



Global Skill Development Council

FIELD GUIDE · 2026 EDITION

Get the AI Leadership Salary Field Guide

Full salary data — all six leadership roles, cited percentile bands, regional adjustments and ROI worksheets, plus the GSDC pathway that closes the gap.

Inside the toolkit

- **6-role salary breakdown** — cited, 2026
- **Tier-progression compensation math**
- **Regional adjustments** — SF, NYC & remote
- **ROI calculator template**

Roles covered: Chief AI Officer · VP of AI · Head of AI · AI Director · AI Strategist · AI Program Manager

How to read this guide

Salary aggregators disagree by hundreds of thousands of dollars on AI leadership roles — because a single title sits on three or four very different job descriptions. This guide normalizes that noise into percentile bands you can actually negotiate against.

What a percentile band means

Every role in this guide is reported as a four-point band rather than a single "average." Use it like a ruler, not a target.

Marker	What it tells you	How to use it
P25	Entry into the role / smaller orgs	Your floor — decline offers below this once qualified
P50 (median)	The typical credentialed holder	Your anchor in any negotiation
P75	Strong performers, larger orgs	Your realistic ceiling with a credential + results
P90	Top of market, enterprise / AI-first	Reachable with equity, scale and tenure

Sources & scope

Bands reflect **US base compensation, 2026**, synthesized from Glassdoor's 2026 "most likely range" data (P25–P75) and 90th-percentile reporting, with ZipRecruiter and published 2026 executive-search guides used to corroborate spread. Equity, bonus and signing are *excluded* from the base bands unless a note says otherwise — at the executive tier these can double total compensation.

The 2026 AI-leadership market at a glance

AI leadership is the fastest-repricing band in the executive market. Three forces are driving it.

92%

of companies plan to increase AI investment over the next three years

~1%

of leaders say their organization has reached AI maturity

56%

wage premium for workers with AI skills vs. peers without

1 — Demand is structurally ahead of supply

The Chief AI Officer seat barely existed before 2024. The talent pool that can credibly fill it — and the VP, Head and Director roles beneath it — is still thin, so employers compete on compensation rather than wait.

2 — Governance is now a board-level line item

With the EU AI Act in force for high-risk systems and a growing patchwork of US state law, organizations need leaders who can own AI *risk*, not just AI *build*. That accountability commands a premium.

3 — The credential gap is visible in the bands

Across roles, certified and demonstrably-qualified leaders cluster in the upper percentiles. The gap between P25 and P75 is, in practice, an upskilling gap — which is exactly what the rest of this guide is built to help you close.

The six leadership roles, mapped

These roles form a ladder of scope and accountability. Knowing where a title sits tells you which band to expect — and what the next rung pays.

Chief AI Officer

Owens enterprise AI strategy, risk & governance · answers to the board

VP of AI / Head of AI

Owens the AI function & org · translates strategy into delivery

AI Director

Bridges strategy and execution · leads multiple teams / programs

AI Strategist

Builds the roadmap · identifies high-value use cases

AI Program Manager

Delivery backbone · runs the PMO that ships the roadmap

Head of AI and VP of AI often overlap; at AI-first companies the **Head of AI** can out-earn a VP, because the title carries full functional ownership rather than a layer in a larger org.

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RELATED CREDENTIAL

Turn these benchmarks into your own number.

The GSDC AI Leadership Certification is the credential mapped directly to the six roles in this guide — the fastest route from reading the bands to landing inside them.

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Chief AI Officer (CAIO)

US · 2026 · base

The C-suite owner of AI strategy, implementation and governance. The widest band in this guide — the same title covers a growth-stage operator and a Fortune 500 executive answering to an audit committee.

P25	Median (P50)	P75	P90
\$265K	\$350K	\$494K	\$645K

With equity, signing & bonus, total compensation can reach \$1.5M-\$3M+ at frontier labs and large enterprises.

median



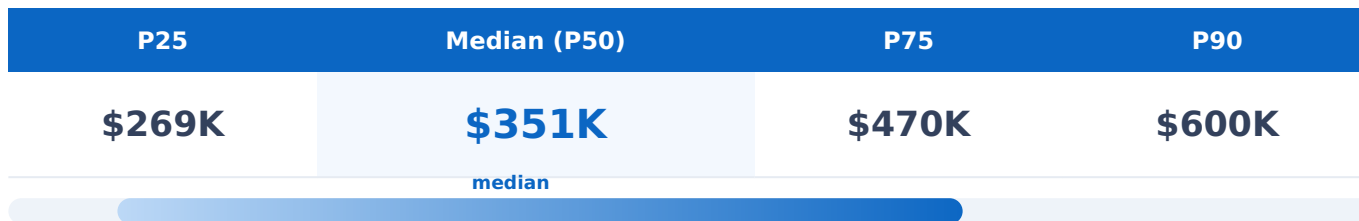
What shifts you up the band

- Company stage & scale — enterprise CAIOs sit two bands above startups
- Board-level governance & model-risk accountability
- Demonstrated P&L impact from deployed AI, not pilots
- A recognized AI-leadership credential to validate breadth fast

