# The 2026 Tech Staffing Playbook
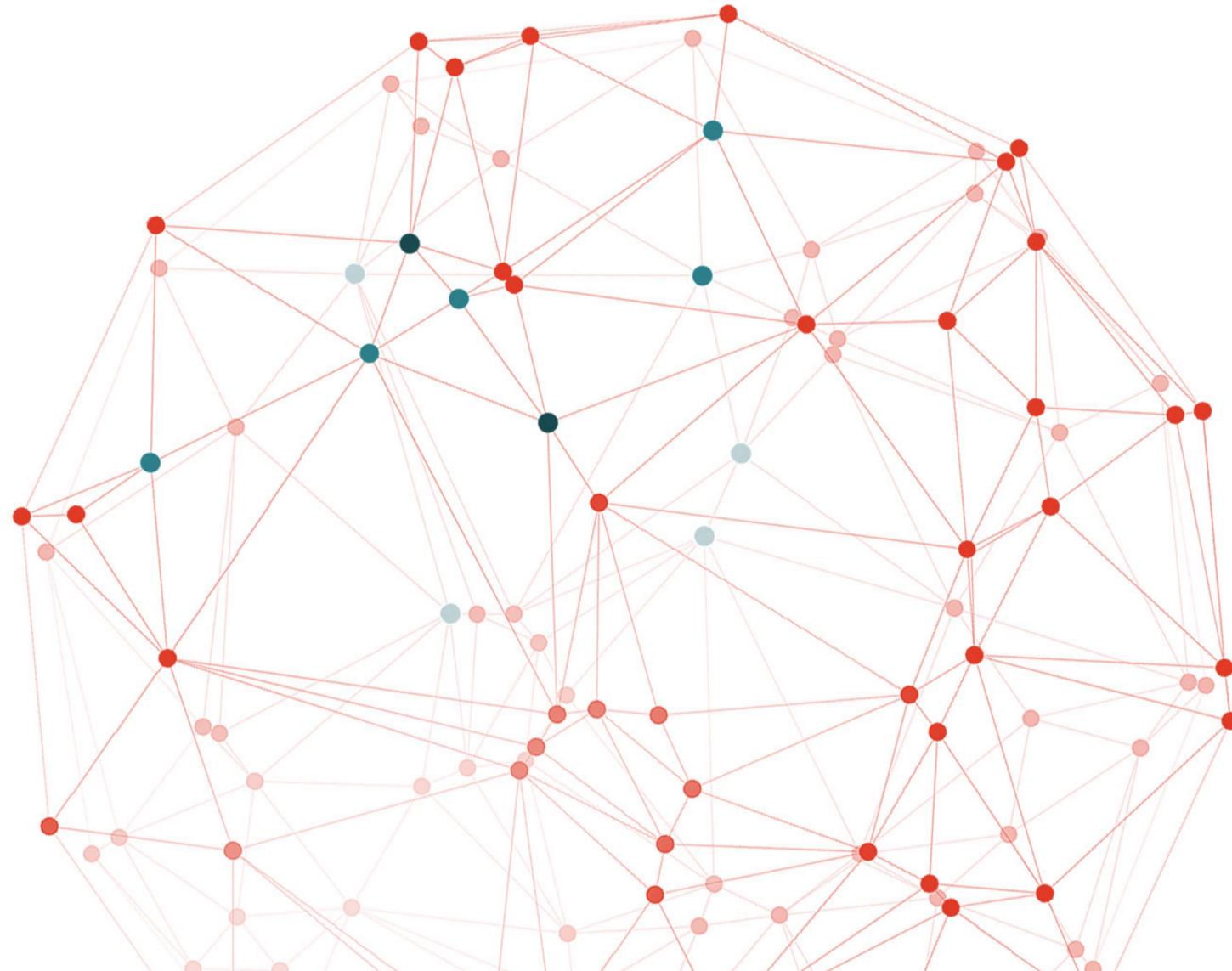
How to position roles, target flight-risk segments, and close skeptical candidates

PROPRIETARY RESEARCH + TACTICAL FRAMEWORKS

# The Paradox Driving 2026 Placement Dynamics

Here's the paradox defining tech hiring in 2026: nearly three-quarters of tech professionals plan to change employers in the next year, yet only four in ten feel confident they could land a favorable new role.

They're not moving from strength or optimism. They're moving to seek safety. Our data shows that layoffs, burnout, and broken trust are key factors pushing them out the door to seek new roles.

For staffing and recruiting firms, this creates a high-intent, high-anxiety placement environment. Your candidates are motivated to listen, but they're also skeptical, risk-averse, and harder to close. The firms that understand why tech professionals are moving, and what they actually need to hear, will win placements competitors miss.

This report draws on findings from a November-December 2025 survey of 1,159 U.S. tech professionals conducted by Dice. We examined perspectives on the job market, economic outlook, and AI's role in their work. The data reveals a workforce that's still resilient and engaged, but more selective, risk-aware, and strained as it looks ahead.

