



UK FREELANCE ROLES

Salary Survey

WWW.DRC-SEARCH.COM

2026



ABOUT DRC SEARCH

DRC Search was established to provide exceptional executive search solutions to the technology and digital sectors, with a focus on placing senior leaders who drive innovation, growth, and transformation. Founded in London, our mission is to support high-growth and enterprise businesses across the UK, Europe, and the US by delivering strategic leadership talent through a rigorous, insight-led search process.

Our specialism lies in Executive and Board-level appointments across Technology, Product, Data, Marketing, and Commercial leadership. From PE-backed scaleups to global technology firms, we partner with businesses that are shaping the future of their industries.

With deep sector knowledge, an extensive senior talent network, and a proven track record in executive hiring, we offer a consultative approach that goes beyond filling roles, we help organisations build the leadership foundations they need for long-term success.

Our core services include retained executive search, board and NED appointments, interim leadership, succession planning, and strategic talent mapping.



WELCOME TO THE 2026 SALARY SURVEY

Welcome to our annual salary survey for the digital sector. As always, we'd like to thank all those who participated to produce this year's report. One of the things we love at DRC Search is the amazing quality and diversity of people in our network and community. It is always a pleasure to put together this survey and we hope you find it useful. Following on from previous years we have produced two separate reports, one focused on permanent staffing and the other focused on contract workers. This report covers freelance workers. Rates quoted are day rates.

16 YEARS OF DEDICATED CLIENT SERVICE

DRCSearch provides its clients with the latest talent insights to help them achieve their workforce goals. We believe that good recruitment starts with the end in mind, that being that good recruitment leads to good retention. Our salary survey seeks to provide clients with the means to attract and retain the right hires. If you'd like to reach out or discuss anything in the report please contact Toby Day: toby@drc-search.com



Meet the Editor

Toby founded DRC Search back in 2010. Toby has worked with a diverse range of clients over the years including agencies and inhouse teams. In addition to his recruitment responsibilities, Toby runs and edits our annual salary survey.

WHAT ARE THE TRENDS FOR 2026?

Toby Day

Director/Founder

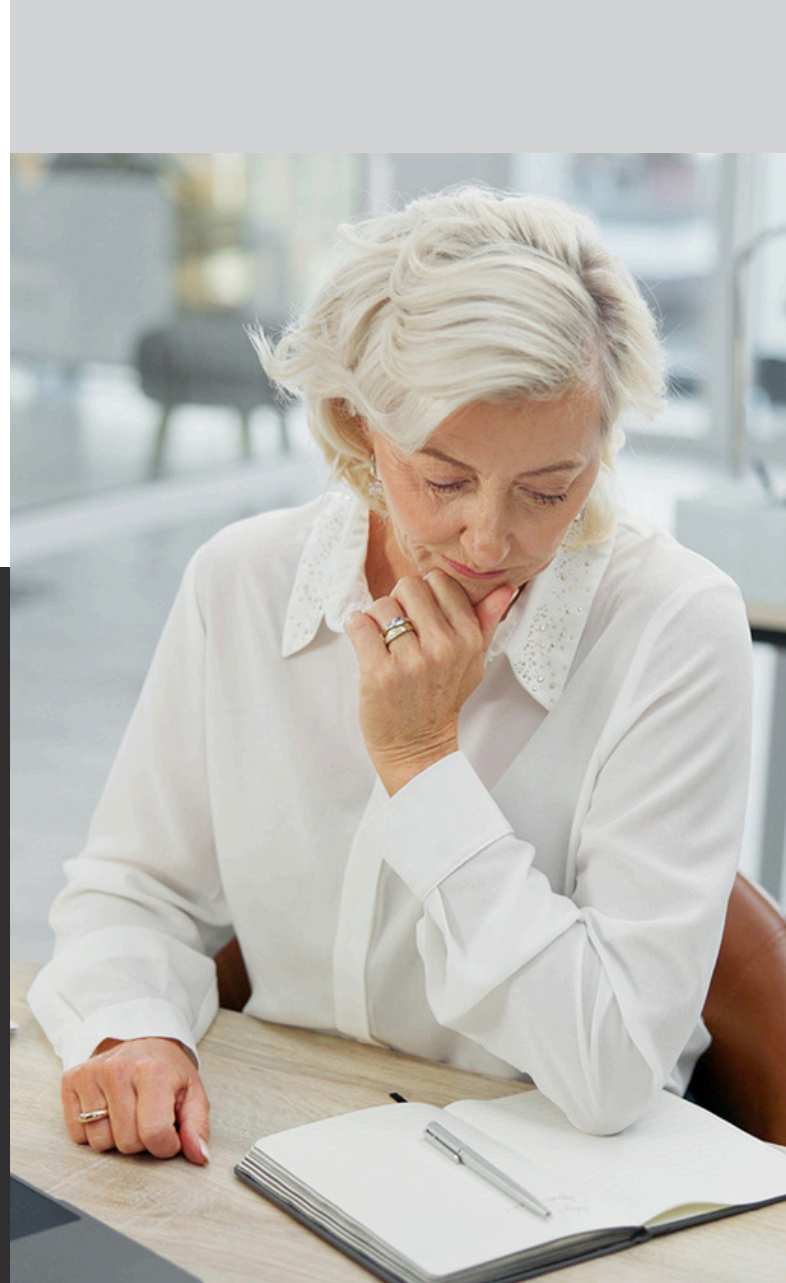
The UK contract and freelance talent market is entering 2026 in a more complex and selective environment, shaped by economic caution, regulatory change, and the rapid acceleration of AI adoption across core business functions. Organisations are increasingly pressure-testing “build vs buy vs contract” decisions, with a clear shift toward flexible, project-based hiring where outcomes, speed, and specialist expertise are critical.

