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2026 CONTRACT RATE GUIDE

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Introduction

Welcome to Digital Republic Talent's 2026 contract rate guide

It has been six months since our last contract guide and we are excited to present an updated overview of average hourly and daily rates for the most common job roles in the following markets: Data Science, ML, AI, Cloud Computing, Analytics and Programmatic. Our methodology involved independent surveys, internal analysis, online sources and data consolidation to ensure accurate salary insights.

For this edition, we have focused on gathering and presenting average contract rates in both the United States and the United Kingdom.

In addition to the average hourly and daily rate figures, we provide key talent statistics, digital market overview, analysis of hiring trends and valuable insights into popular workplace topics such as flexible working and the most sought-after incentives.

By utilizing these resources, we aim to provide you with the most accurate and up-to-date contract rate information in the industry. We hope that this guide proves valuable in your understanding of the current market landscape and assists you in making informed decisions regarding compensation.

Director’s comments

Richard Manso, Founder & Managing Director of Digital Republic Talent

Executive Summary – 2026 Tech & Digital Hiring Outlook (UK & US)

The 2026 tech talent market is defined by cautious optimism following a period of market stabilisation and normalisation in 2025. While economic uncertainty and client budget pressures have led some firms to slow permanent hiring, demand for specialist talent in AI, machine learning, data science, cloud and cybersecurity remains strong across both the UK and US.

Generative AI is reshaping job scopes and fuelling demand for hybrid skill sets, while psychometric-led hiring is increasingly improving retention by ensuring stronger cultural and values alignment. The market continues to polarise, with niche specialists commanding premium salaries and broader generalist roles facing increased competition.

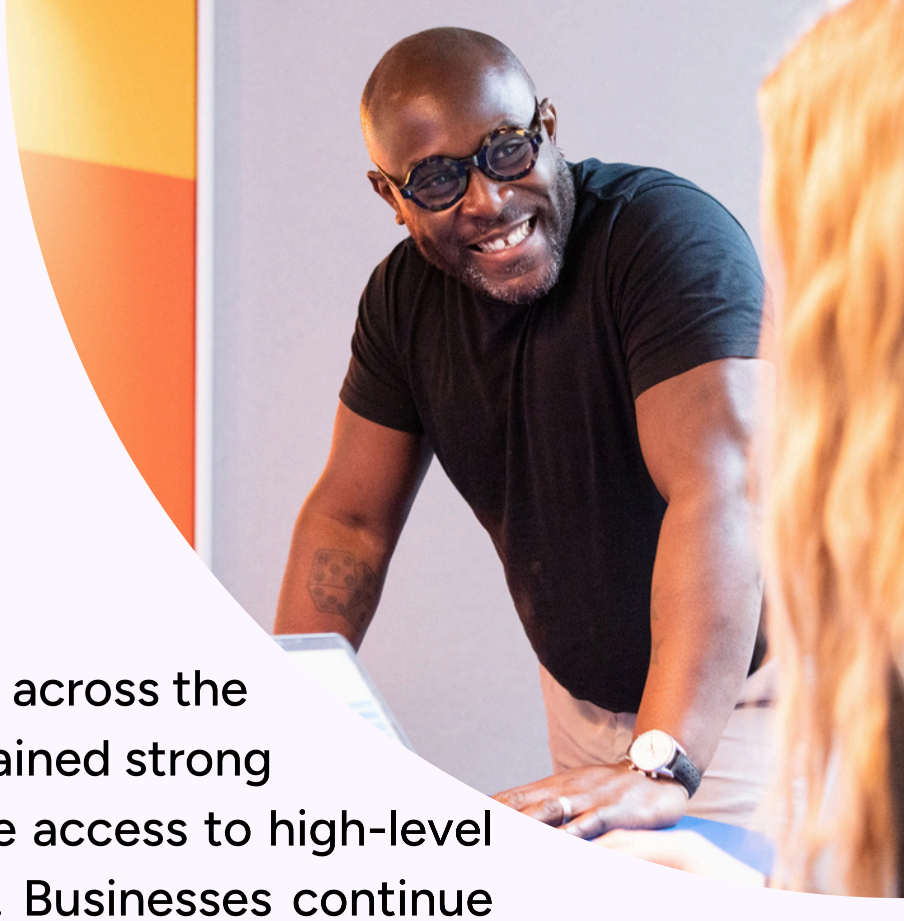
Key hiring hubs remain strong: London, Austin, New York, San Francisco and regional growth centres such as Manchester, Birmingham, Leeds, Dallas and Austin, while flexible hiring models including contract, project-based and subscription recruitment are gaining traction across both tech and digital media sectors.

