

THE SALARY FIELD GUIDE

Generative AI Salary Field Guide

The numbers, in one place. Five experience bands, a 10+ role comparison matrix, regional adjustments for the highest-paying markets, and an ROI worksheet to value your next move — plus the GSDC pathway that closes the gap between where you are and where the pay is.

WHAT'S INSIDE

01 · 5-BAND BREAKDOWN

Entry to leadership pay, with 2026 sources cited.

02 · ROLE MATRIX

10+ AI roles compared on pay, demand and difficulty.

03 · REGIONAL ADJUSTMENTS

San Francisco, NYC, remote and beyond.

04 · ROI WORKSHEET

Calculate the return on your next skill move.

05 · ROADMAP & TRENDS

How pay grows, and what employers pay premiums for.

06 · CLOSING THE GAP

The GSDC pathway from your band to the next.

5

EXPERIENCE BANDS

12

ROLES COMPARED

+56%

AI-SKILLS WAGE
PREMIUM

2026

DATA, CITED

All figures are indicative ranges aggregated from public 2025–26 sources (see Methodology, page 2) and vary by region, employer, specialty and experience. This guide is informational only — not financial, career or compensation advice.

START HERE

Methodology & how to read the numbers

Salary figures online contradict each other constantly — different sources measure base vs. total comp, different cities, different seniority. This guide normalises them into clear bands and tells you exactly what each number includes.

WHAT WE COUNT**Base vs. total comp**

Unless stated, ranges are **annual base salary, US market**. “Total comp” adds bonus and equity — which can lift senior pay 30–80% above base.

SOURCES**Aggregated, 2026**

Drawn from public reporting: Glassdoor, Built In, Levels.fyi, Indeed, ZipRecruiter, Coursera, recruiter placement data, BLS and PwC analyses.

WHY RANGES**Bands, not points**

A single “average” hides more than it reveals. Ranges show the realistic spread you'd see across employers and cities.

HOW TO USE IT**Find, adjust, plan**

Find your band and role, apply your regional multiplier, then use the ROI worksheet to value the jump to the next band.

AN HONEST CAVEAT

Compensation is noisy and moves fast. Treat every figure here as a **directional benchmark** for orientation and negotiation — not a promise. Always cross-check against live data for your exact role, level and city before making decisions.

Currency is US dollars unless noted. International figures appear on the regional pages. Reproduced figures are paraphrased and rounded; no single source is presented as definitive.

01 · EXPERIENCE BANDS

The five bands, explained

Experience is the single biggest driver of AI pay — and the jump from mid to senior is famously steep. Here's what each band actually does before we put numbers to them on the next page.

1 Entry / Associate · 0–2 years

Supports AI projects, writes and tests prompts, assists with data and integration. In practice most “entry” AI hires already have a technical degree or real project work.

2 Mid-level · 2–5 years

Works independently on production AI systems, integrates models into applications, and owns features. Where specialisation starts to pay off.

3 Senior · 5–8 years

Makes architectural decisions, leads projects and mentors others. Attracts the highest base salaries and the most substantial equity.

4 Staff / Lead · 8+ years

Sets technical direction across teams, owns complex systems, and influences hiring and strategy. Total packages climb sharply with equity.

5 Principal / Director / Leadership

Defines AI strategy, architecture or policy at scale. The roles where total compensation can reach the highest tiers in the market.

THE HEADLINE

The mid-to-senior leap surprises people most: it's often the largest single jump in the whole ladder, because senior engineers and leads directly shape cost, quality and risk.

01 · SALARY BREAKDOWN

What each band pays in 2026

Indicative US base-salary ranges. Bars scale to a common \$0–\$450k axis. Total compensation (with bonus and equity) runs meaningfully higher, especially from Band 3 up.



Base ranges; “TC” = total compensation including bonus and equity. Sources: Glassdoor, Built In, Levels.fyi, Indeed, recruiter placement data, BLS (2026). Top-tier packages at frontier labs and Big Tech can exceed these figures.

50% OFF

Bands move with proven skill — get the credential that proves it

The GSDC Generative AI Certification validates the exact capabilities that separate one band from the next. A natural companion to this breakdown — enrol now with 50% off applied at checkout.