Head of AI

US · 2026 · base

Full ownership of the AI function. At AI-first organizations this is frequently the top AI seat, which is why its median edges past the VP band.



What shifts you up the band

- Whether the role owns the function or reports into a VP
- Size of the team and breadth of the mandate
- Track record standing up an AI org from scratch
- Cross-functional credibility with product, data & risk

VP of AI

US · 2026 · base

Translates executive strategy into a functioning AI organization and delivery engine. VP titles that fold in machine-learning ownership trend slightly higher again.

P25	Median (P50)	P75	P90
\$231K	\$307K	\$427K	\$562K

median

What shifts you up the band

- Scope of org owned (single team vs. multi-team function)
- ML / platform ownership lifts the band ~5-8%
- Delivery record on revenue- or cost-moving AI products
- Industry — tech, financial services & professional services pay top

AI Director

US · 2026 · base

The hinge between strategy and execution — leads multiple teams or programs and is the most common entry point into AI leadership from a senior IC track.

P25	Median (P50)	P75	P90
\$231K	\$302K	\$402K	\$514K

median

What shifts you up the band

- Number of teams / programs under direct leadership
- Whether the role is delivery-only or also shapes strategy
- Enterprise vs. mid-market employer
- A credential that signals leadership readiness, not just technical depth

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LIMITED-TIME OFFER

The comp gap is widening every quarter.

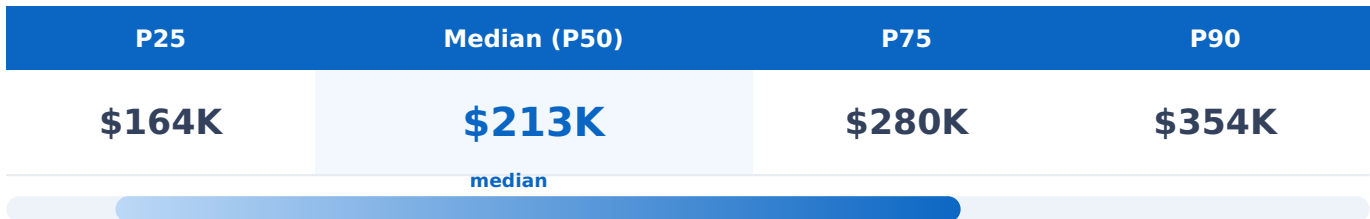
Demand for certified AI leaders is outpacing supply. Lock in your enrolment while this season's pricing window is open and start closing the gap today.

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AI Strategist

US · 2026 · base

Builds the roadmap and identifies the high-value use cases the rest of the org executes. Senior strategists land in the top 5% of US earners; the mid-level median clusters tightly around \$190K.



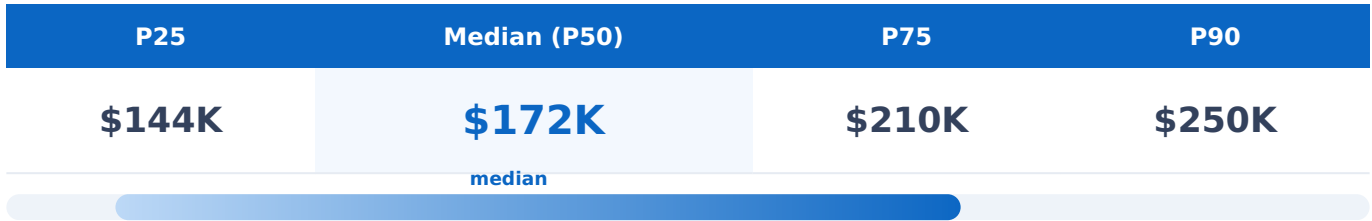
What shifts you up the band

- Seniority — senior median (~\$230K) sits well above mid-level
- Hands-on generative-AI & MLOps fluency appears at every level
- Evidence you've designed enterprise AI roadmaps end-to-end
- Change-management & transformation credentials accelerate credibility

AI Program Manager

US · 2026 · base

The delivery backbone — runs the PMO that turns the roadmap into shipped systems. The most accessible leadership entry point, and a proven launchpad toward Director and VP.