# High Mobility, Low Confidence

Understanding the 2026 candidate mindset
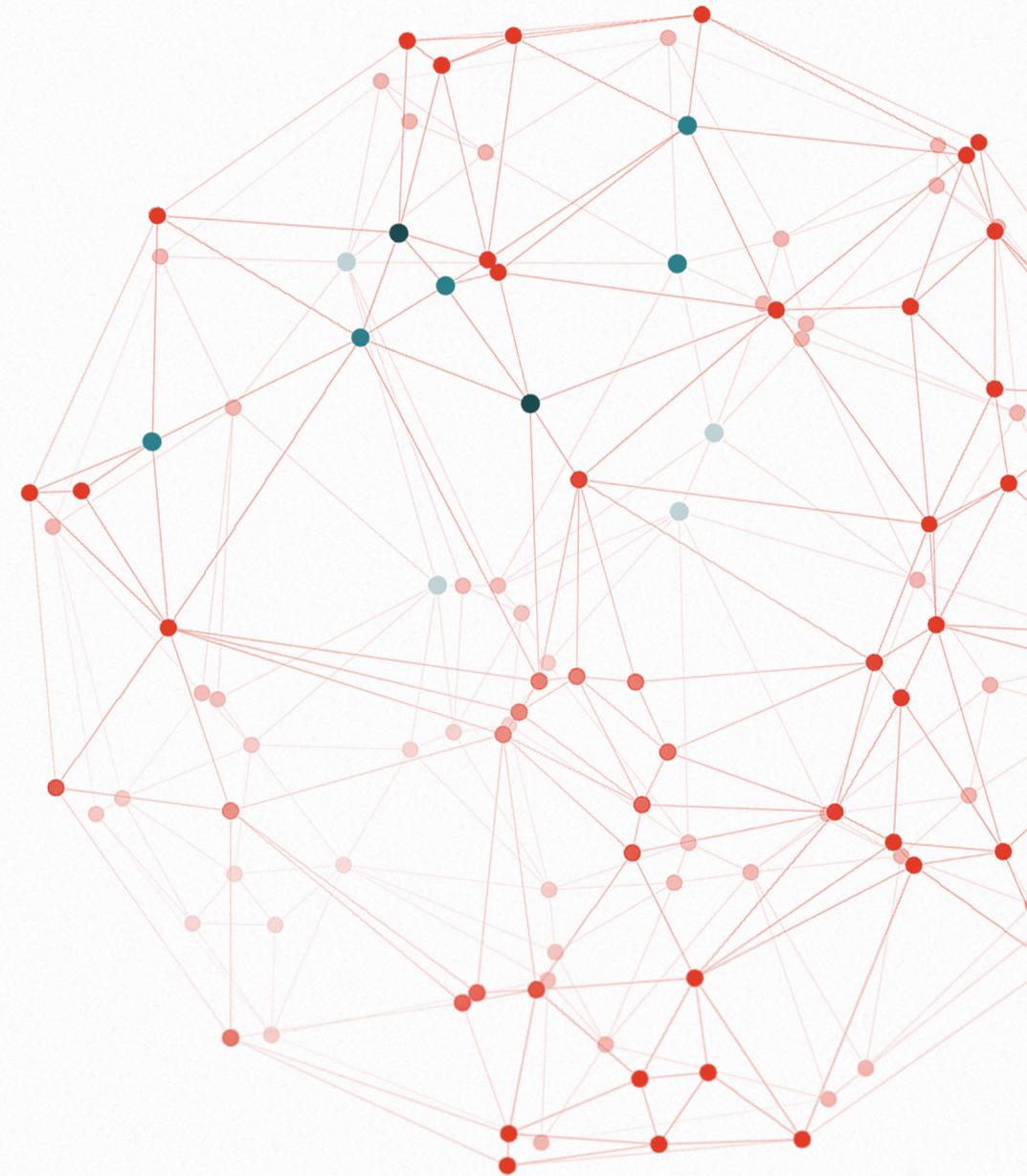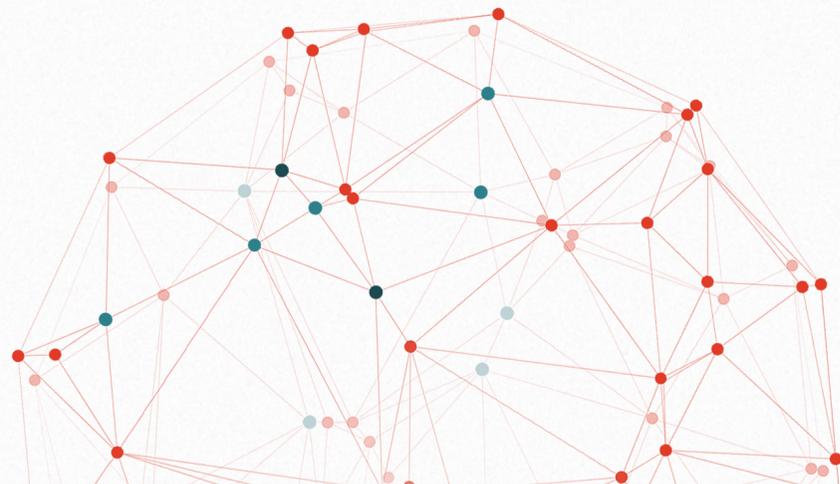
# Willingness to Switch is High, Even as Confidence Stays Low

Tech professionals signaled unusually high levels of job mobility in our research. Nearly three-quarters say they'll likely change employers in the next year.
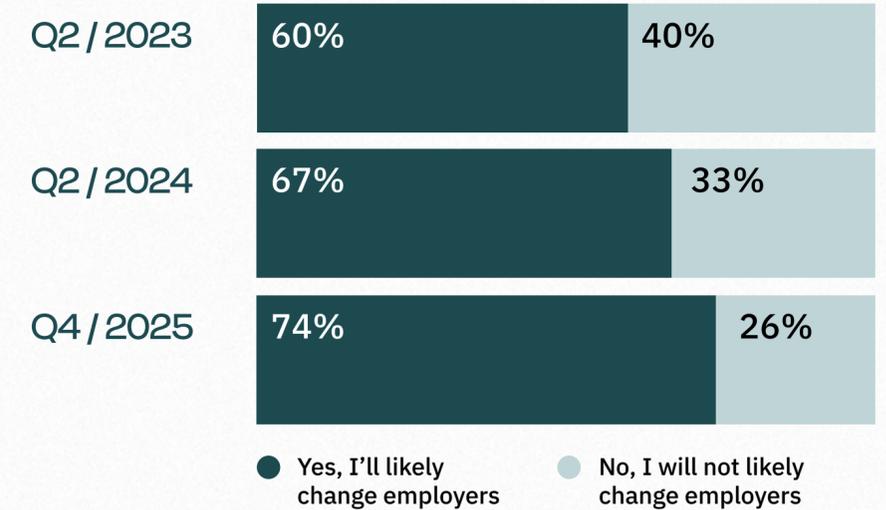
To put this in context, this is up from 2024 and a sharp contrast to the uncertainty still gripping the market. Yet only 41% are confident they could find a favorable new role in 2026. That figure is unchanged from last year, even as 55% report actively looking for a new job (up from 39% in 2024).

This disconnect reveals candidates exploring opportunities out of necessity, not optimism. Concern about layoffs has climbed year over year—from 22% in 2024 to 29% in 2025.

Confidence isn't distributed evenly. AI professionals are significantly more confident in their ability to find a favorable new role, reflecting sustained demand for AI skills. But other tech professionals are just as likely as AI professionals to say they plan to change employers, despite having far less confidence in their prospects. This signals that today's desire to switch to a new role is defensive, not opportunistic.
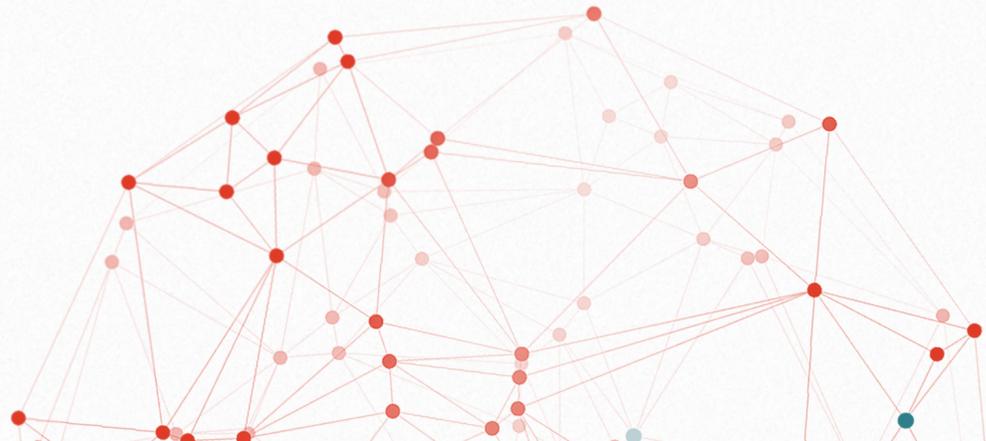
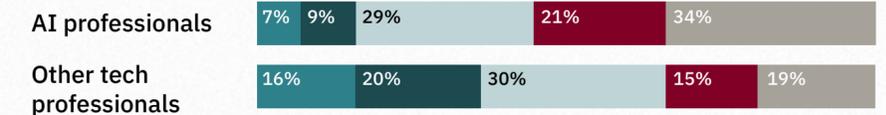## Within the next year, do you anticipate changing employers versus staying where you are?