As we move through the second half of 2026, the outlook continues to suggest cautious confidence. While broader economic headwinds persist, businesses continue to re-invest to gradually re-invest in core digital, data and AI capabilities driven by innovation needs, operational efficiency and competitive pressure. Salary growth continues at a modest pace across most roles, with stronger growth in high-demand areas such as AI, ML and data science. Flexible, performance-led hiring models continue to dominate, with an emphasis on specialist talent that can deliver measurable impact.

General Outlook

Throughout 2026, both the UK and US tech job markets have continued to demonstrate solid salary growth, particularly in AI, data science and machine learning. In the US, mid-level professionals in these fields typically earned $130,000-$160,000, with senior or niche ML specialists often exceeding $200,000, while in the UK, mid-level data scientists earned £65,000-£85,000 and senior AI specialists exceeded £100,000-£130,000 depending on location and sector. Roles in MLOps, LLM engineering and AI infrastructure

Director’s comments



Richard Manso, Founder & Managing Director of Digital Republic Talent

remained among the highest paid due to the limited talent supply. Cloud engineers and data architects continued to command strong compensation, with regional variation narrowing as remote and hybrid work models became more established. Competitive offers, flexibility, and total reward packages remain critical to attracting and retaining top talent.

Why Some Companies Are Slowing Hiring Amid Economic Uncertainty

Across both markets, hiring has become more selective as organisations respond to tightening budgets, cautious client demand, and increased investor pressure to improve operational efficiency. Rather than rapid scaling, firms are prioritising business-critical and ROI-driven roles, particularly where automation and AI enable leaner teams to deliver more with less. Combined with budget constraints and the need for agility, many organisations are delaying permanent headcount expansion and increasingly turning to flexible, project-based, or contract talent to maintain delivery without long-term cost commitments.

Contract and Freelance Hiring Outlook

Throughout 2026, contract and freelance hiring across the US and the UK tech and digital sectors has remained strong as companies seek flexibility and cost-effective access to high-level expertise amid ongoing economic uncertainty. Businesses continue to prioritise short-term, high-impact and outcome-driven hires across AI, machine learning, data, cloud and digital media to maintain momentum without expanding permanent headcount. In the US, senior contractors in areas such as MLOps, LLM engineering and cloud security are commanding hourly rates of $100–$150, while in the UK, contractors with similar niche skills are earning £600–£900 per day.

Demand continues to rise across both markets for freelance specialists in AI training, data analytics, and programmatic media. Growth-stage companies, start-ups, and agencies continue to favour embedded talent and subscription-based recruitment models to scale delivery while managing overhead, reflecting a broader shift toward performance-led, flexible hiring that secures specialist expertise.

Director’s comments

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The Surge in Demand for AI/ML, Cloud and Cybersecurity Talent

The surge in demand for AI/ML, cloud and cybersecurity talent is being driven by accelerated digital transformation, competitive innovation and growing security threats. Organisations adopting AI and cloud technologies require specialists in ML, MLOps, LLM engineering and secure infrastructure. With these capabilities now core to modern business operations, demand for deeply specialised professionals remains at an all-time high across both regions.

How Psychometric-Led Hiring Is Improving Retention

Psychometric-led hiring is playing a growing role in improving retention by ensuring stronger alignment between candidates and company culture, values and working styles beyond technical skills alone. By assessing behavioural traits, motivation, emotional intelligence and team compatibility, employers are identifying candidates more likely to stay engaged and succeed long-term. This data-driven approach is proving especially valuable in fields such as AI, data and cloud, and in hybrid or remote-first environments.

