The AI Talent Divide

Strong Demand and Pay, Uneven Returns

Matthew Baird
Silvia Lara
Mar Carpanelli

Economic Graph
Research Institute

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KEY FINDINGS

Artificial intelligence (AI) is creating some of the fastest-growing and highest-paying opportunities in today's labor market. But access to those opportunities is not evenly distributed. While AI is generating new paths to economic advancement, the workers most represented in the highest-paying AI roles are still disproportionately men and those with bachelor's degrees or higher.

- **AI jobs are among the fastest-growing and highest-paying opportunities in today's labor market.** The number of AI job postings has roughly doubled in recent years and the typical AI job posting lists a salary of $177K, compared with $80K for the typical non-AI role.
- **AI is creating significant economic opportunity, but access to that opportunity isn't equal.** Women account for just 26% of new hires in AI roles, compared with 50% in non-AI occupations, while around 91% of AI roles are held by workers with a bachelor's degree or higher. Women and workers without four-year degrees are more likely to be represented in AI roles with lower barriers to entry, such as data annotation, but those are the lowest-paying AI roles. The highest-paying AI jobs remain disproportionately concentrated among men and highly educated workers.
- **AI opportunity spans generations, and younger workers are finding paths into many emerging AI roles.** Gen Z accounts for more than two-thirds of hires in both AI Engineer and Forward Deployed Engineer roles, suggesting some of the fastest-growing AI occupations are creating entry points for younger workers.

AI jobs pay more than 2x compared to non-AI roles.

$80k	$177k
typical salary for non-AI job postings	typical salary for AI job postings

DEMAND FOR AI IS INCREASING

Demand for AI talent has increased sharply over the past three years.[1] The number of new job postings for AI roles has roughly doubled when comparing 2023/2024 with 2025/2026. But that growth has not been evenly distributed across roles.[2] Some established AI occupations have grown at a relatively moderate pace: Machine Learning Engineer postings increased by about 50%, while `Member of Technical Staff, Head of AI, AI Engineer, and Director of AI have broadly tracked the overall AI market, roughly doubling over the period.

[1] The U.S. Workforce Imperative; Small Business, Big Opportunity; AI Labor Market Update; Women and Future Jobs.

[2] In this report, we focus only on AI engineering and technology building roles, and not other jobs in the AI value chain such as AI infrastructure, data centers, or governance.

Some of the biggest growth has come from emerging AI roles. VP of AI postings increased by around six times, while Data Annotator, Generative AI Engineer, and Forward Deployed Engineer roles saw exceptionally large increases, growing by factors in the thousands off a smaller initial base.

Looking within the AI labor market also shows that the composition of AI jobs is changing. AI Engineers and Machine Learning Engineers remain by far the most common AI roles, together accounting for almost two-thirds of all AI job postings. However, the balance between these two core roles has shifted.

In 2023 and 2024, Machine Learning Engineer postings were more common than AI Engineer postings. By 2025 and 2026, that relationship had flipped, with AI Engineer becoming the more common role. Part of this shift likely reflects real demand for AI talent. But it may also reflect a change in language, with companies increasingly adopting "AI engineer" as a catchall term for roles that might previously have been labeled machine learning engineering positions.

Beyond these core technical roles, the AI occupational mix is becoming broader and more fragmented. Forward Deployed Engineer has grown especially quickly and is now the third most common AI occupation in job postings. Other non-management roles, including Member of Technical Staff, Data Annotator, Applied AI roles (roles that support AI adoption and integration into core company processes), and Generative AI Engineer, have also increased their share of AI postings.

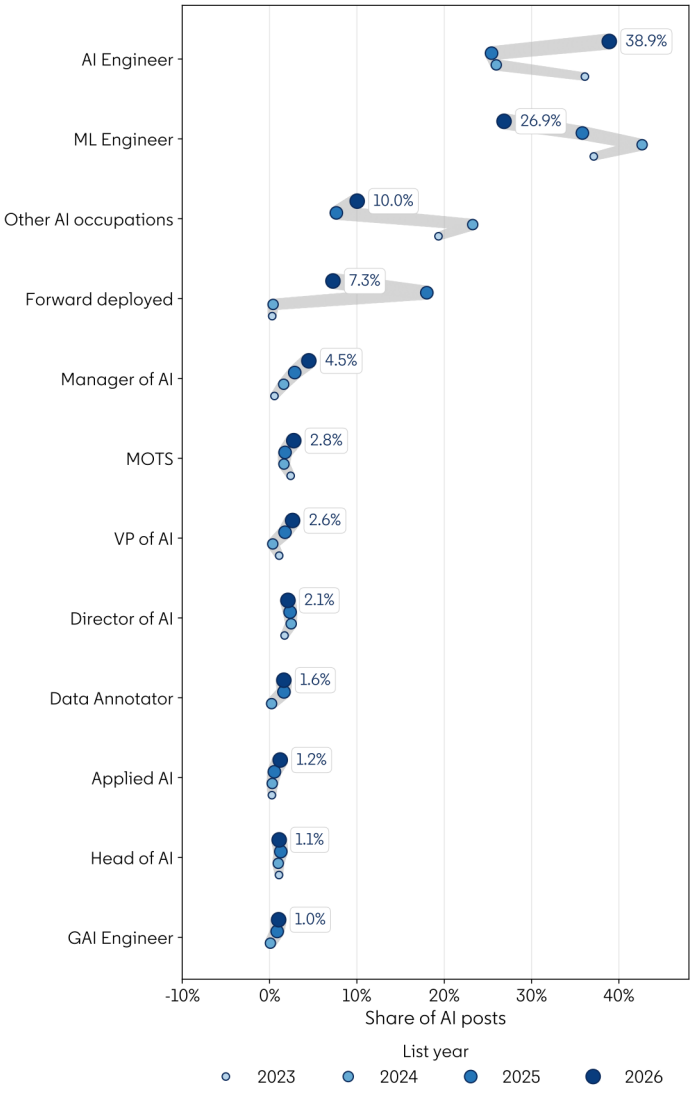
AI hiring is expanding beyond traditional technical roles. While companies still need people to build AI systems, they're also hiring people to deploy, manage, and apply it. This suggests AI is becoming a bigger part of everyday work, not just a specialized function.

There are also signs of growth in AI leadership roles, though the pattern is uneven. AI Manager and VP of AI roles have increased their share of AI postings over the past few years, pointing to a growing need for managerial and strategic oversight as firms scale AI capabilities. By contrast, Head of AI roles have remained relatively stable, while Director of AI roles have seen a slight decline in share. Taken together, the data suggest that AI demand is not only growing, but changing shape: from a market dominated by machine learning specialists toward a more diverse ecosystem of technical, operational, and leadership roles.

As AI demand grows and occupations evolve, the next question is who has access to these opportunities and how much they pay.

Most Common AI Builder Occupations on LinkedIn

Share of AI Job Posts



AI JOBS PAY MORE THAN MOST OTHER JOBS

The AI economy has created a new tier of high-paying jobs. Because job postings report compensation in different ways, we standardize pay before comparing AI and non-AI roles. We find that the typical AI job posting lists a base salary midpoint of $177K, more than double the $80K for non-AI positions. The gap is large enough that even the low end of the typical AI salary range is higher than the high end of the typical non-AI salary range.