| | Yes, I'll likely change employers | No, I will not likely change employers |
|---|---|---|
| Q2 / 2023 | 60% | 40% |
| Q2 / 2024 | 67% | 33% |
| Q4 / 2025 | 74% | 26% |

- Yes, I'll likely change employers
- No, I will not likely change employers

## How confident are you that you could find a favorable new position in your field in 2026?

### 2024

| | 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5 |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| AI professionals | 9% | 15% | 18% | 26% | 32% |
| Other tech professionals | 11% | 13% | 40% | 19% | 17% |

### 2025

| | 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5 |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| AI professionals | 7% | 9% | 29% | 21% | 34% |
| Other tech professionals | 16% | 20% | 30% | 15% | 19% |

- 1 — Not at all confident
- 2
- 3
- 4
- 5 — Very confident

# Flight Risk Concentrates in Specific Segments

Not all tech professionals are equally likely to jump ship.

The ones most likely to leave include women, Black tech professionals, Gen X (age 44-59), mid-career workers with 5-9 or 15-19 years of experience, those at small companies (fewer than 250 employees), professionals who don't currently work at a tech company, and anyone who's been in their current role for 3-9 years.

These groups also report higher burnout, worry more about layoffs, and express lower confidence in job stability. Their intent to switch seems driven by accumulated pressure, not job-hopping ambition. For staffing firms, these are high-probability passive candidates who may be primed to listen, even if they're not actively searching.

Meanwhile, retention holds strongest among Gen Z professionals, those with 3-4 years of experience, mid-size company employees (250-499 employees), tech professionals who are either new to their role (less than one year) or very tenured (20+ years), those with higher confidence in their employer's responsible use of AI, and those at companies that require disclosure of AI use.
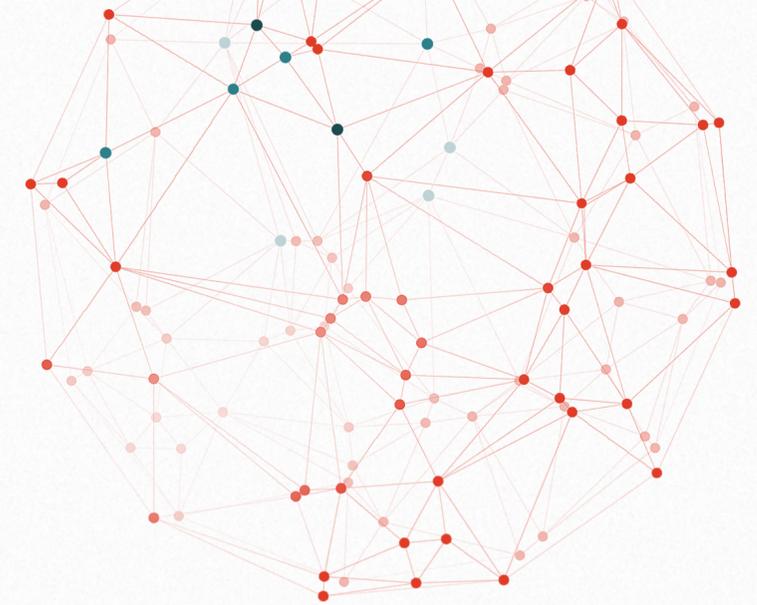
## FLIGHT RISK BY DEMOGRAPHIC SEGMENTS