The Polarisation of the Job Market

The tech labour market has become increasingly polarised, with strong demand for specialised talent and growing competition for more generalist roles. As businesses prioritise measurable outcomes and leaner teams, investment is focused on niche experts who can deliver immediate, high-impact solutions. In contrast, generalist candidates face increased competition, particularly as automation reduces the need for broad, non-specialised roles. This shift is encouraging professionals to upskill, specialise and build deeper domain expertise to remain competitive.

Hiring in Digital Media and Flexible Talent Models

Hiring across the digital media and agency sector remains active but more selective as organisations respond to shifting client budgets and consolidation. Despite restructuring in some areas, demand remains strong for programmatic, paid media, analytics and performance-driven talent. Across the UK and US, agencies and in-house teams are increasingly favouring flexible hiring models, including contract and freelance, to scale delivery and manage costs.

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Insights

2026 digital hiring landscape and candidate insights

The following polls capture real-time sentiment from digital and technology professionals across AI, Data, Cloud, Analytics and Programmatic markets. They provide a snapshot of current expectations around the job market, growth areas, hiring success factors and candidate priorities. The results offer valuable context to the charts below, highlighting the key themes shaping both hiring and career decisions.

What are your thoughts on the job market for 2026?

Likely to improve	31%
Not likely to change	31%
May well get worse	38%

Which of the following markets do you think will experience the most growth in 2026?

Programmatic / Paid Media	11%
Analytics / Insight	14%
Cloud Computing	16%
Data Science / AI / ML	59%

Which factor has the biggest impact on long-term success when hiring technical talent?

Proven technical ability	22%
Excellent soft skills	22%
Strong cultural alignment	33%
Clear role expectations	23%

What matters most to you when applying for a role?

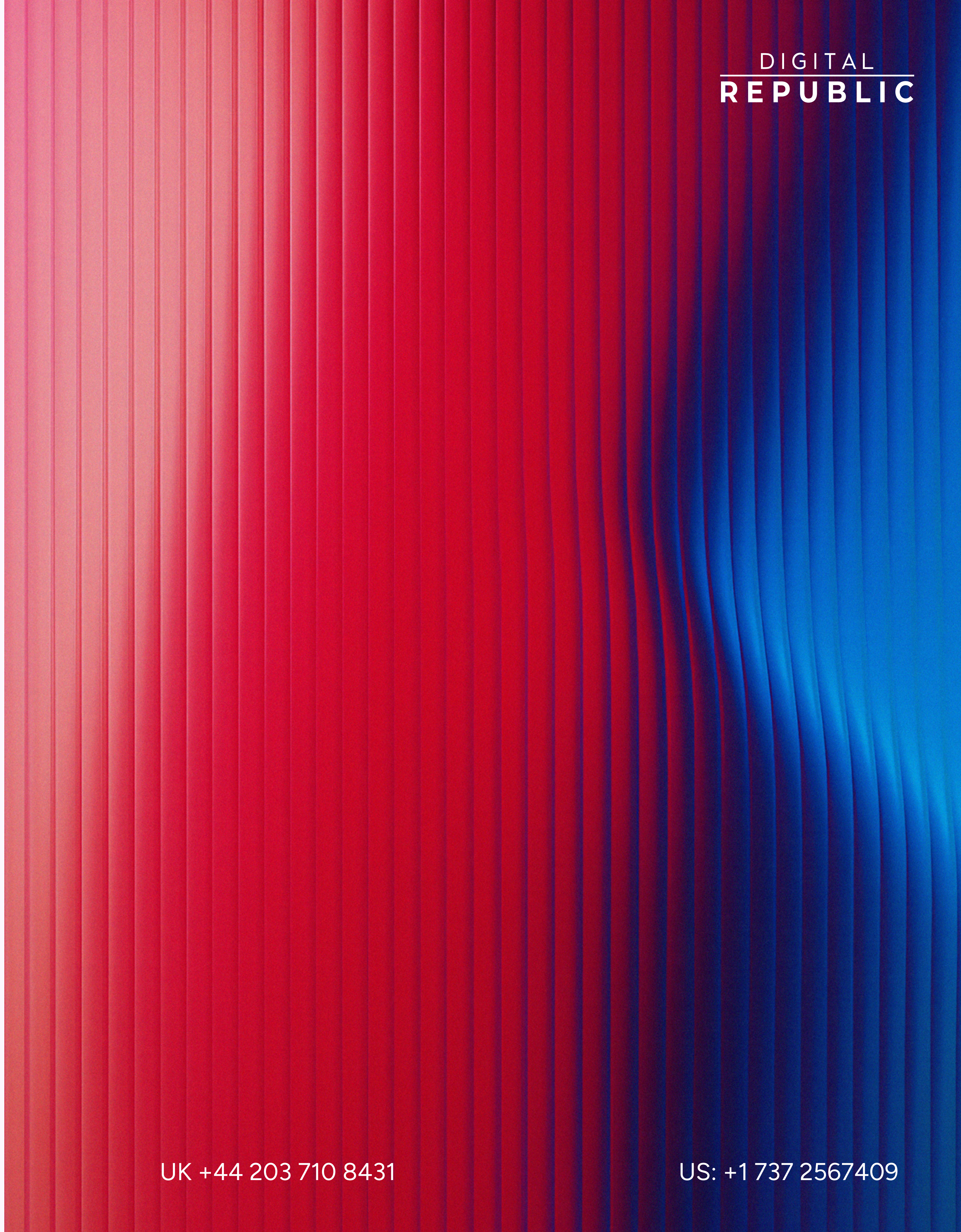
Clarity on the role	25%
Simple application process	21%
Realistic interview process	29%
Consistent updates	25%