Demand is strongest where skills are scarce and outcomes are measurable, particularly across Technology, AI, Product, CRM, Marketing and Sales. Organisations are prioritising specialists who can support digital transformation, AI implementation, customer data strategy, automation, and revenue growth.

AI is a major driver of this shift. While adoption across the UK remains uneven, businesses that are actively investing are increasingly turning to freelance talent to help integrate AI into real workflows, operations, and customer journeys. This is creating strong demand not only for technical delivery, but also for governance, product leadership, and commercial application

From a workforce perspective, freelance talent itself is evolving. Portfolio careers, multiple income streams, and a stronger preference for flexibility and autonomy are reshaping the supply side of the market. While competition for roles has increased, top-tier contractors continue to command premium rates where they offer scarce, outcome-driven expertise aligned to business-critical initiatives.

Overall, the 2026 contract and freelance market is defined by selectivity, specialisation, and strategic impact. Organisations are no longer hiring contractors simply to fill gaps, but to deliver measurable outcomes across transformation, growth, and innovation agendas. For both clients and talent, success in this market will depend on clarity of scope, speed of execution, and the ability to demonstrate tangible commercial value.



The UK digital and technology talent pool continues to expand and evolve in line with rapid AI adoption and increasing investment across the ecosystem. In 2025 alone, UK startups raised \$23.6 billion, up 35% year-on-year, with AI companies attracting \$7.9 billion, an 80% increase, reinforcing the growing demand for highly skilled digital, product, and data talent.

TALENT POOL INSIGHTS

The UK freelance and contract talent pool remains sizeable in 2026, with 4.39 million self-employed workers in the market. However, competition has increased, with the self-employment workforce component down 242,000 (-5.6%) year-on-year, creating a more selective contract environment.

Demand for high-value freelance talent remains strongest in London, Manchester and Cambridge, particularly across AI, Data, Product and digital transformation. Flexible working continues to expand access to these pools, with 54% of AI-related roles offered hybrid and 19% fully remote, allowing employers to hire specialist contractors beyond traditional city hubs

Capability is increasingly being shaped by AI adoption. Among UK businesses already using AI, 85% use NLP/text generation, 35% computer vision, 21% machine learning, and 7% agentic AI. Usage is also becoming embedded, with 80% of adopters using AI at least weekly and 53% using it constantly. This is increasing demand for freelance talent that can bridge strategy, implementation, governance and delivery.