**Women**

**Black tech professionals**

**Gen X (ages 44-59)**

**Mid-career workers with 5-9 or 15-19 years of experience**

**Those at small companies (<250 employees)**

**Professionals who don't currently work at a tech company**

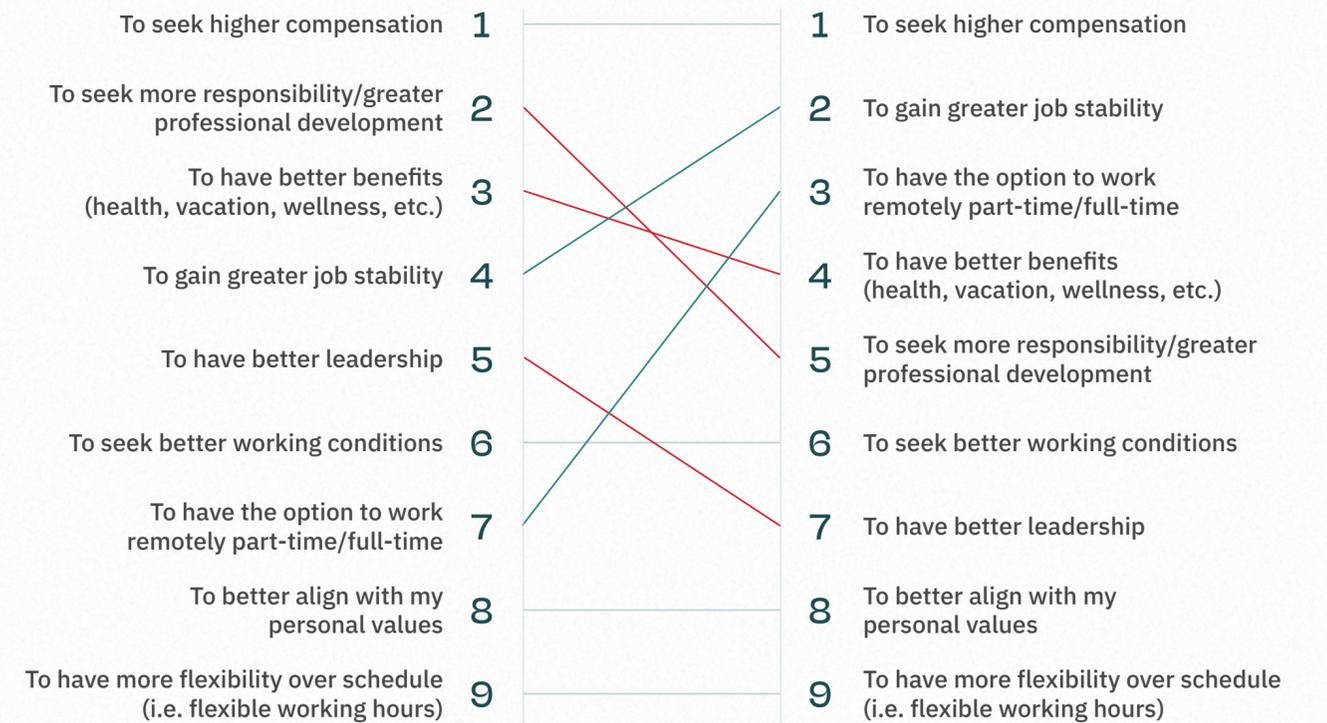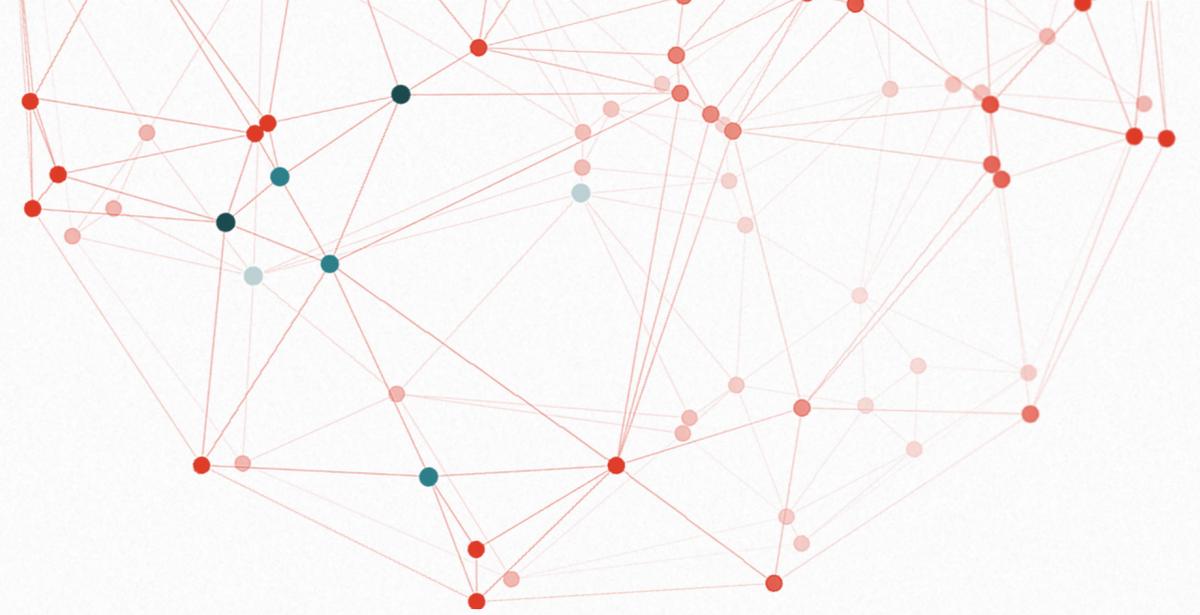**Anyone who has been in their role for 3-9 years**

# Why Tech Professionals Are Switching Has Changed

**Compensation remains the top reason tech professionals change employers, but job stability jumped to #2 in 2025—a clear shift from growth-driven to security-driven mobility.**

Even among tech company employees, job stability is a key motivator. This group is significantly more likely to switch for security than peers working at non-tech companies.

Remote work options also surged in importance, climbing from #7 in 2024 to the top three reasons for switching. Meanwhile, motivations tied to leadership opportunities and increased responsibility declined in rank, reinforcing the defensive nature of today's market.

AI professionals are significantly more motivated than other tech professionals to work at companies advanced in AI adoption. AI maturity now functions as a distinct employer value proposition when attracting and retaining AI talent.

| | | |
|---|---|---|
| To seek higher compensation | 1 | 1 | To seek higher compensation |
| To seek more responsibility/greater professional development | 2 | 2 | To gain greater job stability |
| To have better benefits (health, vacation, wellness, etc.) | 3 | 3 | To have the option to work remotely part-time/full-time |
| To gain greater job stability | 4 | 4 | To have better benefits (health, vacation, wellness, etc.) |
| To have better leadership | 5 | 5 | To seek more responsibility/greater professional development |
| To seek better working conditions | 6 | 6 | To seek better working conditions |
| To have the option to work remotely part-time/full-time | 7 | 7 | To have better leadership |
| To better align with my personal values | 8 | 8 | To better align with my personal values |
| To have more flexibility over schedule (i.e. flexible working hours) | 9 | 9 | To have more flexibility over schedule (i.e. flexible working hours) |

# The Job Search Experience is Frustrating and Mismatched

Job searching has become another friction point. Eight in ten tech professionals believe they applied to a "ghost job" in the past year—a role posted with no real intention to hire.

Just over half say they applied for roles significantly below their skill level just to secure employment. These experiences explain why confidence in finding a favorable role stays low, even as job-search activity accelerates.

For staffing firms, this cuts both ways. Candidates are frustrated and skeptical, which means transparency and speed matter more than ever. But the willingness to apply below skill level suggests candidates may be more open to roles they'd have passed on in stronger markets—though closing them requires addressing their underlying security concerns.
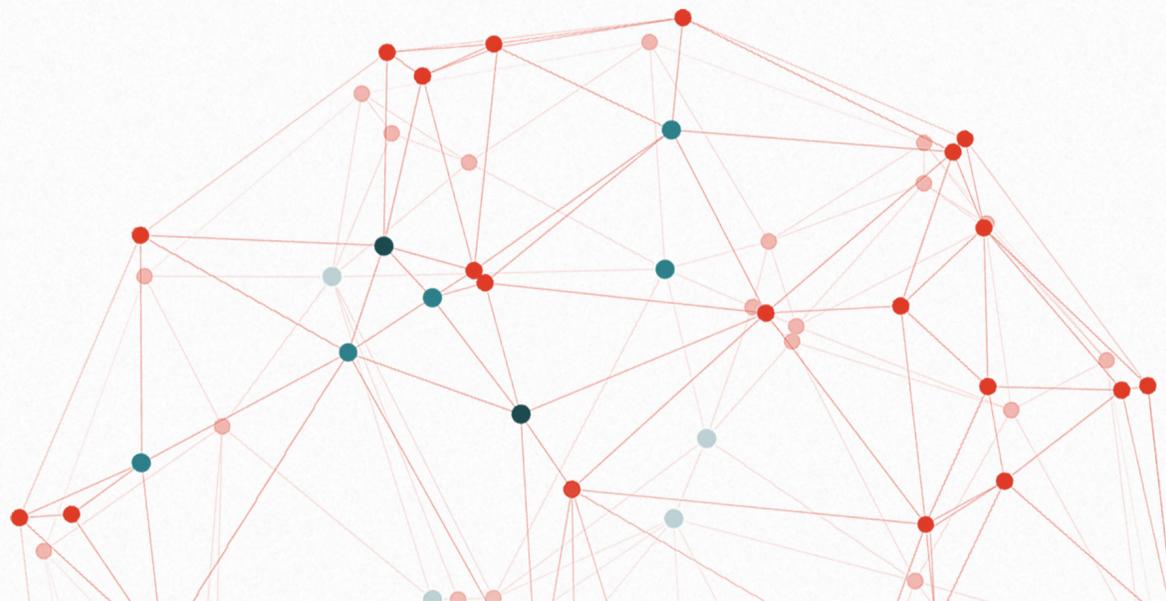
In the past year, have you applied to a job you later suspected was a "ghost job" (a role posted with no real intention to hire)?