If you could choose, which type of compensation structure would you prefer?

Higher base + lower bonus	62%
Average base + bonus	12%
Lower base + big bonus	3%
Equity and stock options	23%

What's the biggest perk an employer can provide?

Flexible working hours	19%
Remote working	70%
Professional development	7%
Wellness benefits	4%



Data science
AI / ML

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Data science / AI / ML - Contract

Average hourly contract rates - United States

Market	Entry Level	Mid Level	Manager / Lead / Principal	VP / Head of / Director
Data Science	$70	$85	$105	$135
Machine Learning	$70	$90	$110	$135
AI	$70	$90	$110	$135
Deep Learning	$70	$80	$100	$130
Computer Vision	$70	$90	$100	$125
MLOps	$70	$85	$110	$130
Natural Language Processing	$75	$90	$105	$125

The following estimates are rough ranges for hourly rates in USD ($) for the mentioned role types in the United States. These figures serve as a general guide, and it's important to consider various factors when determining the appropriate hourly rate for contract employment, such as specific location, the scope of responsibilities, level of expertise, and market demand.

Data science / AI / ML - Contract

Average daily contract rates - United Kingdom

Market	Entry Level	Mid Level	Manager / Lead / Principal	VP / Head of / Director
Data Science	£365	£470	£780	£1,250
Machine Learning	£470	£675	£885	£1,250
AI	£365	£470	£780	£1,350
Deep Learning	£470	£675	£990	£1,405
Computer Vision	£415	£625	£935	£1,250
MLOps	£415	£730	£935	£1,145
Natural Language Processing	£415	£625	£935	£1,250

The following estimates are rough ranges for daily rates in £ (GBP) for the mentioned role types in the United Kingdom. These figures serve as a general guide, and it's important to consider various factors when determining the appropriate hourly rate for contract employment, such as specific location, the scope of responsibilities, level of expertise, and market demand.

Market overview and talent insights

Data science / AI / ML

The data science and AI/ML market has continued to grow throughout 2026 as organisations operationalise GenAI and invest in modern analytics, machine learning and MLOps platforms. The data science platform market is forecast to reach approximately $204B by the end of 2026, while worldwide AI spending is projected to exceed $2.0T, driven by AI software, infrastructure, and enterprise adoption across sectors including software, banking, retail and healthcare. "AI-ready data" continues to emerge as a key constraint, with 63% of organisations lacking adequate data management practices for AI, reinforcing the premium on specialist talent as demand continues to outstrip supply.