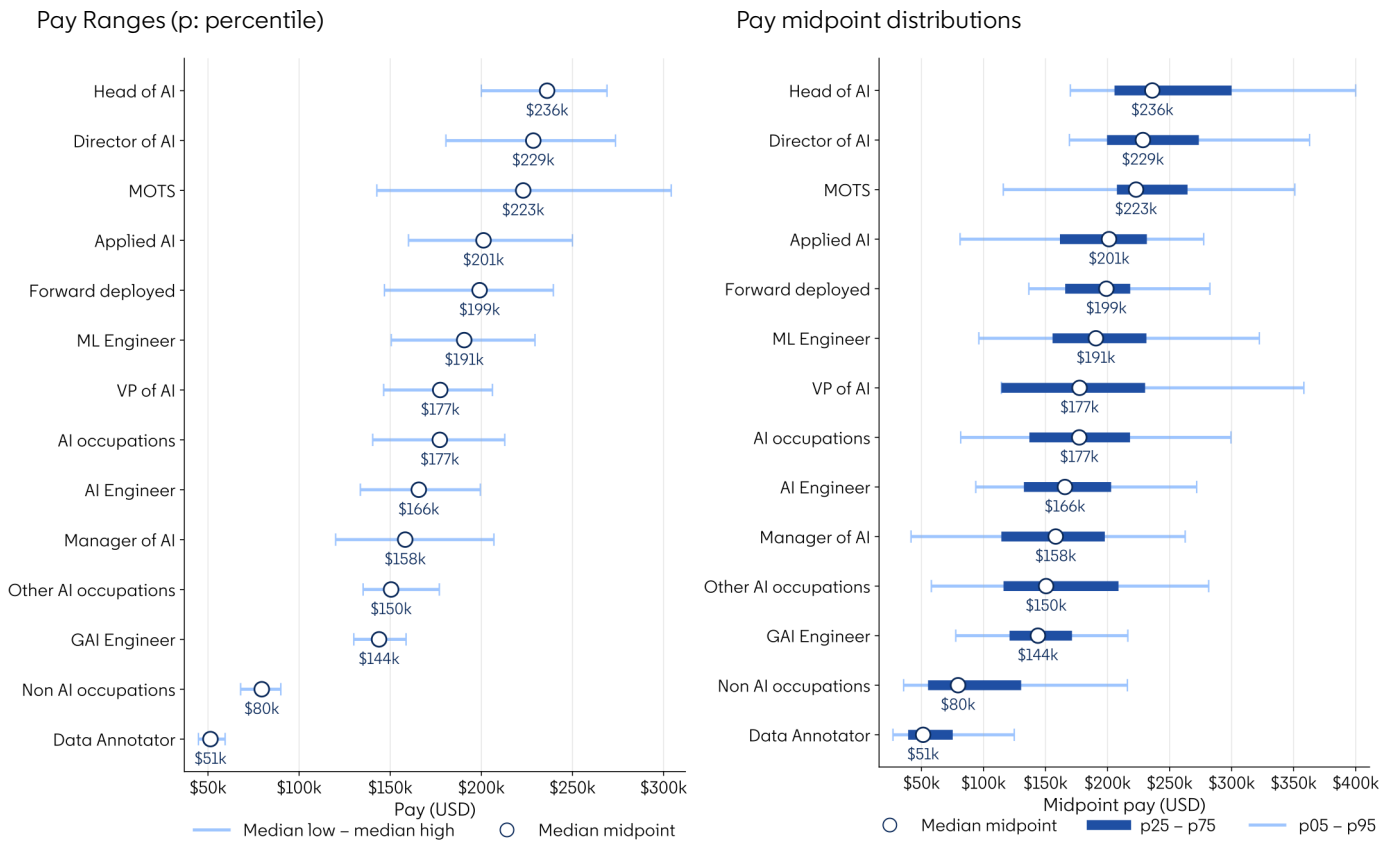
But there is no single "AI salary". Pay varies widely depending on the role. Senior leadership and highly technical positions, such as Head of AI, Director of AI, and Member of Technical Staff (MOTS), sit at the top of the pay scale. Meanwhile, Data Annotator positions are among the lowest-paid AI jobs and fall below even the typical non-AI job posting.

NOT ALL AI JOBS PAY MORE THAN ALL NON-AI JOBS

The typical AI job pays substantially more than the typical non-AI job, but the full picture is more nuanced. Median ranges are useful, but they alone do not capture the variance across job postings (and in particular, across occupations for non-AI postings). Instead of just examining the median range as above, to understand that variation we look at pay ranges on the low end and high end for each occupation. Non-AI occupations include a broad collection of occupations. Some common examples are administrative assistant (median listed pay ~$54K), teachers ($68K), registered nurses ($100K), project manager (123K), software engineer ($158K), and Chief Executive Officer ($225K).

Even with that variation, the pattern is clear: **most AI jobs pay more than most non-AI jobs.** With the exception of Data Annotator and Generative AI Engineer roles, even

Posted Pay of AI Jobs, by Occupation (2026)



lower-paying AI jobs tend to pay more than many of the highest-paying non-AI occupations.

This means a job posting near the bottom of the pay range for many AI occupations can still pay more than a job posting near the top of the range for many non-AI occupations.

Pay trends have also changed over time. AI compensation rose between 2023 and 2024, but since then, listed pay for AI roles has been relatively stable. Non-AI roles, by contrast, have seen a slight decline in listed compensation over the same period.

Within AI, the fastest pay growth has been concentrated in a few roles (see Appendix Figure A.1). Member of Technical Staff and Forward Deployed Engineer roles have seen the most rapid increases in listed compensation. By contrast, Head of AI and AI Engineer roles have remained relatively flat since 2024, while VP of AI roles have seen listed pay decline over time, from high highs above $300K.

Taken together, these patterns show that the AI pay premium is real, but uneven. AI jobs tend to pay more (double as much as non-AI on average), but the size of the premium depends heavily on the specific role, where it sits in the AI value chain[3], and how demand for that role is evolving.

The growth and pay premium of AI jobs raises a broader question: who is benefiting from the expansion of the AI economy? If AI jobs increasingly offer access to higher wages and opportunity, then representation within those jobs becomes important not only as a workforce issue, but as an economic one.

AI is creating more jobs and higher-paying opportunities. But the benefits are not shared equally. The rest of this paper explores who is gaining access to the best AI jobs and who may be left behind.

DEMOGRAPHIC DIFFERENCES IN AI HIRING

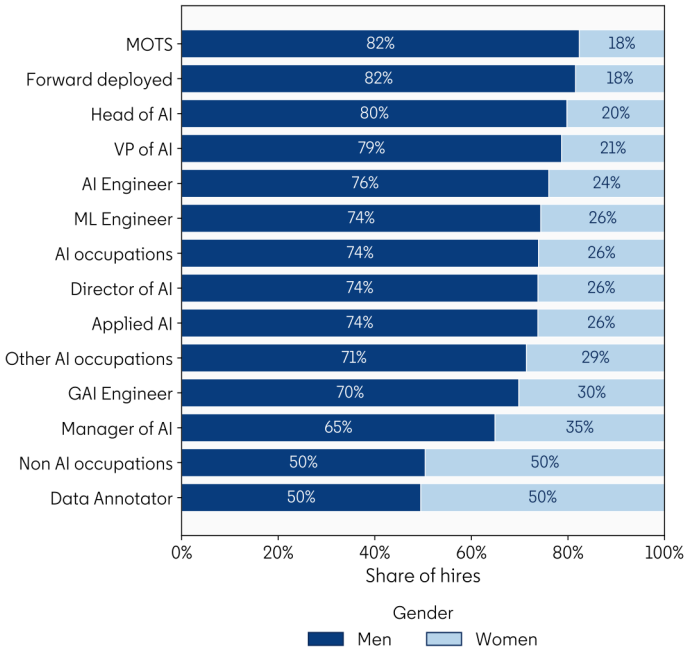
The AI labor market is growing quickly, but access to that growth is uneven. To understand who is benefiting from AI job creation, we look at three divides: gender, education, and age. These divides matter because they shape not only who gets into AI roles, but also who gets access to the highest-paying parts of the AI labor market.

The Gender Divide

Women remain significantly underrepresented in one of the fastest-growing and highest-paying segments of the labor market. In 2025, women accounted for only 26% of new hires in AI roles, compared with 50% of new hires in non-AI occupations. Representation is even lower in some of the highest-paying AI roles. Women make up just 20% of Head of AI hires, 26% of Director of AI hires, and 18% of Member of Technical Staff hires.[4]

This gap is especially concerning because women's representation in AI has not improved as the market has grown. For AI roles overall, listed compensation has remained relatively stable over the past three years,

Share of Hires by Gender and Occupation



[3] See: Understanding the Talent Infrastructure Powering AI Transformation.