| | |
|---|---|
| 82% | 18% |

● Yes  ● No

In the past year, have you applied for a role significantly below your skill level just to get employed?

| | |
|---|---|
| 67% | 33% |

● Yes  ● No
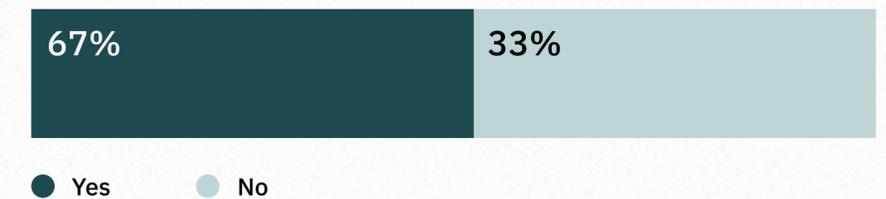
# Power Has Shifted Decisively Toward Employers

**Despite high mobility intent, tech professionals overwhelmingly believe the market favors employers.**

Nine in ten say employers hold more power right now, reinforcing why many workers feel compelled to accept less-than-ideal roles or stay cautious despite wanting to move.

Perceptions of power also vary by role. While most AI and non-AI tech professionals believe employers hold more power, AI professionals are more than twice as likely to say employees hold the advantage (19% vs. 8%)—indicating stronger individual leverage among those working closest to AI.

Who do you feel holds more power in the tech job market right now – employers or employees?

| 88% | 12% |
|---|---|

● Employers/companies hold more power     ● Employees/workers hold more power
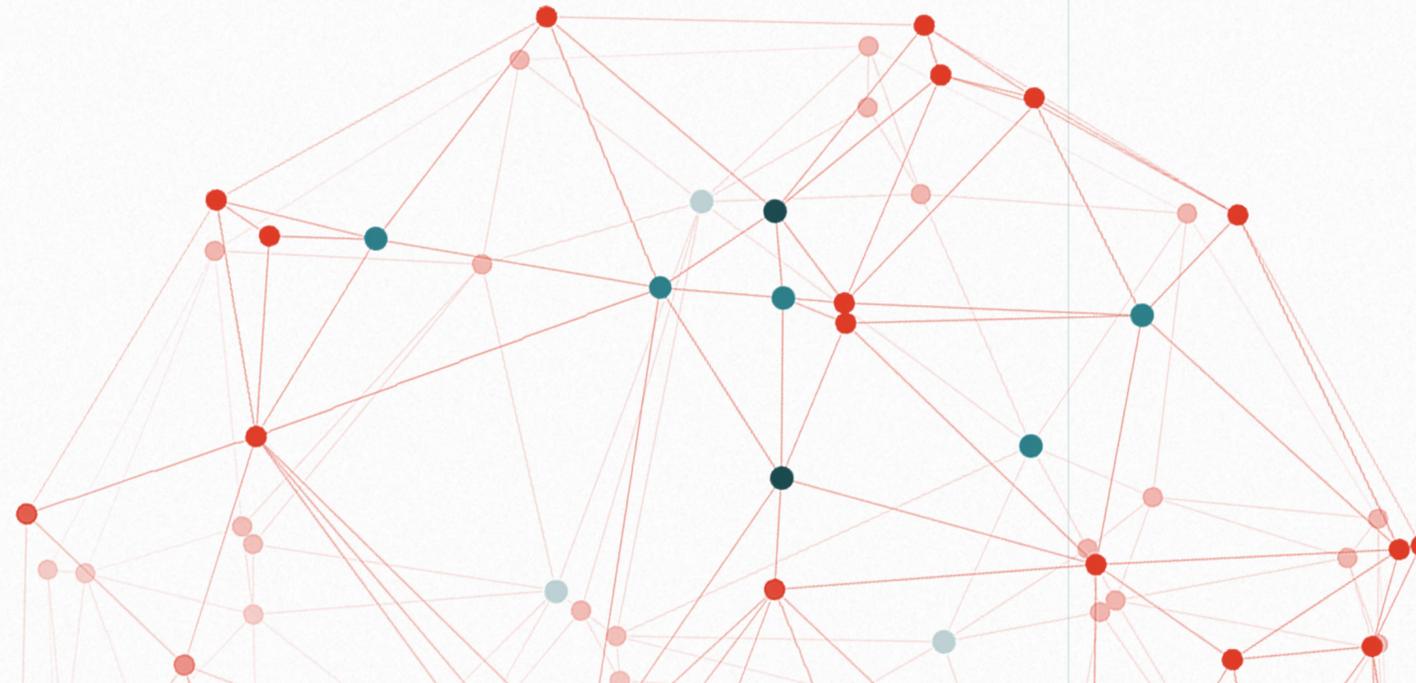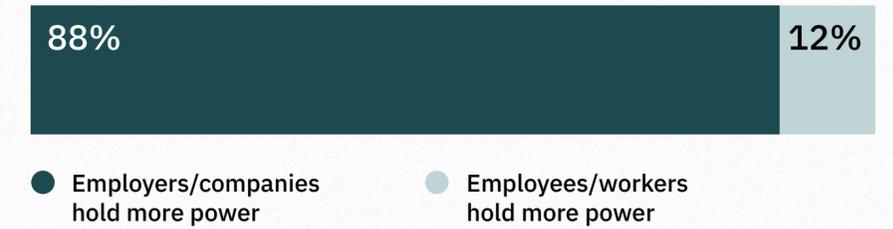
What This Signals for Staffing Firms

# The 2026 candidate mindset is defined by high intent to move, low confidence, and constrained choice.

Tech professionals are willing to switch employers, but they're doing it defensively—driven by layoffs, burnout, trust gaps, and job stability concerns rather than optimism about new opportunities.

