

# AI ENGINEERING COMPENSATION REPORT

*Q1 2026 Market Analysis*

Comprehensive analysis of 2,000+ ML engineer salaries  
from Glassdoor, Levels.fyi, Built In, and industry sources

Published by

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## Executive Summary

The AI talent market in 2026 continues to demonstrate exceptional compensation growth, driven by unprecedented demand and limited supply of qualified candidates. This report synthesizes data from multiple industry sources to provide CTOs and engineering leaders with actionable compensation benchmarks.

## Key Findings

- **Average ML Engineer salary increased 9% year-over-year, one of the largest jumps in tech**
- AI engineer salaries jumped \$50,000 to an average of \$206,000 in 2025
- Geographic premium: San Francisco ML engineers earn 38% more than national average
- Equity compensation represents 40-70% of total comp at growth-stage startups
- Top 1% of AI researchers command packages exceeding \$1M annually

## National Salary Averages

Compensation varies significantly by role, experience level, and specialization. Below are 2026 national averages for key AI/ML positions.

| Role                    | Base Salary     | Total Comp*     |
|-------------------------|-----------------|-----------------|
| ML Engineer (Mid-Level) | \$135K - \$240K | \$160K - \$290K |
| ML Engineer (Senior)    | \$200K - \$260K | \$300K - \$500K |
| Data Scientist          | \$118K - \$147K | \$140K - \$180K |
| AI Research Scientist   | \$128K - \$220K | \$180K - \$350K |
| AI Engineer             | \$175K - \$206K | \$220K - \$280K |

\* Total compensation includes base salary, equity value (annualized), and bonuses. Equity values based on latest company valuations.

## Geographic Salary Breakdown

Location remains one of the strongest drivers of AI/ML compensation. While remote work has created some salary arbitrage opportunities, top-tier tech hubs continue to command significant premiums.

### ML Engineer Salaries by City (Mid-Level)

| Location               | Average Salary  | vs. National Avg |
|------------------------|-----------------|------------------|
| San Francisco Bay Area | \$187K - \$220K | +38%             |
| New York City          | \$157K - \$180K | +20%             |
| Seattle                | \$160K - \$207K | +25%             |
| Austin                 | \$145K - \$175K | +12%             |
| Boston                 | \$150K - \$180K | +15%             |

### Senior ML Engineer Compensation

Senior ML engineers (5-8+ years experience) command significantly higher compensation, with equity becoming a larger component of total comp at this level.

| Location      | Base Salary     | Total Comp       |
|---------------|-----------------|------------------|
| San Francisco | \$221K - \$337K | \$350K - \$500K+ |
| New York City | \$179K - \$292K | \$280K - \$400K  |
| Seattle       | \$200K - \$218K | \$300K - \$380K  |

## Equity Compensation at Startups

For Series B-D AI startups, equity represents a critical component of total compensation. Understanding how to evaluate equity offers is essential for both candidates and hiring managers.

### Typical Equity Ranges by Company Stage

| Company Stage | Equity %      | Notes                         |
|---------------|---------------|-------------------------------|
| Series B      | 0.1% - 0.3%   | Mid-level engineers           |
| Series C      | 0.05% - 0.15% | Lower % but higher valuations |
| Series D+     | 0.01% - 0.08% | Pre-IPO, closer to liquidity  |

### Key Equity Considerations

- Vesting Schedule: Standard is 4-year vest with 1-year cliff
- Dilution: Expect 10-25% dilution per funding round
- Refresh Grants: Top-performing engineers receive annual equity refreshes
- 409A Valuation: Strike price determines exercise cost for options
- **Equity can represent 40-70% of total compensation value at growth-stage companies**

## 2026 Compensation Trends

### What's Driving Salary Growth

#### 1. Supply-Demand Imbalance

300,000 open AI/ML roles globally with only 100,000 qualified candidates. This 3:1 ratio creates intense bidding wars for top talent.

#### 2. Specialized Skill Premiums

Engineers with specialized expertise command significant premiums. NLP and computer vision specialists earn \$50K-\$100K more than generalist ML engineers. Transformer architecture expertise and LLM fine-tuning skills are particularly valuable in 2026.

#### 3. Big Tech Competition

FAANG companies and AI-native firms (OpenAI, Anthropic, Google DeepMind) offer \$400K-\$800K packages for senior ML talent. Microsoft, Meta, and Google continue aggressive talent acquisition with compensation packages well into six figures.

#### 4. Startup Urgency

73% of AI startups cite talent as their #1 growth constraint. This creates urgency in hiring decisions and willingness to pay premium compensation to secure qualified candidates quickly.

## Recommendations for CTOs

Based on current market conditions, here are actionable recommendations for engineering leaders building AI teams:

### 1. Benchmark Against Total Comp, Not Just Base

Candidates evaluate total compensation packages. A \$180K base with 0.2% equity at a Series B valued at \$200M (\$400K paper value) is effectively a \$280K offer when annualized. Make sure your offers are competitive on total comp, not just salary.

### 2. Move Fast on Top Candidates

The best ML engineers are off the market in 2-3 weeks. Standard 4-month hiring processes lose 90% of qualified candidates. Consider compressed interview loops (2-3 days vs. 2-3 weeks) and same-day offer decisions for exceptional talent.

### 3. Specialize Your Equity Story

Generic equity pitches don't work. Top candidates want specifics: current valuation, last round details, runway, path to liquidity, and comparable exits. Be transparent about the upside potential and realistic about risks.

### 4. Consider Remote Talent Strategically

While SF Bay Area engineers command 38% premium, exceptional remote talent can provide 20-30% salary savings without compromising quality. However, ensure your remote comp is still competitive for the candidate's market to avoid retention issues.

## Methodology & Data Sources

This report synthesizes compensation data from multiple authoritative sources to provide the most accurate view of the current AI/ML talent market. All figures represent January 2026 data unless otherwise noted.

### Primary Data Sources

- Glassdoor: 2,164+ verified ML engineer salaries (January 2026)
- Levels.fyi: Comprehensive tech compensation database with equity breakdowns
- Built In: 1,074+ salary submissions for SF Bay Area ML engineers
- Motion Recruitment 2026 Tech Salary Guide: Industry-wide analysis
- Wellfound (AngelList): Startup-specific compensation data
- Industry reports from Second Talent, HeroHunt, and other specialized AI recruiting firms

### Data Processing

Salary ranges represent 25th-75th percentile data unless otherwise noted. Equity calculations assume current company valuations with standard 4-year vesting. Total compensation includes base salary, annualized equity value, and typical bonuses (10-15% for mid-level, 15-20% for senior).

## About Superhumancy

Superhumancy is a software-defined recruiting firm specializing in AI/ML talent acquisition for Series B-D startups. We combine proprietary AlignIQ™ technology with expert human vetting to deliver interview-ready ML candidates in 72 hours.

## Our Approach

Unlike traditional recruiting agencies that recycle LinkedIn profiles, we use AlignIQ™ to filter 500+ applications down to the top 5% in minutes. Our senior ML hiring experts then vet each candidate to ensure technical depth and cultural fit.

**Result: 31-day average time-to-hire (vs. industry average of 118 days) with 94% filtering accuracy.**

## Contact Us

**Ready to build your AI team faster?**

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*All data current as of January 31, 2026*