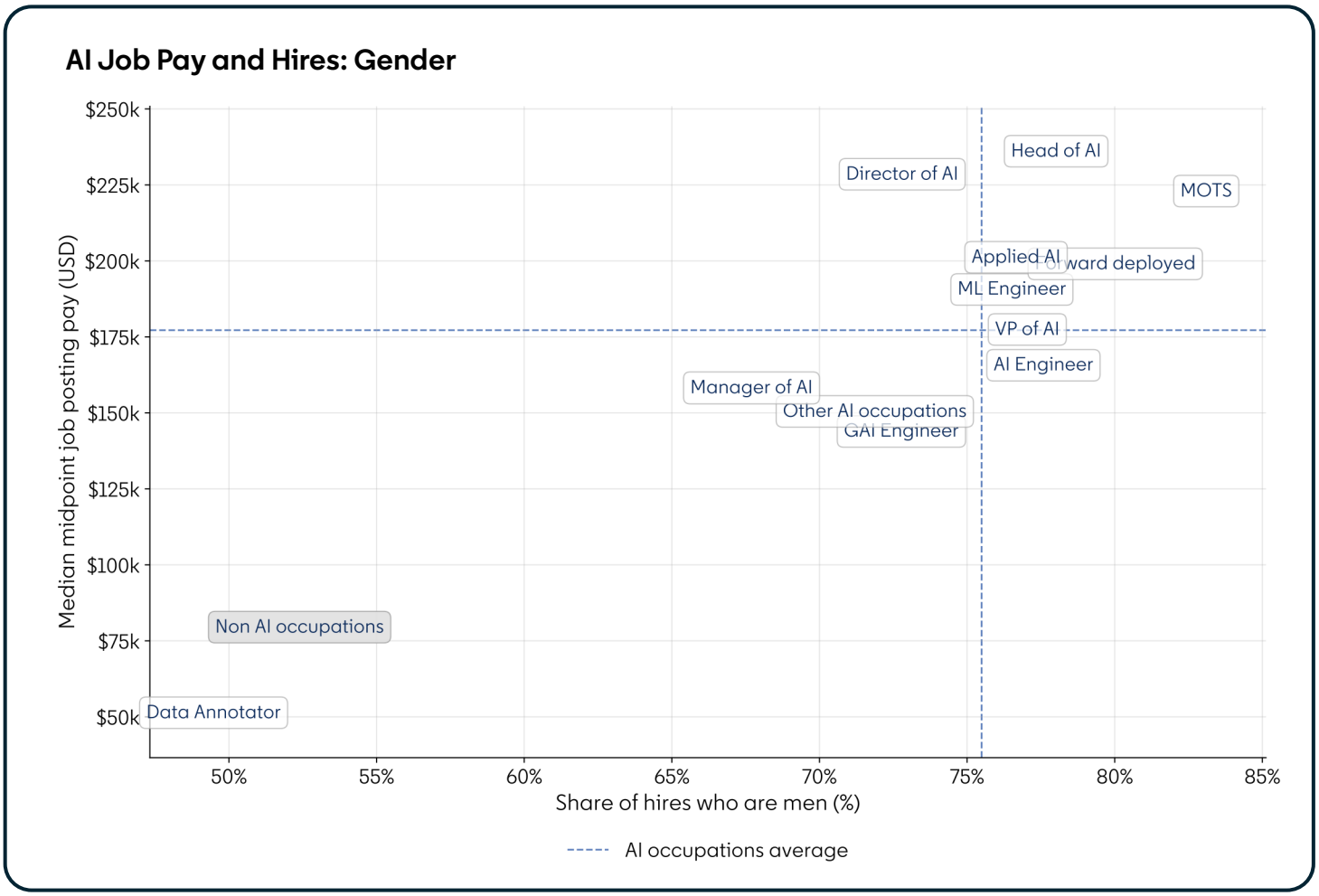
[4] For a deeper dive into gender in the AI workforce and economy, see Baird, M., S. Lara, and M. Carpanelli (2026). "The Triple Penalty: Mapping the Gender Gap in the AI Economy." LinkedIn Economic Graph Research Institute Research Note.

while the share of hires who are women has declined (Appendix Figure A.2). We also see some decline in women's representation in non-AI roles, which may reflect broader labor market conditions and the barriers women often face when labor markets worsen.

Within AI occupations the higher paying occupations have lower shares of hires who are women. Not only do AI jobs pay more than non-AI jobs on average, while having lower representation of women. But even within-AI, the sorting persists. The roles that pay more tend to have a higher share of male hires. Head of AI and Member of Technical Staff roles are among the highest-paid AI jobs, and women make up less than a quarter of hires in both categories. The appendix shows how each of these AI occupations have shifted over the last few years (Figure A.3). Most of the occupations have been relatively stable in the past three years; however, MOTS has shown a clear movement to fewer women hires but higher average pay. Interestingly, VP of AI shows the reverse pattern.

The most gender-balanced AI role (Data Annotator) is also the AI occupation with the lowest pay. Women represent more than half of hires in these roles, making data annotation one of the few AI occupations with greater gender balance. These roles also tend to have lower specialized education requirements than other AI jobs. The structure of the work may help explain this pattern: data annotation is often paid hourly, can be project-based, and is frequently remote. For women balancing paid work with caregiving responsibilities, remote and flexible hourly work may be more feasible than traditional full-time technical roles.

But this exception also reveals a deeper problem. Data annotation is more accessible and more gender-balanced, but it is also one of the lowest-paid AI roles. In other words, women are better represented in the part of



the AI labor market with lower pay, while they remain underrepresented in the highest-paying AI roles.

This relationship shows up clearly in the data. AI occupations with a higher share of male hires tend to have significantly higher listed salaries. A 10 percentage point increase in the male share of hires is associated with roughly $45,000 higher median listed pay across AI occupations. In 2026 alone, that relationship is even larger, at around $50,000. That is a much stronger relationship between occupation relationship between share of hires who are men and typical pay of the occupation in job postings, which is around $10K per 10 percentage point higher share.

The gender divide in AI is therefore not only about representation. It is also about access to the highest-value parts of the AI economy.