[Explore the certification →](#)

Recognised in 90+ countries

02 · ROLE MATRIX

12 AI roles, compared

Pay isn't only about your band — your *role* sets the ceiling. This matrix compares typical US base ranges, demand, and how hard each is to break into.

ROLE	BASE RANGE	TOTAL COMP	DEMAND	ENTRY
AI Prompt Engineer	\$120k–\$180k	+15–25%	High	Easier
Generative AI Engineer	\$150k–\$300k+	+30–80%	High	Hard
Machine Learning Engineer	\$150k–\$250k	+30–60%	High	Hard
AI / ML Research Scientist	\$200k–\$400k+	+40–100%	Medium	Hard (PhD)
AI Product Manager	\$160k–\$270k	+20–50%	High	Medium
AI Solutions Architect	\$170k–\$300k	+25–50%	High	Hard
MLOps / AI Platform Engineer	\$150k–\$260k	+20–45%	High	Hard
Agentic AI Developer	\$170k–\$320k	+30–60%	Rising	Hard
AI Governance / Ethics Specialist	\$120k–\$300k+	+15–40%	Rising fast	Medium
Data Scientist (AI-focused)	\$130k–\$220k	+15–40%	High	Medium
AI Solutions Consultant	\$120k–\$220k	+15–35%	High	Medium
AI Technical Writer / Content	\$90k–\$150k	+10–20%	Medium	Easier

“Total comp” shows the typical uplift over base from bonus and equity. Specialty matters: LLM/RAG and agentic work tend to top traditional ML. Indicative US 2026 ranges; verify for your market.

02 · READING THE MATRIX

What drives the spread

Two people with the same title can be paid wildly differently. Four factors explain most of the gap — and three of them you can influence.

FACTOR 1 · YOU CAN INFLUENCE**Specialty**

LLM and RAG work, then computer vision, tend to pay above traditional ML. Newer, scarcer skills (agentic AI) carry a 15–20% premium.

FACTOR 2 · YOU CAN INFLUENCE**Proof of skill**

A portfolio plus a recognised credential shortens hiring and strengthens offers — especially for career-changers without a traditional CS path.

FACTOR 3 · PARTLY**Company stage**

Frontier labs and well-funded startups pay above enterprise — but trade off with risk and equity that may or may not pay out.

FACTOR 4 · MOSTLY FIXED**Location**

Geography still shapes pay even with remote work. The next pages quantify it for the top markets.

THE TAKEAWAY

You can't easily change your years of experience or relocate a company — but you **can** change your specialty and your proof of skill. That's where a focused upskilling investment moves your number the fastest.

03 · REGIONAL ADJUSTMENTS

Where you work still moves the number

Multipliers relative to the US national base for an equivalent role and band. Apply your city's factor to the band ranges on page 4. Remember: high-pay metros also carry high living costs.



Illustrative multipliers synthesised from 2026 city-level reporting (e.g., SF and NYC averages near \$190k–\$213k; remote roles ~\$150k–\$180k). Your offer depends on employer and role.

LIMITED TIME

Skills travel between cities — your credential should too

For a limited time, the GSDC Generative AI Certification is open with a special offer. A globally recognised credential strengthens your hand whether you're targeting a top metro or a remote role.

[Enrol while it lasts →](#)

Offer ends soon

03 · REGIONAL ADJUSTMENTS

Cost of living, remote & international

REALITY CHECK

Nominal vs. real pay

A Bay Area number that looks 30% higher can shrink once housing and taxes are counted. Compare offers on take-home and savings, not headline base.

OPPORTUNITY

Remote arbitrage

A remote role pegged near a national band, paid while you live somewhere cheaper, can beat a higher nominal metro salary in real terms.

International snapshot (mid-level base, approximate)

REGION	INDICATIVE MID-LEVEL BASE	NOTE
United States	\$140k–\$185k	Highest overall
Switzerland	~\$160k	Top of Western Europe
Canada	~\$130k	Strong demand
Australia	~\$128k	Growing market
United Kingdom	~\$72k	Below US for equivalent level
Eastern Europe	~\$49k	Strong remote-export base
India	₹15–40 LPA	Wide range; senior far higher
Latin America	~\$41k	Rising remote demand

Approximate, converted figures from 2026 international reporting; local currency, seniority and employer change these substantially.