Traditional "sell the opportunity" tactics may fall flat. Candidates need stability signals first. This includes clarity about company financial health, low turnover rates, and transparent hiring processes. Compensation matters, but it's no longer enough on its own to close candidates who are moving out of fear rather than ambition.
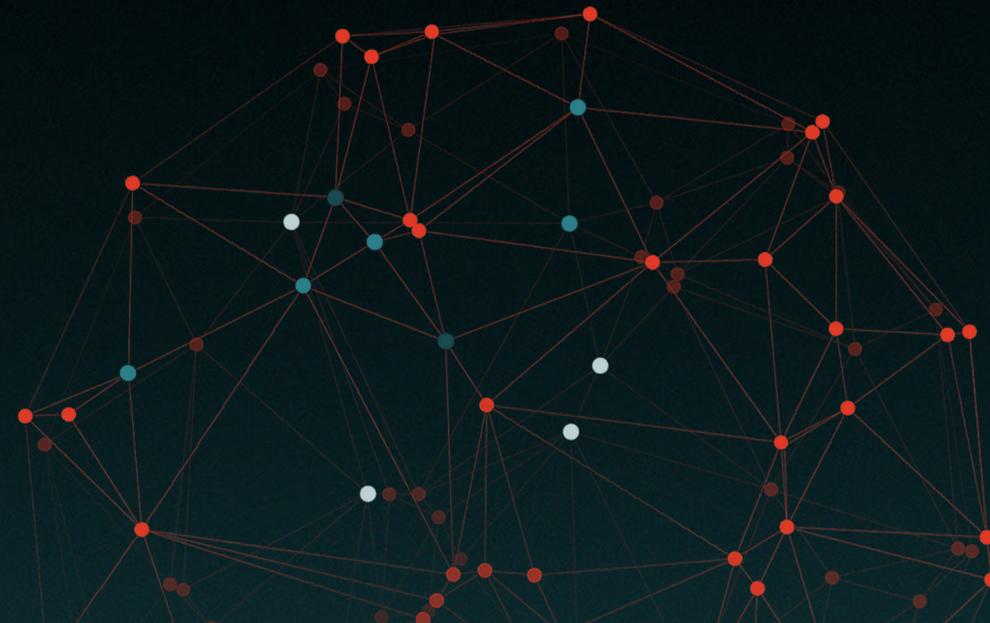
# Economic Uncertainty and Rising Burnout are Reshaping the Workforce
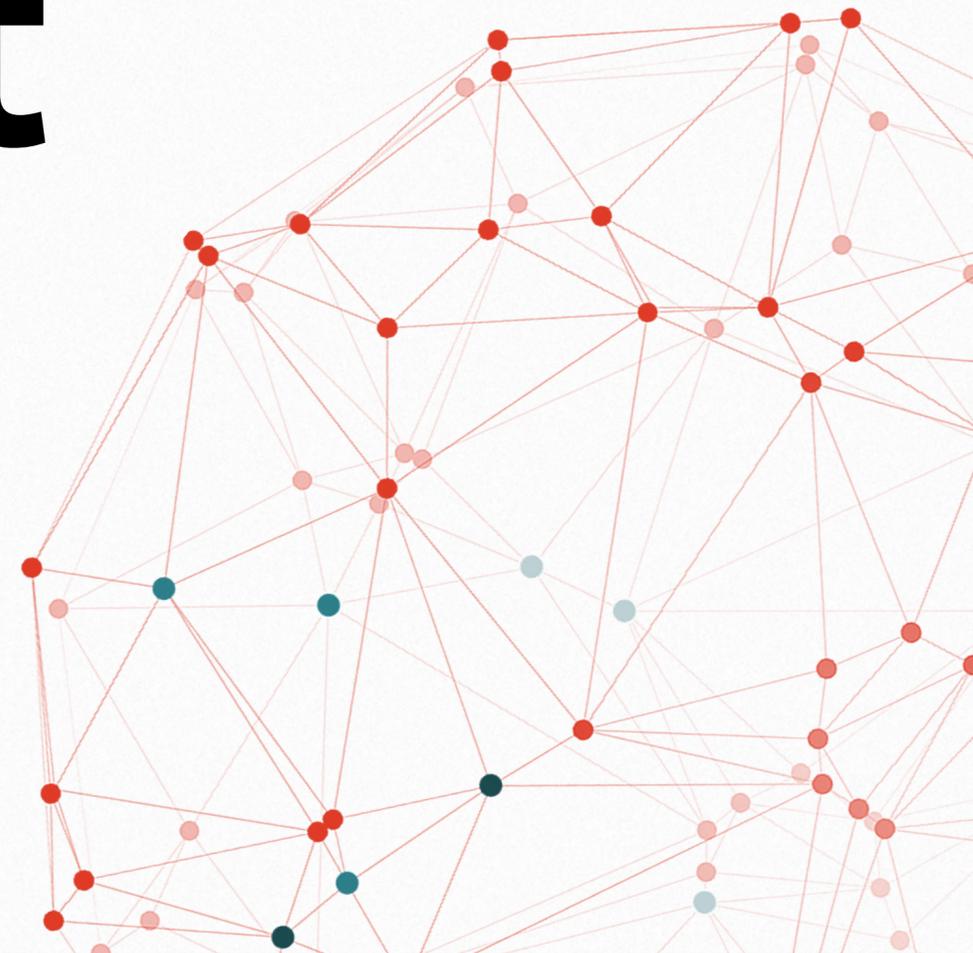
# Layoffs Are No Longer Isolated Events

**Layoffs continued to shape the tech workforce experience in 2025, and they are apprehensive about this dynamic in 2026 as well.**

The share of tech professionals reporting they've been laid off climbed to 22%, while nearly three in ten now said they're worried about or expecting layoffs at their current employer. Meanwhile, the proportion who report being untouched by layoffs has fallen sharply—from 56% in 2023 to just 34% in 2025.

Layoffs are no longer perceived as rare or isolated—they're increasingly normalized across the industry. For staffing firms, this means nearly every candidate has been directly or indirectly affected, which shapes how they evaluate offers. Stability and job security are front-and-center in the minds of candidates.