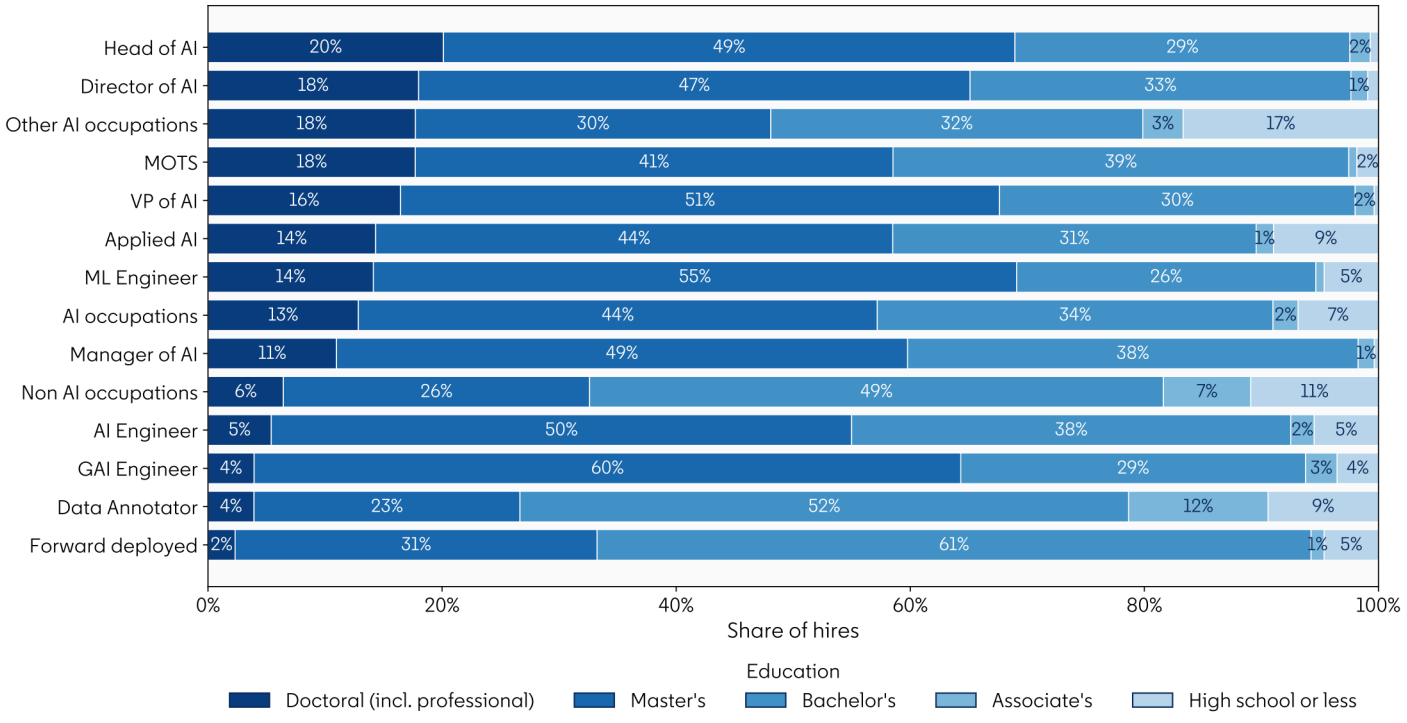
The Education Divide

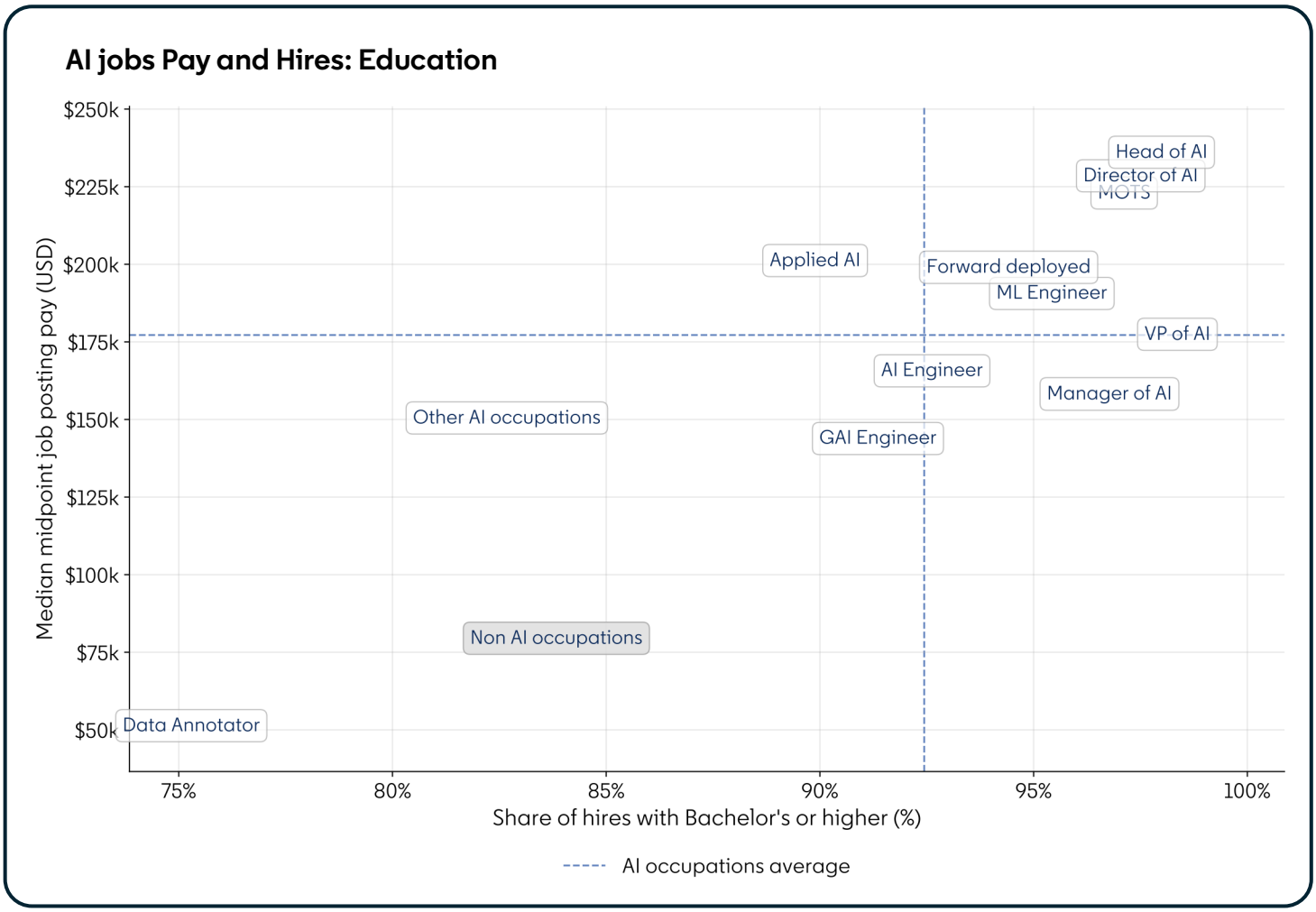
AI jobs are also highly concentrated among workers with college degrees. Around 91% of AI roles are held by workers with a bachelor's degree or higher, compared with 82% of non-AI roles.

The concentration is even stronger in the highest-paying AI occupations. Among Head of AI hires, 98% have at least a bachelor's degree, nearly 70% have a graduate degree, and about 20% have a doctorate. Director of AI and Member of Technical Staff roles show a similar pattern, with more than 97% of hires holding at least a bachelor's degree. For Member of Technical Staff roles, around 60% of hires have graduate degrees.

This means that the AI labor market is not only highly paid, but also highly educated. And that degree intensity has increased over time. The share of AI workers with bachelor's degrees or higher has risen steadily over the past three years, widening the gap between workers with and without four-year degrees. The education advantage in the AI talent pool stands in contrast to narratives in the rest of the labor market, where workers

Share of Jobs by Education and Occupation





with higher educational attainment are more exposed to AI and the slackening labor market.[5]

The relationship between education and pay is also strong. Within AI roles, the highest-paying roles tend to be the ones with the highest concentration of college-educated hires. This is especially true for Head of AI, Director of AI, and Member of Technical Staff roles, with well over 95% of new hires having bachelor's degrees or higher, and representing the highest pay range in the job postings. The appendix again charts changes over time in these patterns. The growth has been especially fast among forward deployed. However, this is at least partially due to the fact that head of AI and MOTS positions are near the ceiling of 100% of new hires being filled by workers with bachelor's degrees or higher.

There are some signs of broader access in specific roles. Data Annotator roles have seen the sharpest decline in the share of hires with bachelor's degrees or higher, suggesting that they may be becoming a more accessible entry point into AI work for people without four-year degrees. But again, this accessibility comes with lower pay.

Education mix is a strong predictor of pay across AI occupations. A 10 percentage point increase in the share of hires with a Bachelor's degree or higher is associated with approximately $52,000 higher median listed pay

[5] See Preparing the Workforce for Generative AI, Generative AI's influence on Employment Patterns, and The Labor Market for Recent College Graduates.

(this finding is also stable in the 2026 cross-section alone, with ~$59,000 per 10pp).

AI is often described as a force that democratizes expertise. Yet today's AI labor market appears increasingly concentrated among workers with higher levels of formal education, especially in the highest-paying occupations.

The Age Divide

The age divide in AI is more complex. Unlike gender and education, where the patterns are clearer, generational representation varies substantially by role.

Some AI leadership roles skew older, but not exclusively. Head of AI roles are disproportionately held by Millennials, who make up 60% of new hires, followed by Gen X. Member of Technical Staff roles also have a large Millennial share, at 56%, but skew younger overall, with Gen Z as the second-largest group.

