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SALARY & DAY-RATE INTELLIGENCE · H2 2026 EDITION

AI & Automation Benchmark

Salary and day-rate intelligence for AI Engineering, Data Science and AI Architecture, UK-wide and by region.

James Adams Group · H2 2026

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AI and data hiring hasn't cooled off this year: competition for good people has just settled after the rush of 2023–24. Day rates have levelled out, but architecture and lead-level roles are still climbing, and anyone with real LLM, MLOps or data-architecture experience can still set their price. Demand is broad-based too: engineering, data science and architecture are all hiring hard at once, not just one discipline having a moment.

£475–800/day

UK-wide day-rate span across the six roles

20%

London & Greater London premium over UK-wide rates, see p.3

£160k+

Ceiling salary: AI Architect, the scarcest role

Rate & salary benchmark

AI Engineer, AI Data Scientist and AI Architect are the three core job families; Senior and Lead Data Scientist and Machine Learning Engineer are included for wider market context.

Role	Day rate (£/day)	Typical salary	Strong / senior
AI Engineer	£525–650	£70k–100k	£100k–120k+
AI Data Scientist / Data Scientist	£475–600	£65k–90k	£90k–105k+
Senior Data Scientist	£575–700	£80k–115k	£115k–130k+
Lead Data Scientist	£675–800	£95k–130k	£130k–150k+
AI Architect	£550–750	£100k–140k	£140k–160k+
Machine Learning Engineer	£525–725	£75k–115k	£115k–135k+

Contract vs. permanent, annualised (~220 days): AI Engineer £116k–143k · AI Data Scientist £105k–132k · AI Architect £121k–165k, before umbrella/agency deductions and, inside IR35, employer NI & apprenticeship levy at source.

These figures are UK-wide and blended across regions. Pay for these roles varies a good deal by location, so read them alongside the regional breakdown on p.3 before you settle on a range.

Day rate at a glance (£/day)

Regional benchmark

Typical salary and day rate by region, for the three core roles.

Pay for AI and data roles varies a good deal by location, for permanent hires and contract engagements alike. London and the South East pull well above the national picture; the Midlands, North of England and Wales typically sit below our UK-wide benchmark on p.2; Scotland, lifted by Edinburgh and Glasgow's growing tech scenes, sits level with the national average. Day rates follow the same regional pattern as salary.

Permanent salary

Region	AI Engineer	AI Data Scientist	AI Architect
London & Greater London	£84k–120k	£78k–108k	£120k–168k
South & South East	£74k–105k	£68k–95k	£105k–147k
Midlands	£64k–92k	£60k–83k	£92k–129k
North of England	£63k–90k	£58k–81k	£90k–126k
Scotland	£70k–100k	£65k–90k	£100k–140k
Wales	£62k–89k	£57k–80k	£89k–125k

Contract day rate

Region	AI Engineer	AI Data Scientist	AI Architect
London & Greater London	£630–780	£570–720	£660–900
South & South East	£550–680	£500–630	£575–790
Midlands	£480–600	£435–550	£505–690
North of England	£470–585	£430–540	£495–675
Scotland	£525–650	£475–600	£550–750
Wales	£465–580	£420–535	£490–670

Methodology: *regional multipliers derived from Ashdown Group's 2026 UK IT/data salary guide (London, South East and Wales medians for Data Scientist, ML Engineer and Data Architect), extended to the Midlands, North of England and Scotland using ONS-based regional earnings patterns (via Sage, 2026), and applied to both the UK-wide salary and day-rate benchmarks on p.2. Indicative ranges, not a substitute for local, role-specific data.*

Role & seniority framework

What each title actually covers, level by level, so the numbers on p.2 map to real job scope.

	Mid	Senior	Lead / Principal
AI Engineer	Builds and deploys ML/AI models into production; integrates model APIs (Azure OpenAI, Bedrock, etc.); owns the pipeline for a single product area.	Leads model development for complex systems; owns MLOps practice: CI/CD for models, monitoring, retraining; mentors junior engineers.	Sets technical direction across multiple AI initiatives; makes build vs buy calls on LLM and vendor platforms; owns engineering standards.
AI Data Scientist	Builds predictive models and statistical analysis to support decisions; owns experimentation and A/B testing for a single domain.	Leads projects end-to-end from problem framing to production handoff; advises stakeholders on feasibility, risk and ROI.	Defines the data science strategy and roadmap; builds and manages a team; represents the discipline in exec-level conversations.
	Senior	**Principal**	**Head of AI Architecture**
AI Architect	Designs the technical architecture for AI/ML platforms: data pipelines, model serving, integration with legacy and safety-critical systems.	Owns architecture decisions across a full AI programme; balances build vs buy; accountable for security, scalability and compliance.	Sets enterprise-wide AI architecture standards; owns vendor and platform strategy; advises leadership on AI investment.

IR35 and what it does to the rate

Three things that decide what a day rate actually costs you.

1

Check which side of the small-company line your business sits on

Public sector clients have been in scope of the off-payroll rules since April 2017, medium and large private sector clients since April 2021. From 6 April 2026 the small-company thresholds rose: turnover from £10.2m to £15m and balance sheet total from £5.1m to £7.5m, with the 50-employee test unchanged. Meet any two of the three and you count as small, which means the contractor's own company determines status rather than you. HMRC puts the number of businesses reclassifying at roughly 14,000.

2

That decides which rate you are benchmarking against

An inside-IR35 day rate has to clear a higher bar than the outside-IR35 numbers quoted in general market guides, once employer NI, apprenticeship levy and umbrella or agency margin come out at source. The £475–800/day range on p.2 is pitched at inside-IR35 engagements, not the £1,000+/day some London guides quote for scarce, outside-IR35 specialists.

3

Your route to market takes its own slice

Public sector buyers usually engage through a Crown Commercial Service framework such as Public Sector Resourcing, which AMS has run as Master Vendor since February 2024 through to 2031; suppliers sit inside it as approved or strategic partners rather than contracting direct. Private sector buyers more often route through a PSL or an MSP. Either way there is a margin between the rate you sign off and the rate the contractor sees, so a benchmark and a rate card are never quite the same number.

Sources: ITJobsWatch, SecurityClearedJobs, Lorien & recruiter guides, H2 2026; Robert Half UK Salary Guide 2026; Langley James London IT, Tech & AI Salary Guide, Jan 2026; Ashdown Group UK IT Salary Guide 2026 (regional differentials); ONS-based regional earnings data via Sage, 2026; Public Sector Resourcing (publicsectorresourcing.co.uk); Greenberg Traurig, "Threshold Changes to UK Off-Payroll Working Rules (IR35)", Mar 2026; HMRC off-payroll working guidance, 2026. Ranges are indicative and directional, not a binding quote or legal or tax advice.