05 · HIRING TRENDS

The skills employers pay premiums for

Compensation tracks scarcity. These are the skills showing up most in 2026 AI job postings and offers — and where focused learning raises your number.

SIGNAL	WHY IT PAYS	HOW COMMON IN POSTINGS
Python	The default language of AI work	~71% of AI postings
LLM / RAG	Powers most real GenAI products	Top of the premium list
Cloud (AWS / Azure)	Needed to ship to production	AWS ~33%, Azure ~26%
Prompt engineering	Reliability of AI systems	Now a baseline expectation
Governance & responsible AI	Risk and compliance pressure	Fastest-rising requirement

+56%

WAGE PREMIUM FOR AI SKILLS

+15–20%

AGENTIC-AI SPECIALIST PREMIUM

1.3M+

NEW AI ROLES CREATED GLOBALLY

50% OFF TODAY

Build the premium skills — at half price today

The GSDC certification covers prompting, RAG, tools and responsible AI — the exact signals that move offers. Enrol today and claim a flat 50% saving on your seat.

Claim 50% off →

Applied at enrolment

05 · CAREER ROADMAP

How the number grows over time

Pay rises in steps, not a smooth line. Knowing where the big jumps are tells you where to invest effort for the largest return.

1 Entry → Mid · the proof phase

The fastest band to move through with focused upskilling and a portfolio. Roughly a \$40k–\$80k base jump for many roles.

2 Mid → Senior · the big leap

Often the largest single jump. Driven by ownership, architecture and impact — and where equity becomes a major part of pay.

3 Senior → Staff/Lead · the equity phase

Base growth slows; total compensation accelerates through bonus and equity as scope widens across teams.

4 Lead → Principal/Leadership · the strategy phase

Pay reflects accountability for strategy, spend or compliance at scale — the top tier of the market.

WHERE TO INVEST

For most readers, the highest-ROI move is the **Entry → Mid** and **Mid → Senior** transitions, where a credential plus demonstrable skill changes how you're banded. The ROI worksheet on the next pages puts a number on it.

SPOTLIGHT

AI governance: a premium, fast-growing track

As regulation arrives, governance has become one of the highest-growth — and well-paid — corners of AI. Mistakes here are expensive, so trust commands a premium.

GOVERNANCE ROLE	INDICATIVE RANGE	WHY THE PREMIUM
AI Governance Specialist	\$120k–\$250k	Owns the risk framework
Responsible-AI / Ethics Lead	\$150k–\$300k+	Fairness & transparency
AI Compliance Officer	\$120k–\$230k	Maps to EU AI Act & rules
AI Risk Manager	\$130k–\$250k	Measures & mitigates risk

DRIVER

Regulation is here

The EU AI Act is in force and regional rules are multiplying. Every deploying organisation now needs governance capability.

DRIVER

It's the bottleneck

Governance review can stall projects for months. People who make it fast *and* safe directly unlock value — and pay.

UK reporting places ethics/governance leads roughly £95k–£225k; US ranges span entry to executive tiers. Module 8 of the GSDC syllabus targets this track directly.

04 · ROI WORKSHEET

Value your next move

Upskilling is an investment. This worksheet turns “is it worth it?” into a number. Fill in the blanks with your own figures — print this page or copy it into a sheet.

A	Your current annual salary	<input type="text"/>	\$
B	Target band / role salary (from this guide)	<input type="text"/>	\$
C	Annual uplift = B – A	<input type="text"/>	\$
D	Your upskilling investment (course + time value)	<input type="text"/>	\$
E	First-year net gain = C – D	<input type="text"/>	\$

First-year ROI = $(C - D) \div D \times 100\%$
Payback period (months) = $D \div (C \div 12)$

HOW TO READ IT
Because an AI band jump is often a **five-figure annual uplift**, even a meaningful upskilling investment usually pays back in a small number of months — and the uplift recurs every year after. The worked example on the next page shows it in action.

48 HOURS ONLY

Run your numbers, then act within 48 hours

If the worksheet shows a fast payback, the next step is the credential. Enrol in the GSDC certification within the next 48 hours to lock in the current offer.