**How, if at all, have you been impacted by tech layoffs that have been in the news recently?**

Q2 / 2023
10% | 21% | 56%

Q2 / 2024
16% | 22% | 24% | 22% | 45%
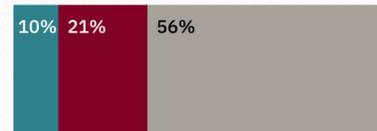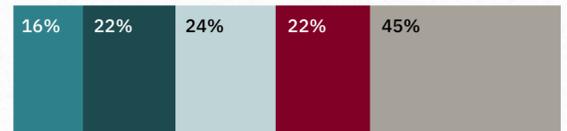
Q4 / 2025
22% | 29% | 34% | 29% | 34%
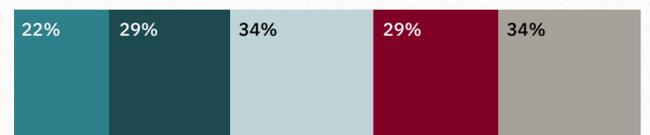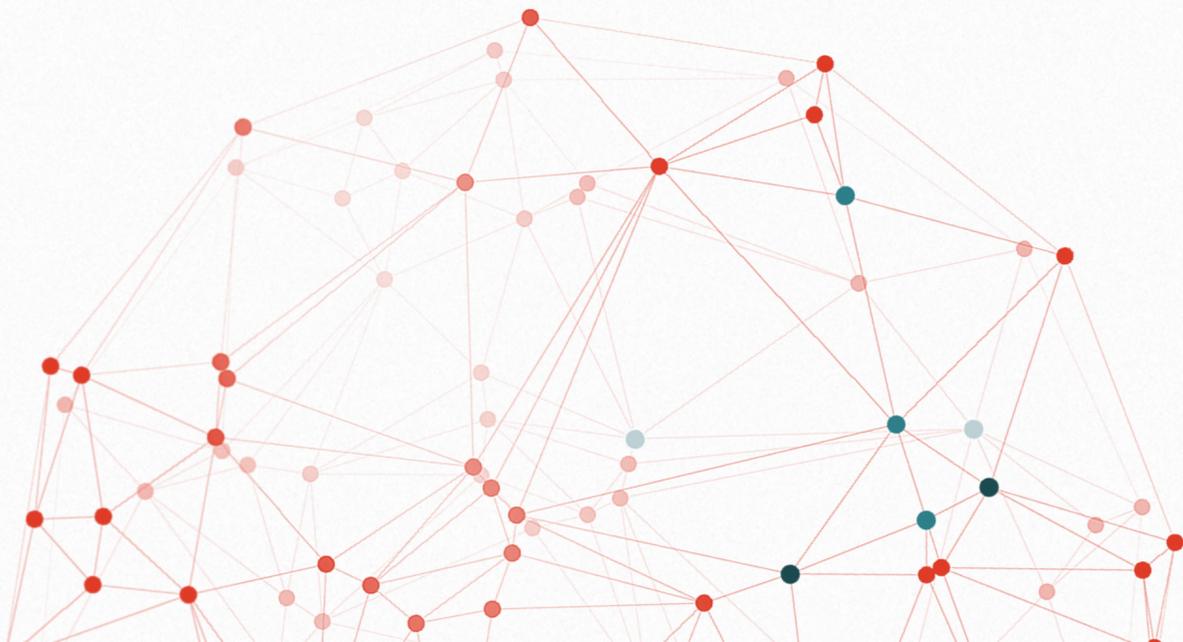
- I have been laid off
- Team member(s) in my department have been laid off
- Team member(s) in other department have been laid off
- I'm worried about/expecting layoffs at my company
- None of the above

# Job Stability Confidence is Slipping

## As layoffs become more common, confidence in job stability has eroded

More tech professionals reported feeling less confident than more confident about job stability compared to six months ago (37% vs. 27%), while more than one-third said their confidence has stayed the same.

Confidence erosion isn't uniform. AI professionals reported significantly higher confidence in their job stability, with nearly twice as many saying they feel more confident than six months ago compared to other tech professionals (38% vs. 21%).
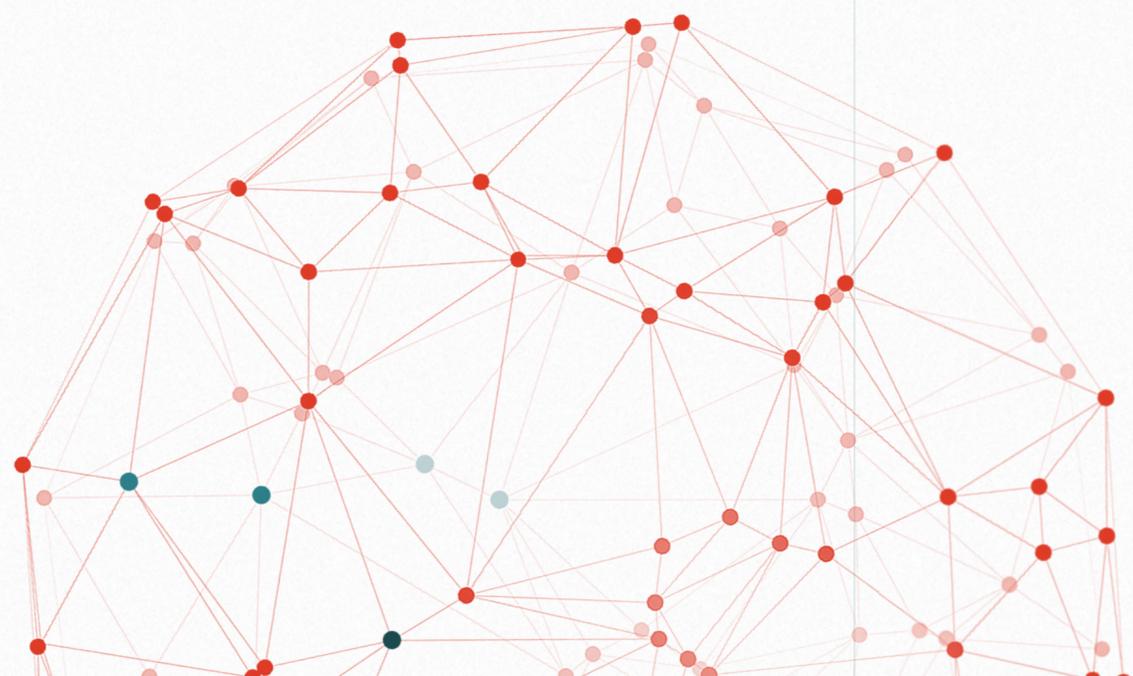
### Compared to six months ago, how confident do you feel in the stability at your job?

**2025**

| | Much more confident | Somewhat more confident | About the same | Somewhat less confident | Much less confident |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| AI professionals | 19% | 18% | 30% | 23% | 10% |
| Other tech professionals | 10% | 11% | 40% | 18% | 21% |

- ● Much more confident
- ● Somewhat more confident
- ● About the same
- ● Somewhat less confident
- ● Much less confident

# Economic Pessimism Reaches a New High

**Broader economic sentiment has worsened considerably. In 2025, 44% of tech professionals expressed pessimism about economic conditions in the year ahead—the highest level observed since 2023.**

This deterioration underscores how macroeconomic uncertainty, layoffs, and uneven hiring conditions are compounding workforce anxiety.

