than a competitive salary. It requires a compelling story, a credible team, and a clear sense of where the product is going.

The Cost of Scale

Tokenomics will force a level of discipline the market has not yet had to apply. The experimental phase is ending. Broad, unrestricted access to AI tooling across entire organisations will give way to something far more intentional. Budget owners are already asking harder questions about what is actually being used, by whom, and to what commercial end. The companies that understand the cost structure, the governance requirements, and the commercial trade-offs will have a significant advantage over those that do not.

The Orchestrator

The orchestrator is the role that ties all of this together. Someone who understands the models, the workflows, the data, and the business outcome — and can sit at the intersection of all four. They are not purely technical and they are not purely commercial. They are the connective tissue between what AI can do and what a business actually needs. These people are rare. They will become rarer.

Where **human** Sits

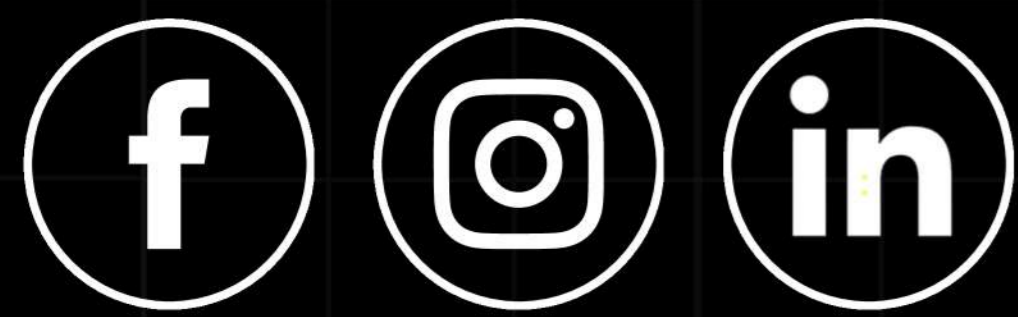
We exist at exactly this intersection. We help companies hire the people who can build real AI capability, and we help them implement the systems that deliver it. Not as separate offerings, but as a connected practice built on the same underlying belief that people and technology, applied with precision, are how meaningful progress actually gets made.

This report is a reflection of how we see the market. The patterns we observe across hiring mandates, AI implementation projects, and the conversations we have with founders, operators, and technical leaders every week. We share it because clarity is useful, and because the companies we want to work with are the ones thinking seriously about what comes next.

~Joe Butler, Founder

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