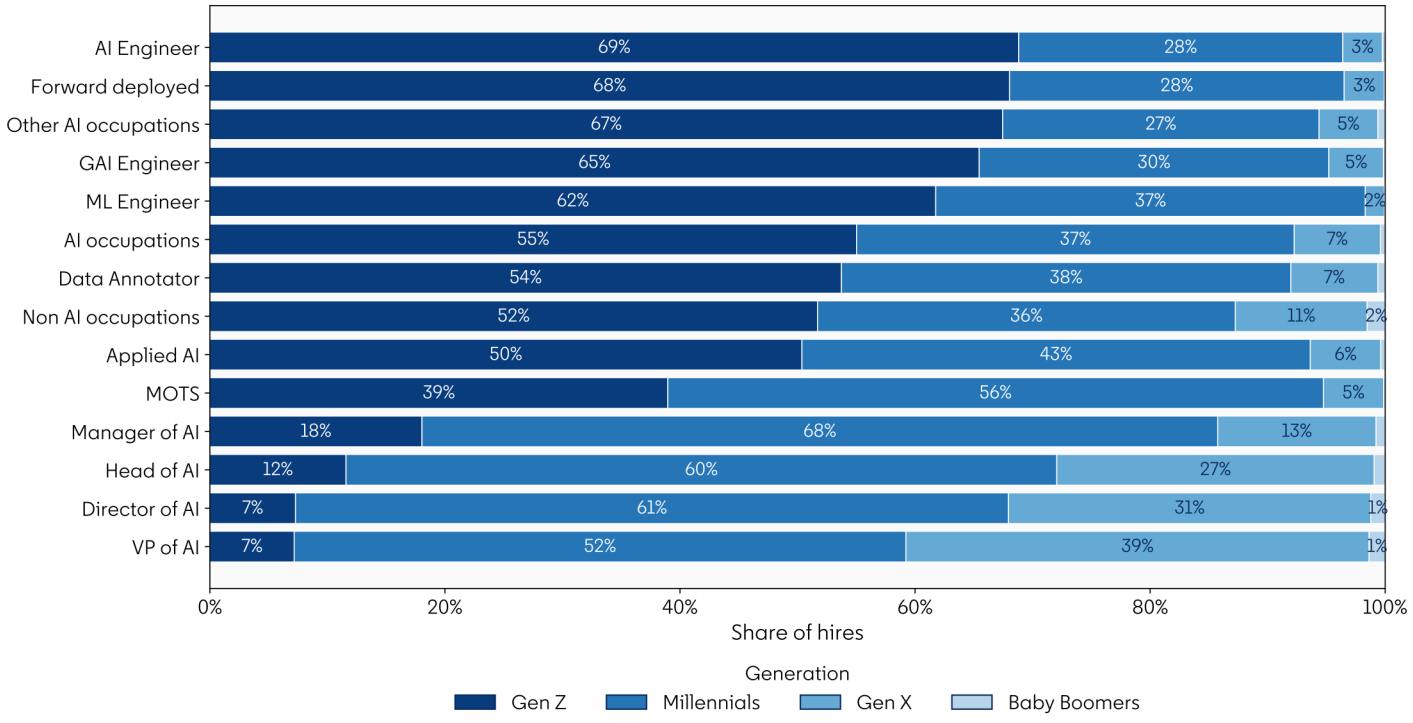
Younger workers are especially prominent in some of the fastest-growing individual contributor roles. Gen Z represents more than two-thirds of Forward Deployed Engineer and AI Engineer hires, suggesting that newer AI roles may be providing strong entry points for younger workers.

For AI overall, the market moved slightly towards younger workers among new hires between 2023 and 2024, but the generational mix has remained roughly stable since then.

When comparing occupations, younger-skewing AI roles tend to be higher paid, but the relationship is weaker than the gender and education divides. The pattern is strongest among individual contributor roles, including Member of Technical Staff, Applied AI, Forward Deployed Engineer, Machine Learning Engineer, and AI Engineer. These roles tend to combine high pay with a large share of Gen Z and Millennial hires. In the Appendix we report it by AI occupation.

Senior management roles tell a different story. Head of AI, Director of AI, and VP of AI roles are also high-paying, but they are less concentrated among younger workers.

Share of Jobs by Generation and Occupation

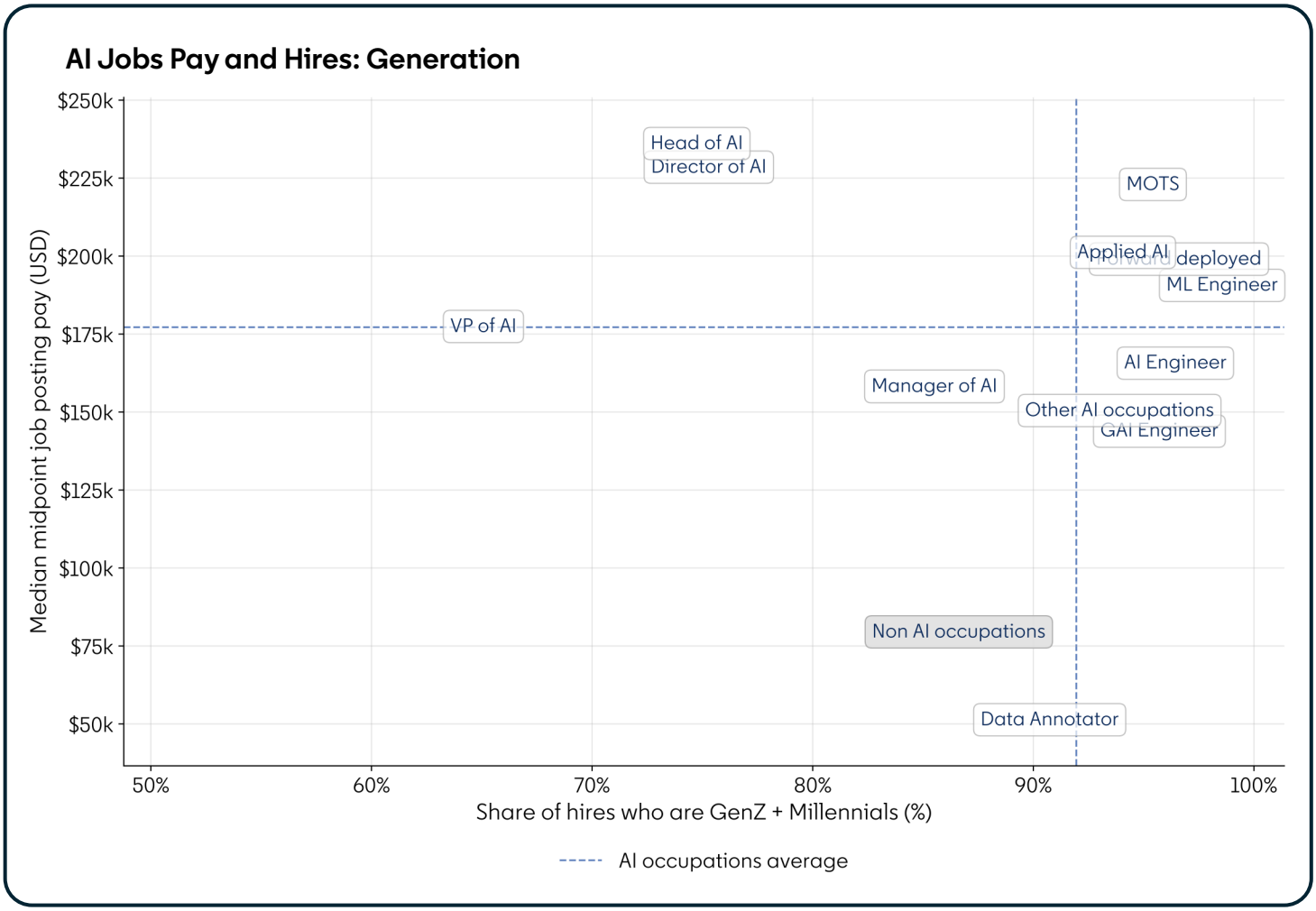


Even so, Gen Z and Millennials still account for more than half of hires in these senior AI roles, showing that AI leadership is not exclusively an older-worker segment.

Over time, some roles are becoming younger. Head of AI and Member of Technical Staff roles have both seen movement toward younger generations. AI Engineer and Forward Deployed Engineer roles are already close to the ceiling, with hires overwhelmingly concentrated among Gen Z and Millennials. VP of AI stands out because it has become younger over time while also seeing a decline in listed pay.