[Secure my seat →](#) Window closes in 48h

Investment figures are your own inputs — this guide never assumes a specific course price. Illustrative only; not financial advice.

04 · ROI WORKSHEET

Worked example & payback table

Meet Marcus, a Band 1 entry analyst aiming for a Band 2 mid-level AI role. Here's his worksheet, filled in with conservative numbers.

A Current salary (Band 1)	\$110,000
B Target (Band 2, conservative)	\$150,000
C Annual uplift	\$40,000
D Upskilling investment (his estimate)	\$2,000
E First-year net gain	\$38,000

First-year ROI = $(40,000 - 2,000) \div 2,000 \times 100\% = 1,900\%$ · Payback = $2,000 \div (40,000 \div 12) \approx 0.6$ months

Payback in months, by uplift & investment

ANNUAL UPLIFT ↓ / INVESTMENT →	\$1,000	\$2,000	\$4,000
\$20,000	0.6 mo	1.2 mo	2.4 mo
\$40,000	0.3 mo	0.6 mo	1.2 mo
\$65,000	0.2 mo	0.4 mo	0.7 mo

Investment values are illustrative reader inputs, not a GSDC price. The point stands across the table: a recurring five-figure uplift dwarfs a one-time upskilling cost.

06 · CLOSING THE GAP

What actually moves you up a band

The data is consistent: the readers who jump bands fastest add a scarce specialty and back it with verifiable proof. Here's the short list — and where the certification maps to each.

THE LEVER	WHY IT BANDS YOU UP	WHERE THE PATHWAY DELIVERS
LLM & RAG fluency	Tops the pay premiums	Modules 3 & 5
Tool & multimodal skill	Productive from day one	Module 4
Responsible-AI literacy	Unlocks governance roles	Module 8
Evaluation & quality	Marks senior judgement	Module 7
A verifiable credential	Shortens hiring, strengthens offers	The certification itself
A portfolio	Proof over claims	12 labs + capstone

RISK-FREE · 50% OFF

Close the gap — risk-free, at half price

The GSDC certification packages every lever above into one pathway, backed by a 7-day money-back guarantee. If a band jump is a five-figure uplift, this is the lowest-risk way to chase it.

Start risk-free →

7-day money-back guarantee

06 · CLOSING THE GAP

The pathway, mapped to your jump

However you read the salary data, the move is the same: prove scarce, in-demand skill. Here's how the GSDC pathway lines up with each band transition.

Jump A **Entry → Mid**

Build core fluency and a portfolio that proves applied skill.

Focus: Modules 1–5 + labs · Outcome: credential + portfolio that re-bands you.

Jump B **Mid → Senior**

Add evaluation, automation and responsible-AI judgement — the markers of ownership.

Focus: Modules 6–8 + capstone · Outcome: evidence you can own outcomes, not just tasks.

Track **Pivot into governance**

Specialise into the premium, fast-growing responsible-AI track.

Focus: Modules 7–8 · Outcome: qualifies you for governance and compliance roles.

WHY A CREDENTIAL, SPECIFICALLY

When demand outruns supply, employers screen on proof. A globally recognised GSDC certification is a fast, trusted signal — exactly the kind that shortens hiring and strengthens an offer.

07 · GET PAID FOR IT

Read the offer like a pro

Knowing the bands is half the battle; the other half is reading and negotiating an offer. From Band 3 up, what you don't understand about equity can cost more than your base.

COMPONENT

Base salary

Guaranteed cash. The number most people fixate on — but often the smallest lever at senior levels.

COMPONENT

Bonus

Target vs. guaranteed matters. Ask how it's actually paid out, historically.

COMPONENT

Equity

Can dominate total comp at senior levels — but value and risk vary hugely by company stage.

COMPONENT

Benefits & flexibility

Remote, learning budgets and time off carry real, often-ignored value.

THREE NEGOTIATION MOVES

1. Anchor with this guide's band data for your role and city. **2.** Negotiate total comp, not just base. **3.** Let your credential and portfolio justify the top of the range, not the middle.

