



2026

# Employment Landscape and Hiring Trends

CREATIVE - DIGITAL - MARKETING - IT

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EXPERIENCE DELIVERED



# Notes from the CEO 2026 Outlook

## A Transforming World of Work: The Talent Landscape Ahead

### NOTES FROM THE CEO — 2026 OUTLOOK

The employment landscape in 2026 is transforming faster than ever. Across the Creative, Digital, Marketing, and IT sectors, we are witnessing a powerful shift—one fueled by AI innovation, data intelligence, automation, and a renewed focus on customer experience. This next chapter demands hybrid-skilled talent who can think boldly, adapt quickly, and thrive at the intersection of technology and human creativity.

AI is no longer an emerging concept—it is becoming a true partner in how work gets done. Companies are weaving AI into workflows, product development, and strategic decision-making, unlocking possibilities that once felt out of reach. Yet even in this era of accelerated innovation, one truth remains: human insight, empathy, and problem-solving are irreplaceable.

The most sought-after professionals in 2026 are those who bring both worlds together—technical expertise paired with imagination, purpose, and a deeply human approach to solving complex challenges.

Today's workforce seeks more than a job. They seek meaning, flexibility, well-being, and an employer committed to their growth. Skills across AI, Creative, Cybersecurity, Digital, Marketing, Product, and UX/UI continue to rise in demand, shaping the future of modern organizations.

This is a year of modernization, transformation, and possibility—and we are excited to help you seize every opportunity.

— Andrew Watt, *President & CEO, ektello*



# 2026 Hiring Drivers

## What's Powering the Next Wave of Talent Demand

### AI & AUTOMATION EVERYWHERE

More than 80% of organizations plan to accelerate AI adoption across their operations. This shift is driving increased demand for AI Developers, Prompt Engineers, Data Scientists, and AI-enhanced Creative and Marketing talent. Companies now prioritize candidates who can pair AI efficiency with human judgment, innovation, and ethical oversight.

### DATA AS A CORE ASSET

Data has become the engine of modern business strategy. Organizations are expanding hiring for Data Analysts, Data Engineers, Machine Learning Specialists, and BI professionals capable of delivering real-time insights, predictive analytics, and automated reporting. As data volumes grow, companies need experts who transform complexity into actionable strategy.



## CUSTOMER EXPERIENCE TRANSFORMATION

Brands are heavily investing in Creative, Digital, Product, and UX/UI talent to elevate customer journeys across web, mobile, and emerging channels. Personalization, seamless design, accessibility, and immersive experiences—including AR/VR—are top priorities. This fuels demand for storytellers, content strategists, designers, and product thinkers who elevate engagement and deliver measurable impact.

## DIGITAL PRODUCT ACCELERATION

Organizations are launching digital products at record speed and modernizing legacy platforms. This momentum fuels demand for Product Managers, Product Designers, Digital Project Managers, and Full Stack Developers who imagine boldly, build rapidly, and deliver seamless experiences that shape the future of digital products.

## WORKFORCE MODERNIZATION & SKILLS REINVENTION

Companies are shifting from traditional job definitions to skills-based hiring.

Today's most valued professionals demonstrate:

- Multidisciplinary skill sets
- Adaptability and continuous learning
- Strong collaboration across Creative, Digital, and Technology teams

Hybrid roles—such as Hybrid Marketer-Analyst, AI-Enabled Content Creator, and Tech-Savvy Project Manager—are becoming workforce staples.



# Top Hiring Priorities for 2026

## Where Leaders Are Focusing Their Talent Strategies

### TOP HIRING PRIORITIES

- Skills-Focused Hiring: Portfolios and hands-on skills outweigh credentials.
- Leaders Who Inspire & Stabilize: Emotional intelligence and transparency define modern leadership.
- Human-Centered AI Adoption: Talent who blend AI efficiency with human creativity are in highest demand.
- Total Employee Well-Being: Flexibility, mobility paths, and wellness expectations drive retention.
- Retention as Strategy: Clear onboarding, recognition, and internal mobility are essential.



## In-Demand Skills by Discipline

### INFORMATION TECHNOLOGY

- AI Development
- DevOps Automation
- Cybersecurity Threat Modeling
- Cloud & Edge Architecture
- Data Visualization & Analytics
- Machine Learning Engineering
- Full Stack Development
- VR/AR Systems Integration

### DIGITAL

- Content Personalization
- Performance Marketing
- Video Content Creation
- Digital Storytelling
- UX/UI Product Thinking

### CREATIVE

- Motion Graphics
- 3D Animation
- Interaction Design
- Visual Systems
- AI-Enhanced Creative Production

### MARKETING

- Growth & Performance Marketing
- Customer Journey Mapping
- AI-Driven Media Buying
- Market Research & Insights

# 2026 Compensation Outlook

## Disciplines Experiencing the Strongest Growth

- AI & Machine Learning Engineering
- Data Science & Analytics
- Cybersecurity
- Product Management

## About the Year-Over-Year Compensation Analysis

### How to Read the YOY Salary Increases

The following pages highlight the roles experiencing the strongest year-over-year compensation growth across Information Technology, Creative, Digital, and Marketing. These increases reflect market demand, evolving skill requirements, and the expanding influence of AI, data, and digital product development. Salary ranges are based on national benchmarks, hiring velocity, and employer demand trends observed across 2025–2026.