Overall, age is a less consistent predictor of pay than gender or education. In 2026 alone, the share of younger hires does not significantly explain pay differences across AI occupations. In a longer panel, occupations with more younger hires appear to have somewhat lower pay, but that may reflect the broader maturation of the AI labor market rather than a stable structural relationship.

The main takeaway is that AI is creating opportunities for younger workers, especially in newer technical and deployment-oriented roles. But age does not define access to the AI wage premium as strongly as education and gender do.



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DEFINITIONS AND METHODOLOGY

Data Sources

All data are drawn from LinkedIn's platform data for the United States. Two primary data sources are used: job postings (for pay statistics) and member employment histories (for workforce composition).

Job postings pay data are constructed from US-based job postings listed on LinkedIn between 2023 and 2026.

Compensation sources. Pay figures are drawn from two complementary sources within LinkedIn's job postings data: extracted compensation (standardized by LinkedIn's systems from the posting text) and poster-provided compensation (entered directly by the job poster).

Annualization. All pay figures are converted to annual equivalents using the compensation period reported in the posting. Scaling factors are: monthly × 12, weekly × 52, hourly × 40 × 52 (assuming a 40-hour work week). Postings reporting a daily or unspecified period are excluded. Per-period sanity bounds are applied before annualization to remove implausible values (e.g., an "hourly" wage of $500,000 or an "annual" salary of $200) without aggressively trimming the tails of a market that includes both low-wage and extremely high-paying roles. The bounds are intentionally wide; given that the analysis uses percentiles rather than means, residual outliers have limited influence on reported figures.

Midpoint construction. For postings that report both a minimum and maximum salary, the midpoint is computed as (min + max) / 2. Where only one bound is available (truncated range), that bound is used as both the min and max, making the midpoint equal to the single reported value. Postings that report an exact salary (range = 0) are treated equivalently. Min and max are also order-corrected so that the smaller value is always treated as the floor and the larger as the ceiling, regardless of how they were reported.

Aggregation and thresholds. Pay statistics are computed per occupation × list year cell using approximate percentiles (p5, p25, p50, p75, p95 of the midpoint distribution, plus median of the posted min and max). Occupations/years with fewer than 30 qualifying postings (with pay listed) are excluded from the data. Only US postings are included.

Currency. Only USD-denominated compensation is retained; postings with non-USD or missing currency codes are excluded.

Workforce composition data are constructed from LinkedIn member profiles. A "hire" is defined as a member who began a new position in a given occupation in a given calendar year, as reported on their LinkedIn profile. Demographic attributes — gender, birth year cohort (generation), and educational attainment — are drawn from member-reported profile data. Occupation-year demographic cells with fewer than 30 total hires are excluded. All composition figures reflect US members only.

Occupation Classification

Occupations are classified using LinkedIn's standardized occupation taxonomy. This research note focuses on AI builder occupations, manually selected out of all AI occupations standardized in our taxonomy. The 12 most common specific AI occupations (e.g., AI Engineer, Generative AI Engineer, Machine Learning Engineer, Data Annotator, and so on) were selected, while all other AI builder occupations are assigned to Other AI. All non-AI builder occupations are assigned to a Non-AI occupations category. An "AI occupations" aggregate is computed across all AI builder occupations.

Key Definitions

Term	Definition
Median midpoint pay	Median of (posted min + posted max) / 2 across qualifying postings in a given occupation-year cell
Share women / men	Share of hires identified as female / male in a given occupation-year cell

Share younger	Share of hires born 1981 or later (Gen Z and Millennials)
Share BA+	Share of hires reporting a bachelor's degree or higher as their highest credential
List year	Calendar year in which a job posting was listed
Start year	Calendar year in which a member began a new position

Analytical Approach

Descriptive charts show trends across 2023–2026 for pay and workforce composition. Trajectory charts plot median midpoint pay against demographic share for each occupation-year combination; 2026 snapshot charts show only the most recent cross-section. All charts use the 12 AI sub-occupations as the unit of observation; aggregate groupings (AI occupations, Non-AI occupations) are shown as reference benchmarks where noted.

Regression analysis examines the cross-occupational relationship between workforce composition and listed pay. The unit of observation is an AI sub-occupation (12 sub-occupations; aggregate groups excluded). The dependent variable is median midpoint pay in USD. Independent variables are the binary demographic share variables defined above, expressed in percentage points (0–100 scale). Two specifications are reported for each demographic:

- 2026 cross-section: OLS regression on the 2026 observation for each sub-occupation (N≈12, varies by data availability).
- All years, year fixed effects: OLS regression pooling 2023–2026 with indicator variables for each list year, isolating cross-occupational variation net of common year-level trends (N≈46).

All regressions are estimated with OLS. Results are presented as the coefficient on the demographic share variable; the level-model coefficient is reported as the change in median pay associated with a 10 percentage point increase in the share variable. Standard errors are not adjusted for clustering given the small number of occupational units; p-values should be interpreted accordingly.

Limitations

Findings are descriptive and correlational; no causal interpretation is warranted. Pay figures reflect only postings with voluntarily disclosed compensation, which may not be representative of the full posting universe. Workforce composition reflects LinkedIn member self-reported data and may not represent the overall US workforce for these occupations. Sample sizes at the occupation-year level are small (12 sub-occupations), which limits statistical precision; results should be interpreted as indicative cross-occupational patterns rather than precise point estimates.

SUPPLEMENTARY TABLES AND FIGURES

Figure A.1 Median Midpoint Pay Over Time, By Occupation

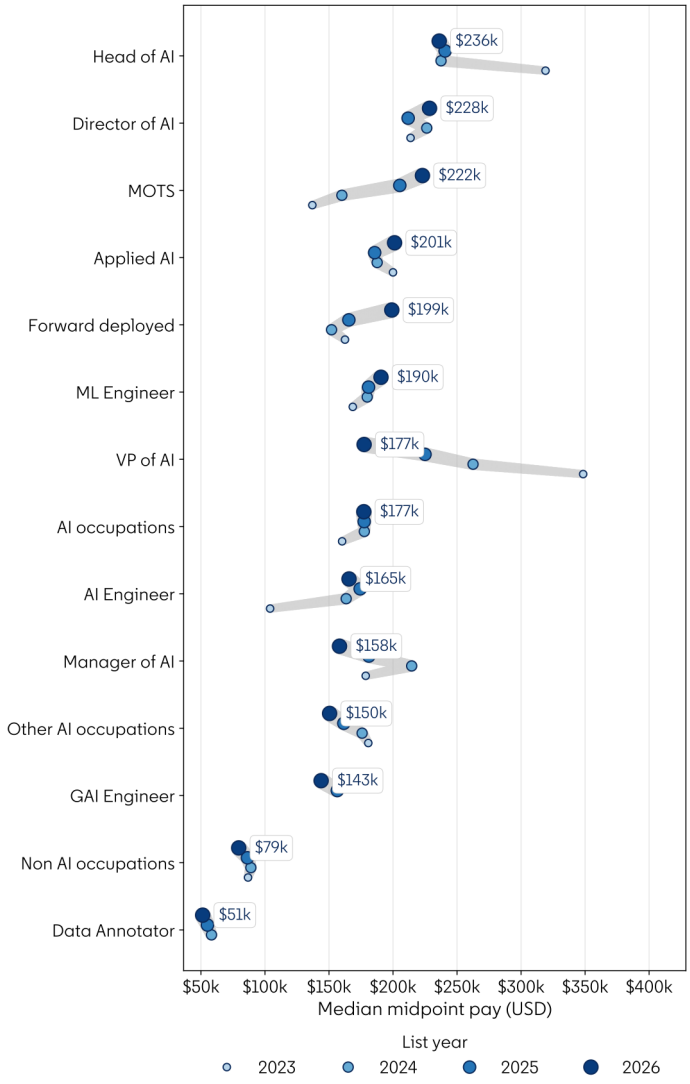
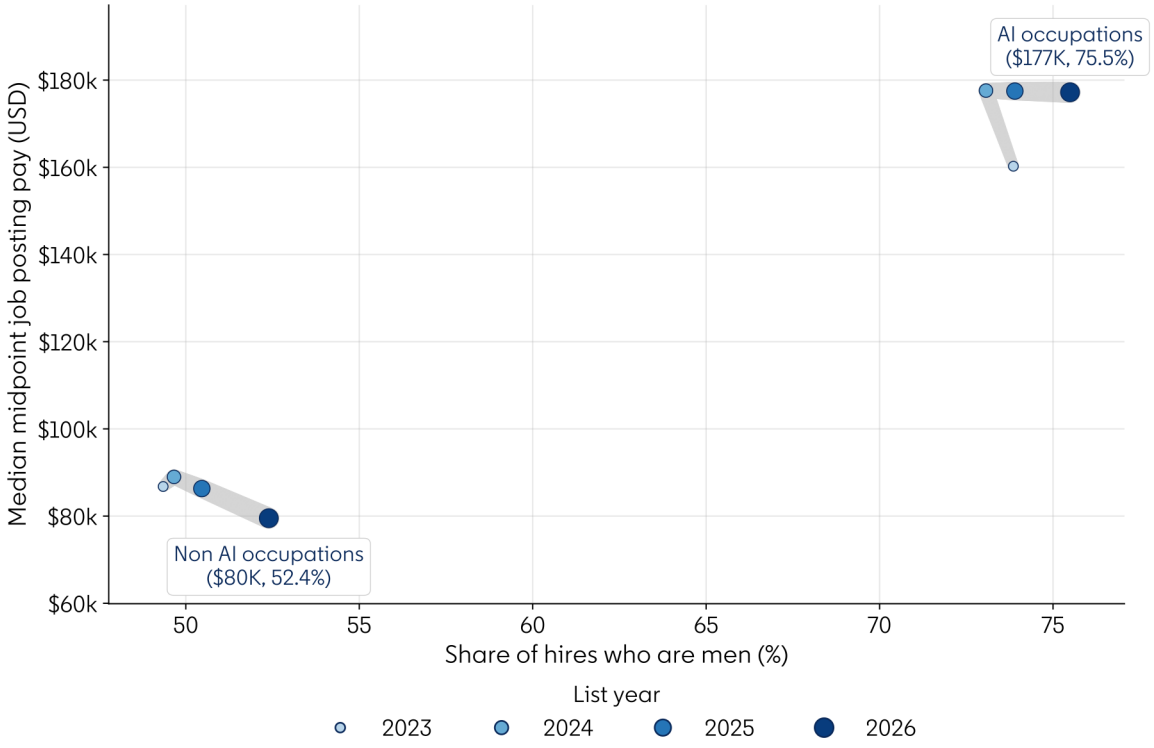