Despite this, adoption remains uneven. Only 16% of UK businesses currently use AI, while 80% neither use nor plan to adopt it, creating a clear gap between ambition and execution. This is driving demand for contract specialists who can rapidly deliver AI, data, CRM, automation and product transformation capability.

CANDIDATE MOTIVATION

EMPLOYER VALUE PROPOSITION

CHANGING PRIORITIES FOR STAFF ATTRACTION

Candidate motivation in the UK freelance and contract market is increasingly driven by a mix of financial, lifestyle and flexibility factors. While 81% of professionals cite pay as the primary driver, retention is led by broader considerations, with 46% prioritising work-life balance versus just 23% for pay alone.

Freelance behaviour reinforces this shift. 40% of professionals now hold a second role, and 36% plan to increase working hours across multiple income streams, highlighting the continued rise of portfolio careers and demand for flexible, project-based work.

For contractors specifically, autonomy and flexibility remain core drivers. Up to 79% value independence, 75% flexibility, and over 80% value control over when and where they work, making flexibility a non-negotiable element of any Employer Value Proposition.

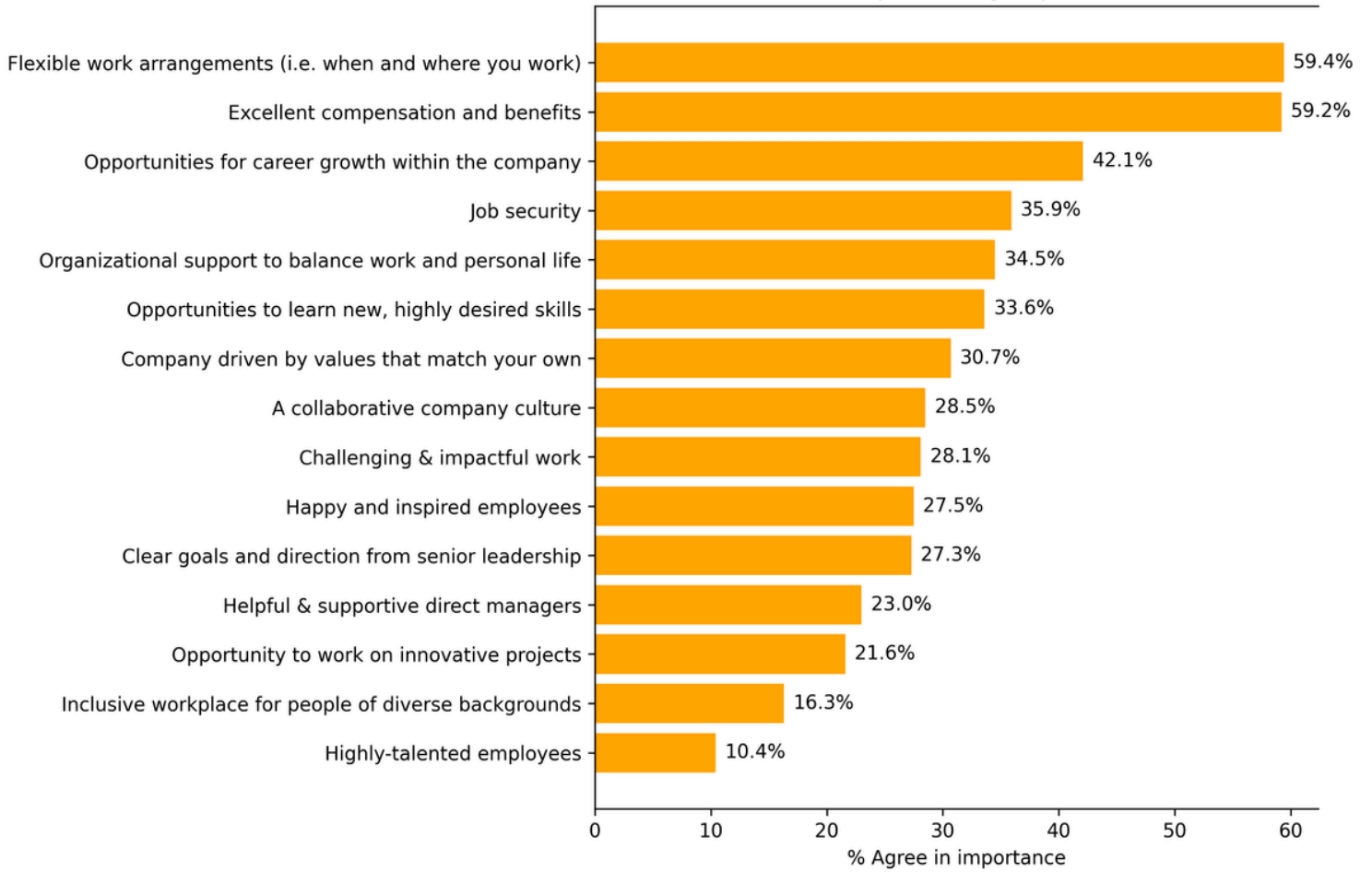
From an employer perspective, this is creating a clear shift in how freelance talent must be engaged. Competitive day rates remain critical, but are no longer enough in isolation. Contractors increasingly prioritise clear scope, fast hiring processes, IR35 clarity, and immediate access to tools and data, alongside flexible working models.