# Roles Experiencing the Fastest Salary Growth in 2026



## INFORMATION TECHNOLOGY

### Highest YOY Increases

- AI Architect: 6.5%–9%
- Machine Learning Engineer: 6%–8%
- AI Developer: 5%–7%
- Data Engineer: 5%–7%
- Data Scientist: 5%–7%
- Cybersecurity Engineer: 5.5%–7.5%

### Strong, Steady Increases

- Cloud Architect: 4%–6%
- Cloud Engineer: 4%–5.5%
- DevOps Engineer: 4%–6%
- Full Stack Developer: 3.5%–5%

### Moderate Increases

- Back-End Developer: 3%–5%
- Front-End Developer: 3%–4.5%
- Data Analyst: 3%–4.5%
- Network Engineer: 2.5%–4%



## CREATIVE

### Highest YOY Increases

- 3D Animator: 4%–7%
- VR Designer: 5%–7%
- Motion Graphics: 4%–6%
- Product Designer: 4%–6%

### Moderate Increases

- Visual Designer: 3%–5%
- Art Director: 3%–4.5%
- Creative Director: 3%–4%

### Lower Movement

- Graphic Designer: 2%–3%
- Presentation Designer: 2.5%–3.5%



## DIGITAL

### Highest YOY Increases

- Product Manager: 5%–7%
- Interactive Designer: 5%–7%
- Social Media Content Manager: 5%–7%

### Strong Increases

- UX Designer: 4%–6%
- UX Researcher: 4%–6%
- Content Strategist: 4%–5.5%
- UI Designer: 3.5%–5%

### Moderate Increases

- Digital Project Manager: 3%–5%
- Digital Copywriter: 3%–4.5%



## MARKETING

### Highest YOY Increases

- Growth/Performance Marketer: 6%–8%
- Digital Marketing Manager: 4%–6%
- Media Buyer / Media Director: 4%–5.5%

### Steady Increases

- Marketing Analyst: 4%–5%
- SEM/SEO Specialist: 4%–6%
- Email Marketer: 3%–4.5%

### Moderate Movement

- Brand Manager: 3%–4%
- Event Specialist: 2.5%–4%

# 2026 Employee Engagement Trends

## What Today's Workforce Values Most

### ADAPTIVE FLEXIBILITY

Hybrid remains the dominant model, but flexibility now encompasses more than location. Adjustable hours, asynchronous collaboration, and outcome-based performance measures have become key differentiators. Organizations offering autonomy and trust are seeing higher satisfaction and retention.

### MICROLEARNING & CONTINUOUS TRAINING

As AI, automation, and digital tools evolve, employees prefer short, targeted learning modules. Companies are investing in personalized learning paths, real-time training recommendations, and continuous upskilling programs to support growth and close skill gaps.

### PURPOSE-DRIVEN WORK

Today's workforce values organizations with a clear mission, measurable impact, and authentic commitments to sustainability, diversity, and community involvement. Employees want visibility into how their work supports larger goals and gravitate toward companies with strong values.

### HIGH-TRUST LEADERSHIP

Empathy, transparency, and consistent communication define strong leadership. Leaders who cultivate psychological safety, prioritize well-being, and empower teams create engaged, resilient, and high-performing environments.



## RECOGNITION AS A MOTIVATOR

Formalized recognition programs and real-time appreciation significantly boost motivation, belonging, and cohesion. Companies that celebrate progress, creative contributions, and milestone achievements see enhanced performance and lower turnover.

## HOLISTIC WELL-BEING

Employees expect employers to support their mental, physical, and emotional wellness. Organizations are expanding access to wellness tools, stress-management resources, flexible PTO, and mental health services as part of a comprehensive employee experience.

## EMPLOYEE VOICE & FEEDBACK LOOPS

Continuous feedback cultures are reshaping performance management. Employees want real-time coaching, open dialogue, and opportunities to influence workplace policies. Organizations that measure engagement frequently—and act quickly—build loyalty and alignment.

## CAREER MOBILITY & INTERNAL GROWTH

Career stagnation is a leading driver of turnover. Forward-thinking companies are investing in internal mobility pathways, mentorship programs, job rotations, and clear advancement frameworks. Employees want to grow within their organizations—not feel they must leave to move forward.



# Executive Summary

## The Future of Talent Is Hybrid, Human, and AI-Enabled

The 2026 hiring environment reflects accelerating AI integration, predictive analytics, immersive digital experiences, and people-first leadership. Organizations no longer seek talent who simply execute, they need professionals who elevate strategy, drive innovation, and operate seamlessly across disciplines.

Top talent increasingly expects:

- Purpose-driven work
- Transparent, empathetic, and authentic leadership
- Flexibility and autonomy
- Continuous learning and clear mobility pathways
- Recognition, belonging, and a culture that celebrates strengths

Companies that evolve quickly—and embrace human-centered, AI-enhanced strategies—will lead the next era of growth.

At ektello, we remain committed to helping our clients stay ahead of the curve by delivering exceptional talent who drive results, fuel innovation, and build long-term organizational success.



# Get The Talent You Need

Let's dig into the data  
together! Reach out to  
**[SurveyGuide@ektello.com](mailto:SurveyGuide@ektello.com)**  
today to coordinate  
a discussion.