Figure A.2. AI Jobs Pay and Hires
Gender



Education

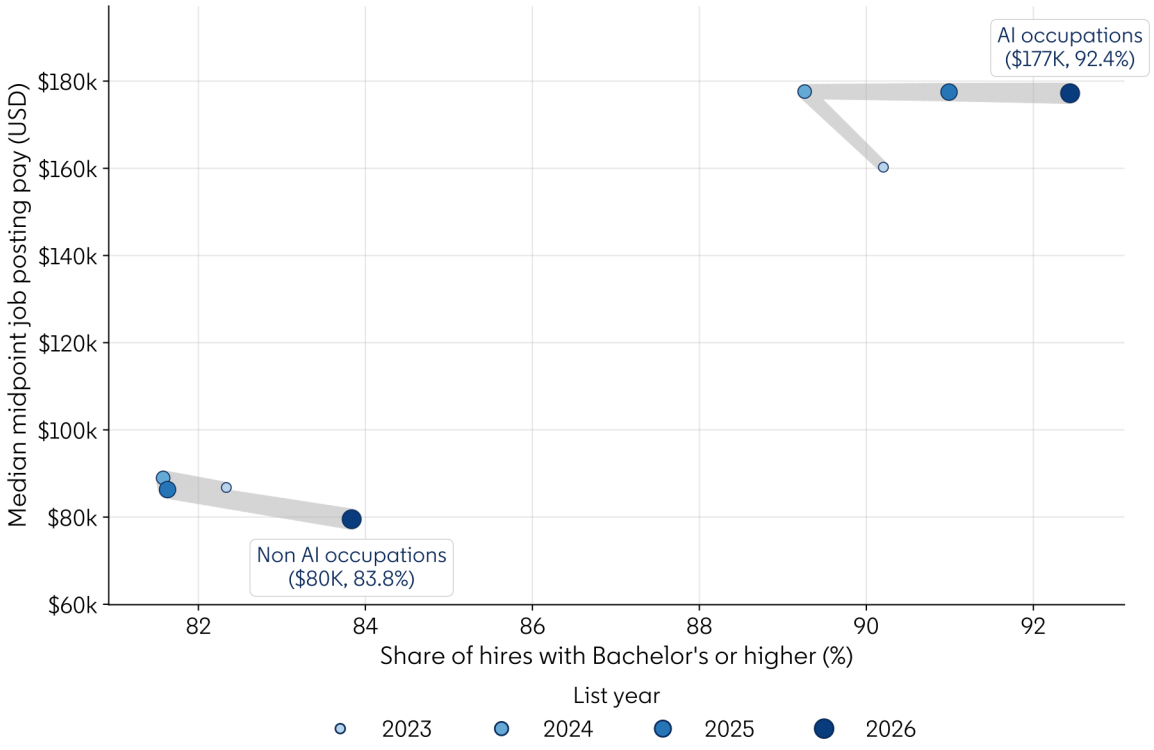


Figure A.2. (continued) AI Jobs Pay and Hires
Generation

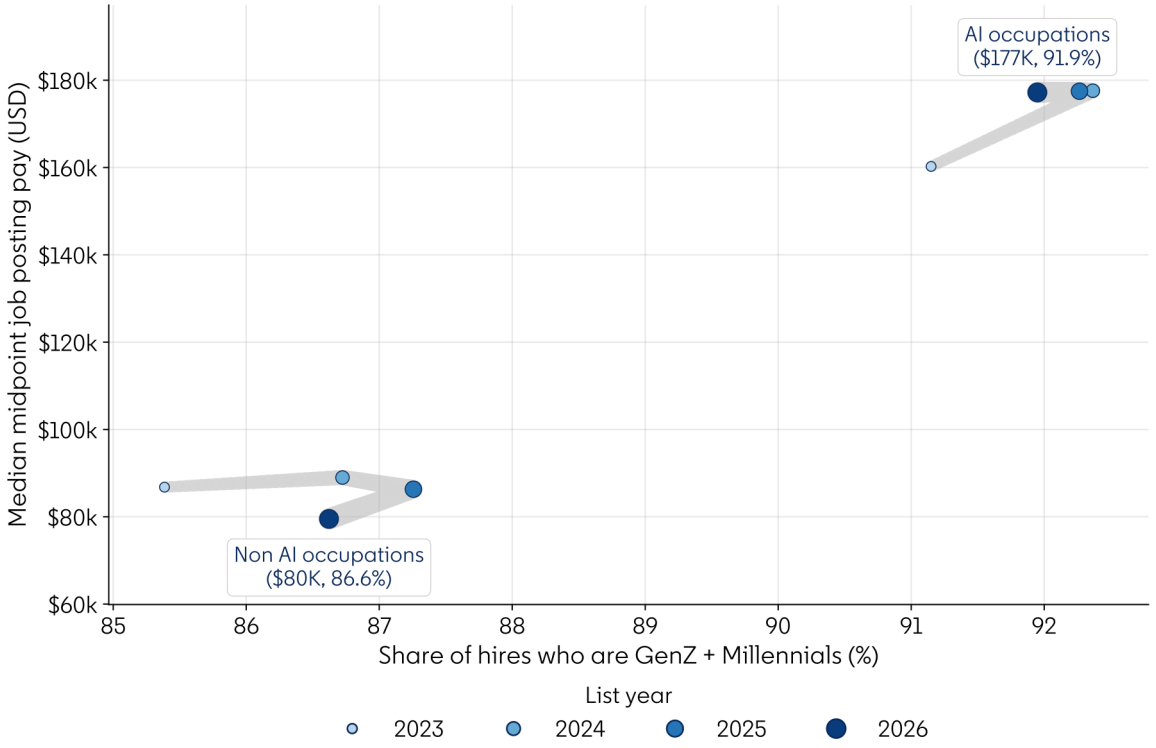