What shifts you up the band

- Breadth of program portfolio & budget owned
- Technical fluency in the AI delivery lifecycle
- Location & employer (hub-city & big-tech roles pay 20%+ more)
- PM credential paired with an AI-leadership credential

All six roles, side by side

US base compensation, 2026. Read across to compare scope; read down to plan your next rung.

Role	P25	Median	P75	P90
Chief AI Officer	\$265K	\$350K	\$494K	\$645K
Head of AI	\$269K	\$351K	\$470K	\$600K
VP of AI	\$231K	\$307K	\$427K	\$562K
AI Director	\$231K	\$302K	\$402K	\$514K
AI Strategist	\$164K	\$213K	\$280K	\$354K
AI Program Manager	\$144K	\$172K	\$210K	\$250K

Executive bands (CAIO, Head, VP) exclude equity & bonus, which can add 50-150% of base at scale. Strategist and Program Manager bands are closer to total cash. The single largest within-role mover, everywhere, is demonstrated leadership scope — which is what a credential is built to evidence.

Turning percentiles into a negotiation

A band is leverage only if you use it deliberately. Here is the play.

- 1 Anchor on the median, not the average.** The "average" is dragged upward by a few outliers. The median is what a typical credentialed holder of *your* exact scope earns — a far stronger anchor.
- 2 Locate yourself honestly between P50 and P75.** Each qualification, each shipped result, each governance responsibility moves you right along the band. List them; they are your evidence.
- 3 Quote the band, not a number.** "Roles at this scope sit between the median and P75" reframes the conversation around market data instead of your current salary.
- 4 Name the gap-closer.** If you're below where you want to be, the credible move is a plan — the credential, the scope, the timeline. That plan is the back half of this guide.

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FLAGSHIP SAVINGS

Half off the credential that moves your band.

Our deepest enrolment saving of the season is live. Get the same GSDC AI Leadership Certification employers screen for — at a fraction of the usual investment.

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Tier-progression compensation math

The fastest way to grow AI-leadership pay is not a raise inside a band — it's a jump to the next band. Here's the math on what each rung is worth.

The core idea

Within a role, annual raises move you a few percent along the band. A **tier jump** — Strategist→Director, Director→VP, VP→C-suite — resets you onto a new, higher band entirely. One jump is typically worth several years of in-band raises.

What a single tier jump is worth (median to median)

Jump	From median	To median	Annual delta
Program Mgr → Strategist	\$172K	\$213K	+\$41K
Strategist → Director	\$213K	\$302K	+\$89K
Director → VP of AI	\$302K	\$307K	+\$5K*
Director → Head of AI	\$302K	\$351K	+\$49K
Head / VP → Chief AI Officer	\$351K	\$350K+	+equity

*Director→VP looks flat at the median but the VP band's P75/P90 sit far higher (\$427K / \$562K) — the jump buys *upside*, not just a higher floor. C-suite deltas show up mostly as equity, which the base bands exclude.

The progression ladder, in dollars

Read this bottom-to-top. Each block is a median base; the arrows are the annual raise you unlock by clearing the rung above.



A five-year progression scenario

A realistic, credential-driven climb from delivery into leadership. Figures are role medians; your mileage varies with company and location.

Year	Role	Median base	Cumulative vs. staying put
0	AI Program Manager	\$172K	—
1-2	AI Strategist	\$213K	+\$41K / yr
3	AI Director	\$302K	+\$130K / yr
4-5	VP / Head of AI	\$307-351K	+\$135-179K / yr

The headline

Over five years, the leader who climbs the ladder out-earns the one who stays in the Program Manager band by **well over \$400K in cumulative base alone** — before equity, bonus or the regional uplifts on the next pages.

The certification premium

Why does a credential move the band? Because it does three things hiring committees pay for — at exactly the moment they're deciding your number.

It evidences breadth

AI leadership is judged on range — strategy, governance, delivery, risk. A credential lets you prove that range without waiting years to accumulate it on the job.

It de-risks the hire

For a board filling a CAIO or VP seat, a recognized credential lowers the perceived risk of the decision — which is what moves an offer toward P75.

It signals leadership, not just skill

The single biggest within-role mover is demonstrated *leadership scope*. A leadership-focused credential speaks to that directly.