2,701,174
Professionals within the US talent pool on LinkedIn

42%
Growth in professionals with AI & ML skills in the US

497,960
Professionals in the US changed jobs during the past year

17,679
Full-time open job posts in the US

1.3
Median length of service in the US

63% / 37%
Male / female split in the US

504,007
Professionals within the UK talent pool on LinkedIn

41%
Growth in professionals with AI & ML skills in the UK

101,096
Professionals in the UK changed jobs during the past year

1,663
Full-time open job posts in the UK

1.3
Median length of service in the UK

65% / 35%
Male / female split in the UK

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Analytics

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Analytics - Contract

Average hourly contract rates - United States

Market	Entry Level	Mid Level	Manager / Lead / Principal	VP / Head of / Director
Web Analytics	$60	$70	$80	$90
Conversion Rate Optimisation	$55	$60	$70	$80
Insight	$50	$60	$70	$80
Product	$65	$80	$90	$110
Implementation	$60	$70	$85	$100

The following estimates are rough ranges for hourly rates in USD ($) for the mentioned role types in the United States. These figures serve as a general guide, and it's important to consider various factors when determining the appropriate hourly rate for contract employment, such as specific location, the scope of responsibilities, level of expertise, and market demand.

Analytics - Contract

Average daily contract rates - United Kingdom

Market	Entry Level	Mid Level	Manager / Lead / Principal	VP / Head of / Director
Web Analytics	£355	£510	£715	£920
Conversion Rate Optimisation	£330	£485	£690	£865
Insight	£305	£460	£665	£815
Product	£410	£610	£815	£1,020
Implementation	£355	£560	£765	£970

The following estimates are rough ranges for hourly rates in GBP (£) for the mentioned role types in the United Kingdom. These figures serve as a general guide, and it's important to consider various factors when determining the appropriate hourly rate for contract employment, such as specific location, the scope of responsibilities, level of expertise, and market demand.

Market overview and talent insights

Analytics

Predictive and real-time analytics, GenAI-enabled BI and IoT/edge data continue to accelerate analytics investment throughout 2026. The global data analytics market is forecast to grow from $82.23B in 2025 to $402.70B by 2032 (25.5% CAGR), with real-time and edge-driven use cases remaining among the fastest-growing segments. Gartner expects 75% of new analytics content to be contextualised via GenAI by 2027, pushing augmented, self-service analytics to more business users. As a result, demand continues to rise for talent who can combine analytics engineering with business-facing storytelling, governance and responsible AI.

- **866,331** Professionals within the US talent pool on LinkedIn
- **8%** Growth in professionals with Analytics skills in the US
- **153,209** Professionals in the US changed jobs during the past year
- **1,893** Full-time open job posts in the US
- **1.8** Median length of service in the US
- **56% / 44%** Male / female split in the US

- **181,407** Professionals within the UK talent pool on LinkedIn
- **9%** Growth in professionals with Analytics skills in the UK
- **35,952** Professionals in the UK changed jobs during the past year
- **594** Full-time open job posts in the UK
- **1.6** Median length of service in the UK
- **60% / 40%** Male / female split in the UK

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Cloud computing

Cloud computing - Contract

Average hourly contract rates - United States

Market	Entry Level	Mid Level	Manager / Lead / Principal	VP / Head of / Director
Cloud Infrastructure	$60	$90	$110	$125
Data Architecture	$80	$95	$115	$130
Data Engineering	$65	$80	$110	$125
Cloud Training	$70	$95	$105	$130
DevOps	$70	$95	$110	$135
Site Reliability Engineering	$60	$90	$105	$130

The following estimates are rough ranges for hourly rates in USD ($) for the mentioned role types in the United States. These figures serve as a general guide, and it's important to consider various factors when determining the appropriate hourly rate for contract employment, such as specific location, the scope of responsibilities, level of expertise, and market demand.

Cloud computing - Contract

Average daily contract rates - United Kingdom

Market	Entry Level	Mid Level	Manager / Lead / Principal	VP / Head of / Director
Cloud Infrastructure	£515	£670	£875	£1,030
Data Architecture	£565	£720	£925	£1,235
Data Engineering	£465	£565	£925	£1,235
Cloud Training	£515	£670	£925	£1,235
DevOps	£515	£670	£875	£1,235
Site Reliability Engineering	£515	£670	£875	£1,030

The following estimates are rough ranges for daily rates in £ (GBP) for the mentioned role types in the United Kingdom. These figures serve as a general guide, and it's important to consider various factors when determining the appropriate hourly rate for contract employment, such as specific location, the scope of responsibilities, level of expertise, and market demand.