Flexible working continues to underpin hiring success, particularly in high-demand areas such as AI and Technology, where 54% of roles are hybrid and 19% fully remote, enabling access to wider and more diverse contractor talent pools.

Overall, the 2026 EVP for contract and freelance talent is defined by speed, flexibility and clarity. Organisations that can offer well-defined projects, competitive rates and low-friction engagement models will be best positioned to attract and retain top-tier independent talent.

What is an EVP? An Employee Value Proposition (EVP) is the unique set of benefits and rewards that an organization offers to its employees in return for their skills, capabilities, and performance. EVPs encompass tangible benefits like salary, perks, and career opportunities, as well as intangible aspects such as workplace culture, values, and flexibility.

EVP for UK Digital Marketing Sector Value Proposition by Importance



MARKETING AND SOCIAL & CONTENT CREATION

MARKETING

Marketing Executive	£155–£210
Snr Marketing Executive	£180–£240
Marketing Manager	£230–£325
B2B Marketing Manager	£245–£335
Campaign Manager	£215–£295
Snr Marketing Manager	£250–£375
Marketing Director	£480–£820
Events Marketing Manager	£165–£375
Head of Brand	£350–£600
Brand Manager	£215–£400
CMO	£800–£1,650

SOCIAL AND CONTENT CREATION

Copywriter	£185–£270
Mid-Level Copywriter	£265–£375
Senior Copywriter	£375–£485
Head of Copy	£400–£550
Content Executive	£135–£240
Content Manager	£220–£475
Content Strategist	£350–£600
Social Media Executive	£135–£175
Social Media Manager	£170–£350
Social Media Strategist	£295–£400
Snr Paid Social	£350–£485
Head of Paid Social	£400–£600
Head of Social	£380–£675
Video Editor	£190–£375
Sub-Editor	£270–£425
Editor	£190–£450
Editor Director	£300–£700



MARKET RESEARCH

Senior Researcher	£245–£430
Research Manager	£325–£510
Research Director	£440–£700
Head of Research	£550–£875

PROJECT MANAGEMENT

Project Executive	£190–£275
Project Manager	£275–£420
Project Director	£400–£550
Technical Project Executive	£225–£325
Technical Project Manager	£300–£475
Technical Project Director	£450–£750

UX & SERVICE DESIGN

Jnr UX Designer Mid UX	£190–£275
Designer Snr UX	£245–£375
Designer UI Specialist	£375–£600
Senior UX/UI Head of	£375–£520
UX/UI Jnr Service	£380–£650
Designer Mid Service	£600–£925
Designer Senior Service	£135–£270
Designer Head of	£190–£325
SD/Innovation Creative	£275–£600
Director	£550–£875
	£460–£820