It accelerates the jump

Credentials appear in only a minority of postings — which means holding one is a differentiator, not a checkbox. It shortens the climb between tiers.

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Regional adjustments

The same role pays very differently by market. Apply these multipliers to any median in this guide to estimate a local number.

Market	Multiplier	Why
SF Bay Area / Silicon Valley	× 1.28	Highest demand density & cost of living; AI-first employers cluster here
New York City	× 1.18	Financial-services AI demand; high cost of living
Seattle	× 1.15	Big-tech concentration, no state income tax offsets nominal pay
Austin	× 1.04	Growing hub; lower cost base than the coasts
US National baseline	× 1.00	The medians as printed in this guide
Remote (distributed)	× 0.90	Many employers apply a geo-discount to fully-remote roles

Multipliers are directional planning aids, not offers. High-cost markets also carry higher living costs — always compare *net* of housing and tax.

San Francisco Bay Area x1.28

The richest market for every role in this guide. Apply the multiplier to each median to see the Bay-Area-adjusted band.

Role	National median	Bay Area (est.)
Chief AI Officer	\$350K	~\$448K base
Head of AI	\$351K	~\$449K
VP of AI	\$307K	~\$393K
AI Director	\$302K	~\$387K
AI Strategist	\$213K	~\$273K
AI Program Manager	\$172K	~\$220K

At the executive tier the Bay Area premium shows up even more in equity than in base — frontier-lab CAIO packages are the source of the headline multi-million-dollar totals.

New York City & other hubs

NYC leads on financial-services AI demand; Seattle and Austin round out the major US hubs.

New York City ×1.18

Role	National	NYC (est.)
Chief AI Officer	\$350K	~\$413K
VP of AI	\$307K	~\$362K
AI Director	\$302K	~\$356K
AI Strategist	\$213K	~\$251K

Seattle (×1.15) & Austin (×1.04)

Seattle's big-tech concentration and absence of state income tax make nominal pay competitive with the coasts on a net basis. Austin offers coastal-adjacent demand at a materially lower cost of living, which is why its multiplier is modest but its *net* position is often stronger than the number suggests.

Remote compensation math

Fully-remote AI leadership roles trade some nominal pay for flexibility — but the math often favors the candidate once cost of living is netted out.

The geo-discount

Many employers apply roughly a **10% discount** to fully-remote roles versus their highest-cost office band. Apply $\times 0.90$ to the national median for a planning estimate.

The net reality

A VP of AI at ~\$276K remote, living in a low-cost metro, frequently keeps more than a \$393K Bay-Area peer after housing and tax. Always compare **net**.

Role	National	Remote (est.)
VP of AI	\$307K	~\$276K
AI Director	\$302K	~\$272K
AI Strategist	\$213K	~\$192K

Executive seats (CAIO, Head of AI) are less often fully remote — board and stakeholder proximity tends to keep them hybrid at minimum.

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JOIN YOUR PEERS

The professionals in these P75 bands are certified.

Across every role in this guide, credentialed leaders cluster in the upper percentiles. Join the cohort already enrolling and put yourself on the same track.

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The ROI calculator

This is the worksheet that turns the bands into a personal decision: is closing your salary gap worth the investment to close it? Spoiler — at these deltas, the math is rarely close.

The five inputs you need

1. **Current base** — what you earn today
2. **Target median** — the role you're climbing toward (use this guide)
3. **Realistic uplift** — target minus current, or a conservative fraction of it
4. **Total upskilling investment** — tuition + your time, valued honestly
5. **Ramp time** — months until the new band is realistic for you

The next page is a fill-in template. The page after works a real example end-to-end.

ROI worksheet — fill this in

Print this page or copy it into a sheet. The formulas are at the bottom.

#	Input	Your figure
A	Current annual base	\$ _____
B	Target role median (from this guide)	\$ _____
C	Regional multiplier (e.g. 1.18 NYC)	× _____
D	Adjusted target = $B \times C$	\$ _____
E	Annual uplift = $D - A$	\$ _____
F	Total upskilling investment (tuition + time)	\$ _____
G	Ramp time to new band (months)	_____ mo

#	Output	Formula
H	Payback period (months)	$F \div (E \div 12)$
I	3-year cumulative gain	$(E \times 3) - F$
J	ROI multiple over 3 yrs	$(E \times 3) \div F$

ROI worksheet — worked example

An AI Director in NYC targeting a VP of AI seat. Investment figure is an illustrative placeholder for tuition + time — substitute your own.