Figure A.3. AI Jobs Pay and Hires: Gender and Occupation

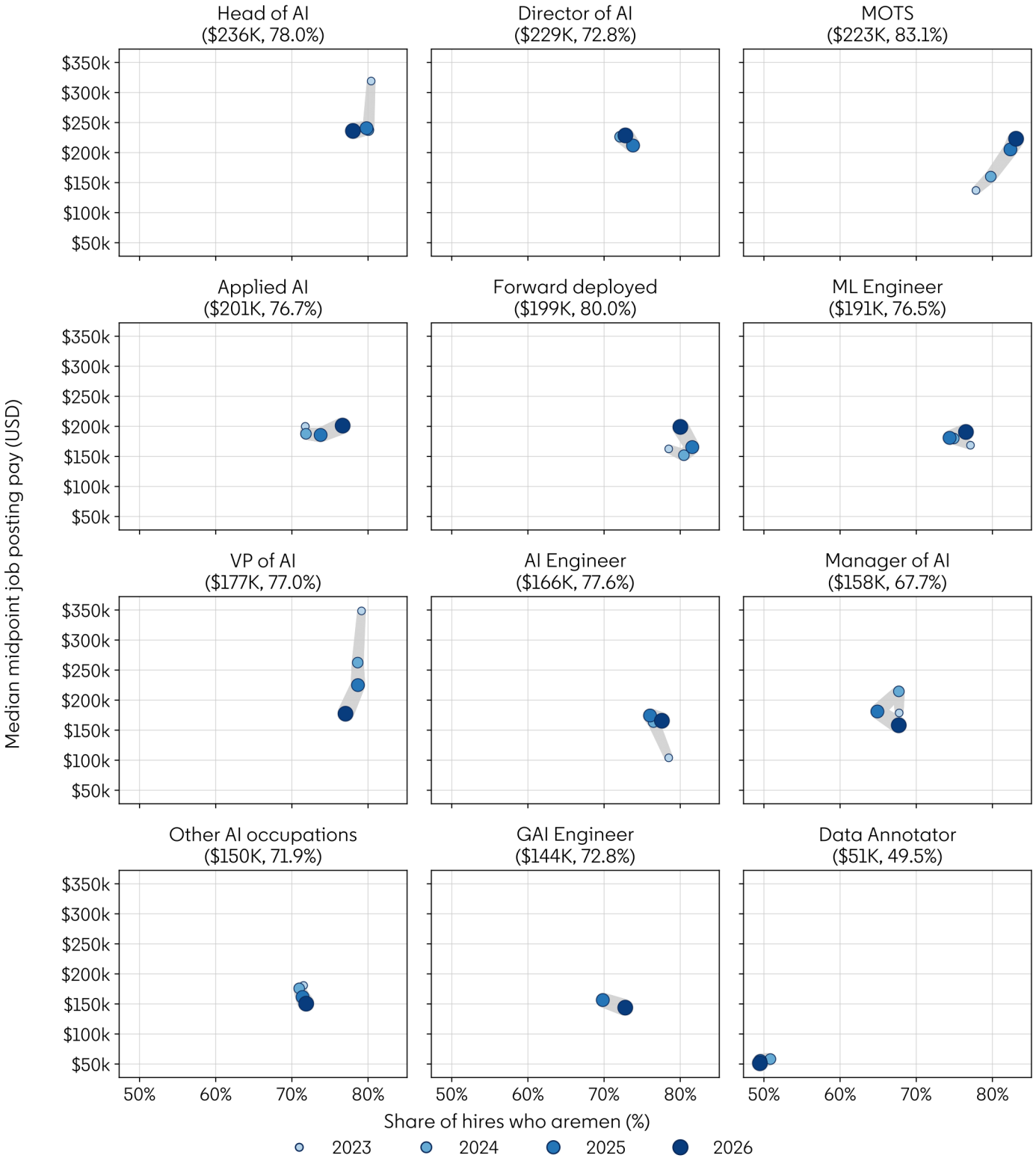


Figure A.4. AI Jobs Pay and Hires: Education

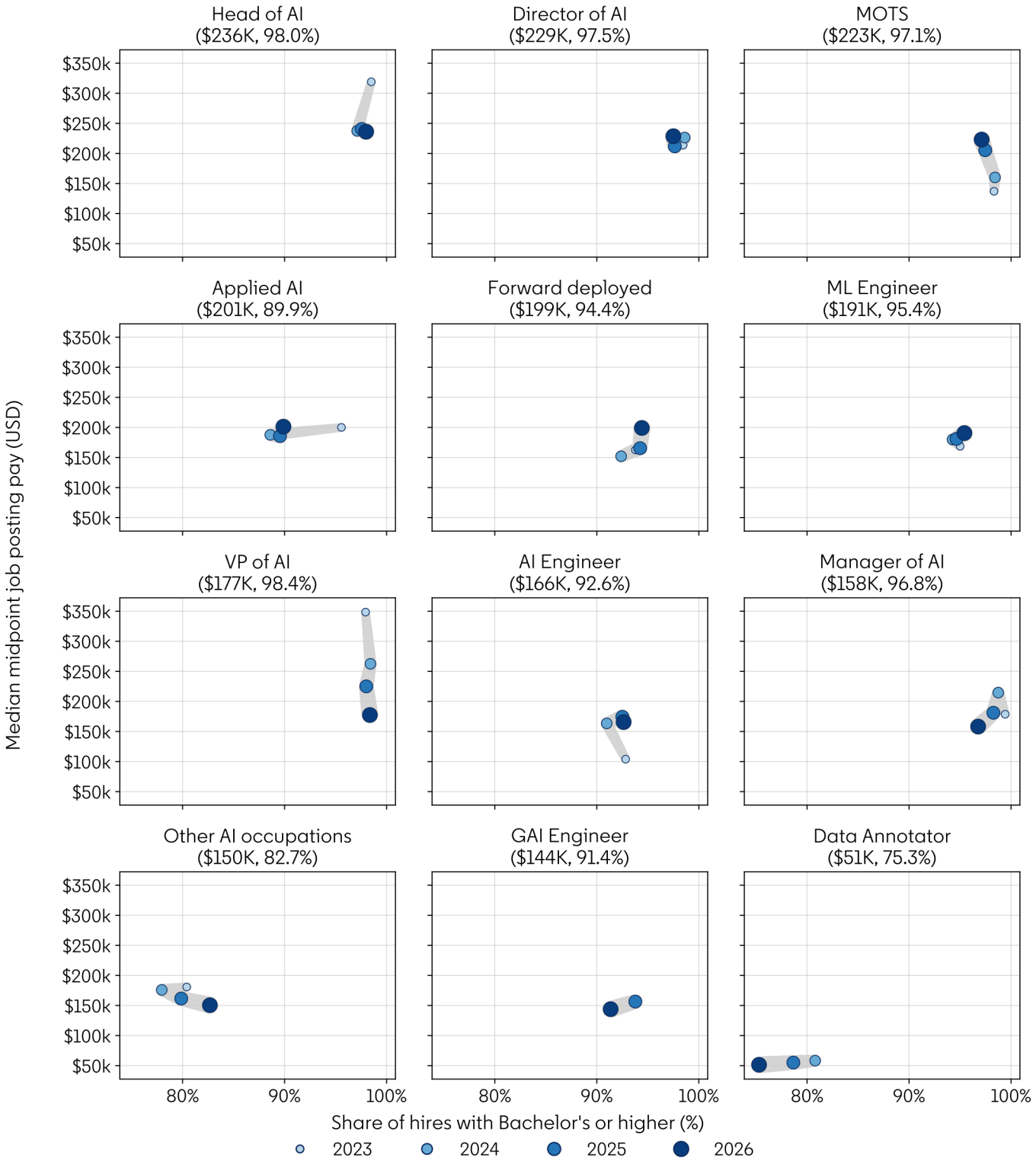


Figure A.5. AI Jobs Pay and Hires: Generations