OFFER INSIDE

Give your number something to stand on

A credential recognised in 90+ countries is leverage at the negotiating table. Earn the GSDC certification and back your ask with proof — a special offer is waiting inside.

Get certified →

Globally recognised credential

REFERENCE

Skills-to-pay quick map

A one-glance view of how the nine syllabus modules connect to the pay drivers in this guide.

MODULE	PAY DRIVER IT BUILDS
M1 · Foundations of Generative AI	Baseline fluency expected everywhere
M2 · How LLMs Work	Interview credibility
M3 · Prompt Engineering	Reliability skill — now a baseline
M4 · Tools & Multimodal	Day-one productivity
M5 · Building: RAG & Grounding	Top pay-premium specialty
M6 · Automation & Agents	Rising agentic-AI premium
M7 · Evaluating AI Output	Marker of senior judgement
M8 · Governance & Responsible AI	Unlocks premium governance track
M9 · Capstone & Implementation	The portfolio that proves it all

HALF PRICE

Every module here maps to a pay driver — start at half price

The GSDC certification turns this map into a hands-on program with labs and a capstone. Enrol now at 50% off and build the skills the market pays for.

[Start the pathway →](#)

Hands-on from day one

08 · ACTION PLAN

Your 30 / 60 / 90-day salary plan

Data is only useful if it changes what you do next. Here's a simple plan to turn this guide into a higher number.

30 Days 1–30 · Locate & target

Find your current band and role in the matrix. Apply your regional multiplier. Pick a target role and band, and run the ROI worksheet.

60 Days 31–60 · Build the proof

Begin the certification pathway; complete the early labs. Start a portfolio and add the scarce specialty (LLM/RAG, governance) that re-bands you.

90 Days 61–90 · Certify & position

Finish the capstone, earn the credential, update your CV and profile, and prepare to negotiate using this guide's band data.

MARCUS, 90 DAYS ON

He targeted Band 2, built a portfolio, certified, and walked into negotiations anchored on real data — turning a worksheet number into an offer.

RECAP

The numbers on one page

Everything in this guide, condensed. Use it as your quick-reference before an application or negotiation.

BANDS (US BASE)

Entry ~\$95–135k · Mid ~\$140–210k · Senior ~\$190–300k · Staff ~\$250–400k · Principal+ \$350k+ (TC much higher).

TOP MARKETS

SF ×1.25–1.35 · NYC ×1.20–1.25 · Seattle ×1.10–1.20
· Remote ×0.95–1.05.

PREMIUM SKILLS

LLM/RAG, agentic AI, cloud, governance. AI skills carry a ~56% wage premium.

THE MOVE

Add a scarce specialty + verifiable proof. Band jumps are typically five-figure, recurring uplifts.

METHODOLOGY RECAP

All figures are indicative US ranges (unless noted) aggregated from public 2025–26 sources — Glassdoor, Built In, Levels.fyi, Indeed, ZipRecruiter, Coursera, recruiter placement data, BLS and PwC. Verify for your exact role, level and city.

This guide is informational only and is not financial, career or compensation advice. No earnings are guaranteed.

WHERE TO GO NEXT

Know the number. Now go earn it.

You now know what each band pays, how your city and role shift it, and what it takes to move up. The gap between your current number and your target one is a skills gap — and it's closable.

KNOW

Your band, role and regional multiplier.

CALCULATE

The ROI of moving up one band.

CLOSE

The gap with proof employers trust.

The bottom line

The market is paying a real premium for proven AI skill, and the supply of credentialed talent hasn't caught up. The readers who act on that gap — not just read about it — are the ones who move up a band. Your worksheet already shows the math.

LAST CHANCE · 50% OFF

Close the gap today — at 50% off

You've seen the bands, the regions and the ROI. The only step left is to build the proof that re-bands you. Enrol in the GSDC certification now at half price — this is your last prompt in the guide, so make it count.

[Enrol & get certified →](#)

Offer applied at checkout

© 2026 Global Skill Development Council (GSDC). Educational companion to GSDC's AI salary resources. All salary and market figures are indicative, aggregated from public 2025–26 sources, rounded and paraphrased, and are not a guarantee of employment or earnings. Verify current program, exam and pricing details on the official certification page.