MARKET RESEARCH UX & SERVICE DESIGN AND PROJECT MANAGEMENT

TECHNOLOGY

SOFTWARE DEVELOPMENT

IT Director	£750–£1080
IT Manager	£600–£900
Head of IT	£500–£780
Head of Software Engineering	£550–£1,100
Head of Data / Chief Data Officer	£850–£1,950
VP of Engineering	£550–£1000
Software Engineer	£500–£1000
Development Manager	£650–£1000
Full Stack Microsoft Developer	£440–£725
Lead .NET Developer	£500–£780
.NET Developer	£420–£725
PHP Developer	£300–£440
Front End Developer	£360–£700
Graduate Developer	£220–£380
Test Manager	£520–£850
Lead Test Analyst	£470–£700
Senior Test Analyst	£380–£600
Test Analyst	£275–£460
Automation Test Analyst	£340–£550
Head of QA	£580–£725
QA Team Lead	£525–£680
QA Engineer	£300–£410



84%

84% of Software Development personnel that we surveyed where male



1.6

The median tenure in years of a sector software development professional is 1.6 years and has dropped in recent years.



40%

40% of graduate entrants in the last 12 months have a masters degree, compared to 29% of the overall workforce



33%

33% of the workforce have skills in Javascript making it the most popular programming language in the talent pool.



Although hiring demand for infrastructure professionals remains very high in the UK, there has been significant attrition in many of the biggest employers in the space.

TECHNOLOGY – INFRASTRUCTURE

DevOps Manager	£780–£1,050
Lead DevOps Engineer	£650–£980
DevOps Engineer	£460–£820
Network Manager	£360–£600
IT Support Manager	£500–£700
Cloud Systems Architect	£750–£1,050
Cloud Systems Engineer	£720–£900
Systems Administrator	£380–£490
Infrastructure Engineer	£400–£500
3rd Line Support Engineer	£450–£600
2nd Line Support Engineer	£400–£500
1st Line Support Engineer	£300–£400
Lead Application Support Engineer	£350–£550
Application Support Engineer	£325–£500
Service Delivery Manager	£500–£820
Service Desk Manager	£450–£680
Service Desk Team Lead	£330–£460
Service Desk Analyst	£230–£300
IT Operations Lead	£300–£460



DATA & ANALYTICS

Graduate Analyst	£185–£275
Junior Analyst	£225–£380
Senior Analyst	£280–£600
Analytics Manager	£500–£720
Head of Analytics/Data	£700–£900
Director of Analytics/Data	£780–£1,250
Managing Director	£900–£2,750
Audience Insights Analyst	£290–£600
Insights Manager	£500–£720
Customer Insights	£300–£630
BI Analyst	£360–£500
Data Scientist	£380–£750
Data Architect	£720–£950
Machine Learning Engineer	£650–£900

AI & MACHINE LEARNING AND CYBER SECURITY

CYBER SECURITY

Head of Information Security	£820–£1,050
Information Security Risk Manager	£850–£1,050
Senior Information Security Manager	£750–£950
Information Security Manager	£700–£900
Senior Information Security Analyst	£650–£880
Information Security Analyst	£600–£820
Security Operations Consultant (SOC)	£550–£700
Security Engineer	£620–£900
Security Architect	£800–£1,050
CISO	£1,300–£1,900
BISO	£900–£1,200
Penetration Tester	£750–£1,050
Business Continuity Analyst	£600–£720
Cloud Security Architect	£1,000–£1,450
Cloud Security Engineer	£720–£950
Identity & Access Management Analyst	£720–£950
Identity & Access Management Arch.	£750–£980
Application Security Engineer	£880–£1,150
Operational Resilience Manager	£800–£1,050
IT Audit Manager	£780–£950