#	Input / Output	Value
A	Current base (Director)	\$302,000
B	Target median (VP of AI)	\$307,000
C	Regional multiplier (NYC)	× 1.18
D	Adjusted target	\$362,260
E	Annual uplift	\$60,260
F	Total upskilling investment (illustrative)	\$5,000
H	Payback period	~1.0 month
I	3-year cumulative gain	\$175,780
J	3-year ROI multiple	36×

Even if you discount the uplift by half to be conservative, payback is still under a quarter and the 3-year ROI stays comfortably above 15×. This is the structural reason the certification math almost always clears.

Break-even & payback timeline

How quickly the investment pays for itself across different uplift sizes (assuming a \$5,000 illustrative investment).

Annual uplift	Payback period	3-yr cumulative gain
\$25,000	~2.4 months	\$70,000
\$41,000 (PM→Strategist)	~1.5 months	\$118,000
\$60,000 (worked example)	~1.0 month	\$175,000
\$89,000 (Strategist→Director)	~0.7 months	\$262,000

The takeaway

At every realistic uplift in this guide, payback lands inside the **first quarter**. The risk isn't over-investing in the credential — it's leaving a full salary band on the table by waiting.

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CAREER ROI

One band-jump pays for the program many times over.

Run the worksheet on the next pages, then act on it. A single tier of progression dwarfs the cost of getting certified — enrol and start the climb.

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Closing the gap: the GSDC pathway

Every page so far points to one move: evidence the leadership scope that moves your band. The GSDC AI Leadership Certification is built to do exactly that.

- 1 Benchmark** — you've done this. You know the six roles and where you sit.
- 2 Target** — pick the next rung and its adjusted median from the worksheet.
- 3 Credential** — close the breadth-and-leadership gap the credential is designed for.
- 4 Negotiate** — quote the band, present the credential, anchor above the median.

The certification maps to the same strategy / governance / delivery / risk dimensions hiring committees use to set your number — which is what makes it a gap-closer rather than just a line on a CV.

What the certification covers

A leadership credential, not a coding course — built for the people moving into and up the six roles in this guide.

AI strategy & roadmapping

Identify high-value use cases and build the enterprise roadmap — the core of the Strategist and Director bands.

Governance & risk

Own AI risk at the level boards now expect — the accountability that defines the CAIO premium.

Delivery & org leadership

Stand up and lead the AI function — the scope that separates VP and Head of AI from senior IC.

Cross-functional fluency

Speak product, data and compliance credibly — the differentiator hiring committees screen for.

Who it's for: Program Managers and Strategists climbing into leadership, and Directors / VPs formalizing the breadth they already practice.

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SEATS FILLING FAST

The upcoming cohort is filling quickly.

Live cohorts cap their seats to protect mentorship quality. Reserve your place in the next GSDC AI Leadership intake before it closes to new enrolments.

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Negotiation checklist & key takeaways

Take these into your next compensation conversation.

- ✓ **Know your band.** Median and P75 for your exact role & market, from this guide.
- ✓ **Apply your regional multiplier.** A national number undersells a Bay-Area or NYC role.
- ✓ **Anchor on the median, aim for P75.** Justify the gap with results and credentials.
- ✓ **Quote the band, not your current salary.** Reframe around market data.
- ✓ **Count total comp.** At the executive tier, equity and bonus can match or exceed base.
- ✓ **Bring a gap-closing plan.** If you're below target, name the credential and timeline.
- ✓ **Think in tier jumps.** One jump beats years of in-band raises.
- ✓ **Run the ROI.** If payback is inside a quarter, hesitating is the expensive option.

The bottom line

Six roles. Four percentile markers each. Regional multipliers, tier-jump math and an ROI worksheet that almost always clears. The data points to one move — close the gap deliberately, with a credential that evidences leadership scope.

Sources & method

US base-compensation bands synthesized from 2026 salary reporting (Glassdoor "most likely range" P25-P75 and 90th-percentile data; ZipRecruiter national & metro data) and corroborated against published 2026 executive-search and AI-compensation guides. Regional multipliers and ROI figures are directional planning models, not offers; equity and bonus are excluded from base bands except where noted. Verify any figure against a current, role-specific source before relying on it for a decision.

This field guide is provided by GSDC for educational and benchmarking purposes. Compensation outcomes depend on individual circumstances, employer and market conditions.

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FINAL CALL

Last call — close your salary gap now.

You've seen the roles, the bands, the math and the pathway. The only step left is enrolment. Claim the 50% offer and begin your AI Leadership Certification today.

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