Market overview and talent insights

Cloud computing

The Cloud market continues to remain in high-growth mode throughout 2026 as enterprises scale AI workloads and modernise core applications. IDC expects public cloud services spending to double by 2028 (19.4% CAGR), underscoring the continued momentum across the market. Gartner projects end-user public cloud services spending in Europe to grow by 24% in 2026 and that public cloud will account for more than 45% of enterprise IT spending by the end of the year. Hybrid continues to be the default model, with 90% of organisations expected to run hybrid cloud by 2027, driving demand for secure, governable IaaS/PaaS and integrated AI platforms.

3,343,822
Professionals within the US talent pool on LinkedIn

13%
Growth in professionals with Cloud skills in the US

406,675
Professionals in the US changed jobs during the past year

17,650
Full-time open job posts in the US

2.0
Median length of service in the US

75% / 25%
Male / female split in the US

634,195
Professionals within the UK talent pool on LinkedIn

15%
Growth in professionals with Cloud skills in the UK

91,772
Professionals in the UK changed jobs during the past year

2,054
Full-time open job posts in the UK

1.9
Median length of service in the UK

80% / 20%
Male / female split in the UK

Programmatic

Programmatic - Contract

Average hourly contract rates - United States

Market	Entry Level	Mid Level	Manager / Lead / Principal	VP / Head of / Director
Account Management	$60	$75	$85	$100
Trading	$55	$70	$80	$95
Media Buying	$50	$65	$75	$90
Sales / Business Development	$65	$80	$90	$105
AdOps	$50	$65	$75	$90

The following estimates are rough ranges for hourly rates in USD ($) for the mentioned role types in the United States. These figures serve as a general guide, and it's important to consider various factors when determining the appropriate hourly rate for contract employment, such as specific location, the scope of responsibilities, level of expertise, and market demand.

Programmatic - Contract

Average daily contract rates - United Kingdom

Market	Entry Level	Mid Level	Manager / Lead / Principal	VP / Head of / Director
Account Management	£255	£410	£715	£865
Trading	£205	£355	£610	£865
Media Buying	£255	£355	£560	£765
Sales / Business Development	£355	£460	£560	£715
AdOps	£255	£355	£460	£765

The following estimates are rough ranges for daily rates in £ (GBP) for the mentioned role types in the United Kingdom. These figures serve as a general guide, and it's important to consider various factors when determining the appropriate hourly rate for contract employment, such as specific location, the scope of responsibilities, level of expertise, and market demand.

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Market overview and talent insights

Programmatic

Programmatic advertising continues to be the engine of digital display growth throughout 2026, with US programmatic display spending forecast to surpass $200B by the end of the year. Globally, programmatic is expected to deliver nearly all net-new display growth, accounting for approximately 96% of new display ad spend in 2026. AI-driven bidding, audience modelling, and creative automation continue to improve performance, while budgets increasingly consolidate into more data-rich, curated environments, including retail media and private marketplaces. Connected TV also continues to gain share, with US CTV ad spend forecast to reach approximately $37.7B in 2026 on its way to $46.9B by 2028.

- **1,361,029** Professionals within the US talent pool on LinkedIn
- **35%** Growth in professionals with Programmatic skills in the US
- **232,676** Professionals in the US changed jobs during the past year
- **879** Full-time open job posts in the US
- **1.9** Median length of service in the US
- **53% / 47%** Male / female split in the US

- **281,912** Professionals within the UK talent pool on LinkedIn
- **28%** Growth in professionals with Programmatic skills in the UK
- **55,376** Professionals in the UK changed jobs during the past year
- **138** Full-time open job posts in the UK
- **1.7** Median length of service in the UK
- **57% / 43%** Male / female split in the UK

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Get in touch today

We hope you've found our 2026 Contract Rate Guide useful. Should you require any further information, please feel free to contact us via any of the channels listed.

If you are interested in average hourly and daily rates, please check our 2026 Salary Guide.

If you are interested in a new role or hire, contact our friendly team who are fully equipped with market intel. Visit our Advice Hub on our website for various resources to support your job-seeking and hiring needs.

For further information on our products and services, or if you have any questions on the content of our 2026 Contract Rate Guide, please contact us at info@digitalrepublictalent.com.

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