AI & MACHINE LEARNING

Head of AI/Machine Learning	£800–£1,450
Machine Learning Engineer	£650–£900
AI Developer	£750–£1,100
AI Prompt Engineer	£700–£980
AI Software Engineer	£700–£880
Computer Vision Engineer	£720–£880
NLP Engineer	£700–£880
Research Scientist	£650–£900
Robotics Engineer	£680–£900
Software Architect	£850–£1,500





PERFORMANCE MARKETING & CRM

Performance Marketing Executive	£170–£240
Performance Marketing Manager	£250–£375
Digital Marketing Executive	£165–£240
Digital Marketing Manager	£190–£375
E-Commerce Manager	£275–£500
Head of E-commerce	£450–£725
Director of E-commerce	£500–£850
CRM Executive	£220–£300
CRM Manager	£275–£410
CRM Director	£380–£550
Head of CRM	£480–£720
PPC Executive	£220–£300
PPC Manager	£275–£410
Search Account Director	£350–£500
Head of PPC/Search	£420–£720
SEO Executive	£220–£300
SEO Manager	£275–£410
SEO Account Director	£380–£550
Head of SEO	£500–£720

DESIGN & BRAND PRODUCT MANAGEMENT AND CLIENT SERVICES

DESIGN & BRAND

Junior Designer	£110–£190
Midweight Designer	£140–£250
Senior Designer	£220–£310
Art Worker	£140–£375
Graphic Designer	£140–£220
Senior Graphic Designer	£150–£260
Head of Design/Director	£250–£450
Associate Creative Director	£360–£500
Head of Creative/Director	£400–£600
Executive Creative	£580–£850

CLIENT SERVICES

Graduate Account	£110–£135
Executive Snr Account	£125–£190
Executive Account	£140–£250
Manager Snr Account	£200–£360
Manager Account	£300–£380
Director Snr Account	£360–£500
Director Group/Global	£420–£580
AD Head of Client	£480–£720
Services Business	£580–£850
Director	£650–£1,050 + Commission

PRODUCT MANAGEMENT

Head of Product	£700–£1,400
Product Marketing Manager	£400–£550
Product Marketing Director	£520–£780
Technical Product Manager	£460–£620
Technical Product Director	£600–£880
Junior Product Manager	£300–£380
Product Manager Senior	£330–£450
Product Manager Resource	£400–£520
Manager Resource Director	£200–£380
Studio Manager	£360–£520
	£275–£410

BUSINESS DEVELOPMENT & C-SUITE

BUSINESS DEVELOPMENT & SALES

Business Development/Sales Executive	£115–£200 + Commission
Business Development/Sales Manager	£175–£300 + Commission
Business Development/Sales Director	£250–£500 + Commission
Director of Business Development/Sales	£480–£850 + Commission

C-SUITE

Chief Executive Officer	£1,200–£2,900
Chief Financial Officer	£1,150–£1,700
Chief Revenue Officer	£1,350–£2,400
Chief People Officer	£1,150–£2,000
Chief Digital Officer	£1,050–£2,000
Chief Technology Officer	£1,300–£2,900
Chief Information Officer	£900–£1,450
Chief Operating Officer	£900–£1,200
Chief Marketing Officer	£650–£1,200
Chief Data Officer	£1,300–£2,900
Chief Product Officer	£1,400–£3,100
Chief Strategy Officer	£1,150–£1,700
Managing Director	£950–£2,900



OUR SPECIALISMS

- Technology
- Marketing (Including Mar tech)
- Data & Analytics
- Product
- UX & Service Design
- Client Services
- Project Management
- Strategy & Social

OUR SERVICES

With our clients we work alongside them not to only recruit but to consult on the current market, how best to structure, hire and retain new Marketing, Creative, Technology, Digital & Data & Insights divisions.

INITIAL CONSULTING

A scoping of your requirements and a follow up document putting forward our recommendations on market insights, department structure, salaries, packages etc - free of charge and does not come with any obligation to use us for the hiring.

RECRUITMENT & RETENTION

Delivery of a recruitment strategy and hiring plan to identify, attract and retain the ideal talent for your organisation



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Market Leading Digital Recruitment Solutions