This pessimism concentrates outside AI-focused roles. Nearly half of non-AI tech professionals (49%) are pessimistic about economic conditions in 2025, significantly higher than AI professionals and a sharp increase from prior years. This outlook coincides with widespread concern about AI-driven job loss—63% of non-AI tech professionals believe AI will eliminate more jobs than it creates.
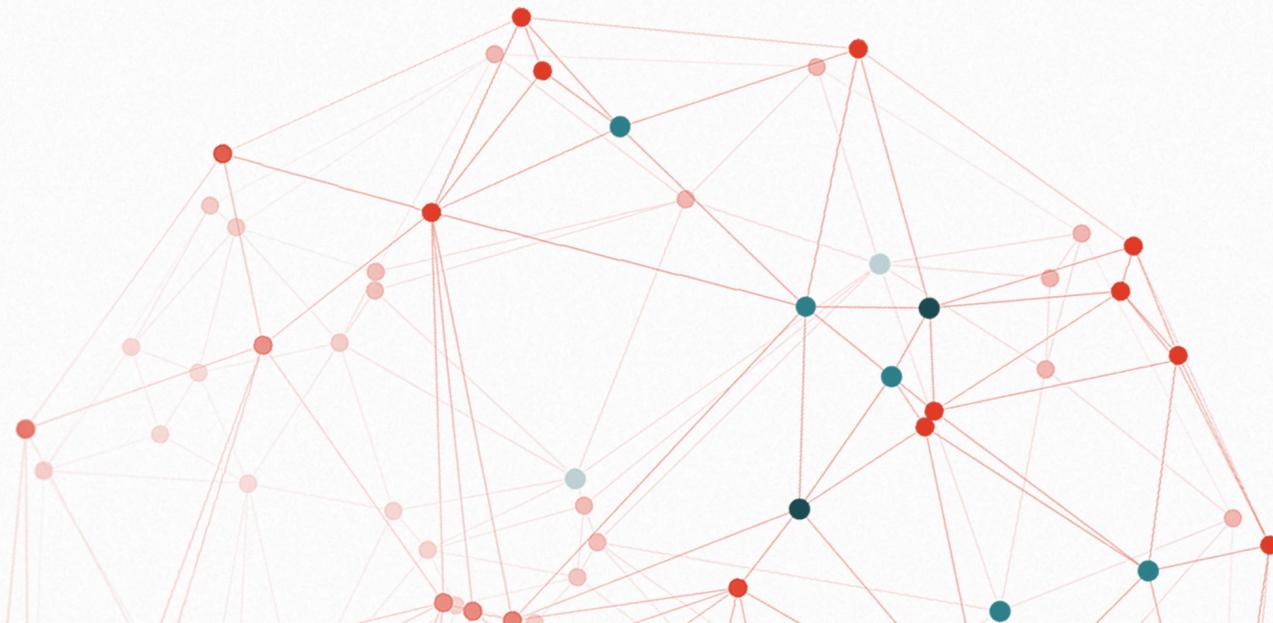
## Thinking about next year, what is your overall confidence level surrounding economic conditions?

| | | | | | |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| **Q2 / 2023** | 11% | 22% | 42% | 17% | 9% |
| **Q2 / 2024** | 10% | 21% | 42% | 16% | 11% |
| **Q4 / 2025** | 12% | 13% | 31% | 20% | 24% |

### 2024

| | | | | | |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| **AI professionals** | 14% | 22% | 37% | 11% | 16% |
| **Other tech professionals** | 9% | 21% | 44% | 17% | 10% |

### 2025

| | | | | | |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| **AI professionals** | 17% | 20% | 29% | 18% | 16% |
| **Other tech professionals** | 9% | 10% | 32% | 21% | 29% |

● 1   ● 2   ● 3   ● 4   ● 5

Very pessimestic                    Very optimistic

# Long-Term Faith in Tech Growth is Weakening

**Despite tech's historical resilience, confidence in the profession's long-term growth has softened meaningfully.**

The share of tech professionals who believe the industry will grow over the next five years has dropped from roughly 80% in 2023-2024 to 60% in 2025, while concern about long-term decline has nearly tripled.
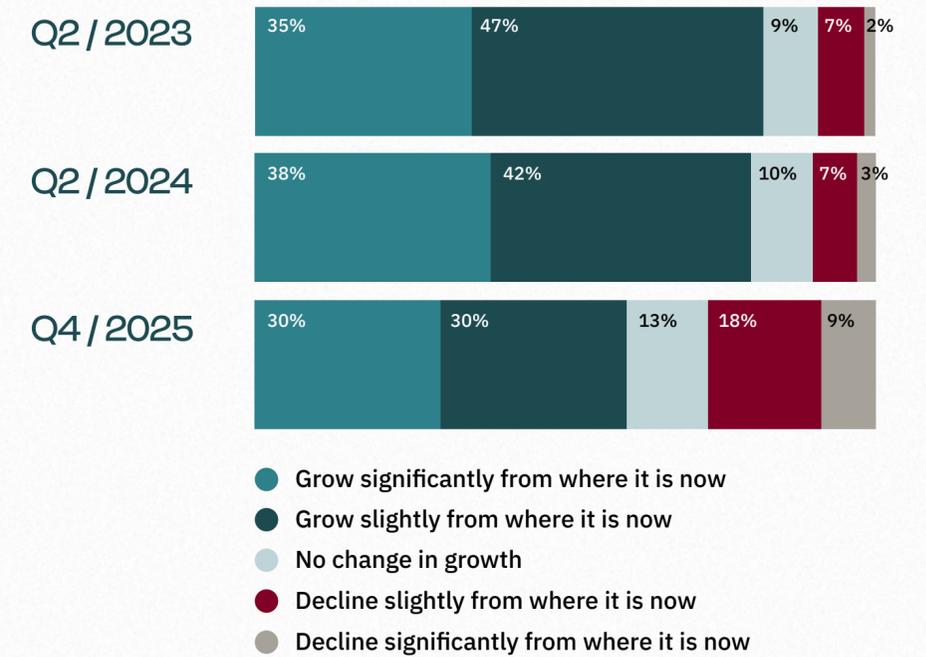
Long-term optimism also diverged sharply by role and workplace. Three-quarters of AI professionals expect the tech profession to grow over the next five years, compared with just over half of other tech professionals. Expectations of decline are even more pronounced among tech professionals working outside of tech companies, who are significantly more likely to believe the profession will decline.

Even confidence among AI professionals softened year over year as expectations of decline increase—AI optimism is no longer immune to broader market pressures.
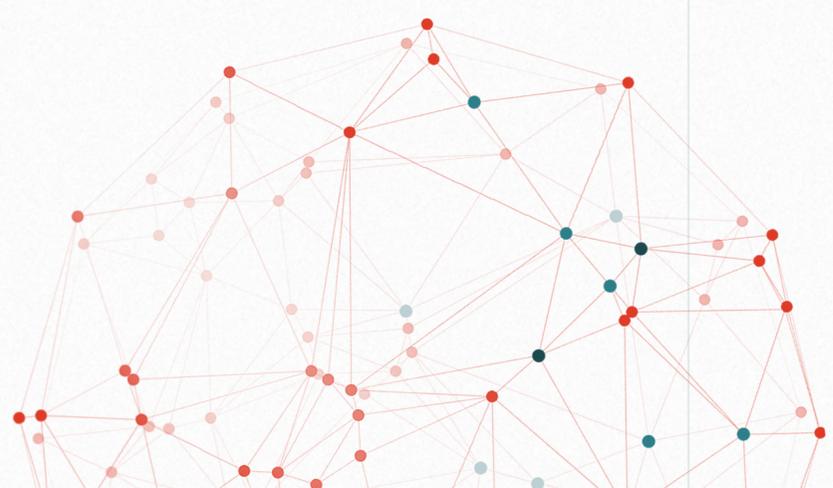
Now thinking specifically about the tech profession and its outlook over the next five years, please select which statement you believe is true.

"I believe the tech profession in the next five years will…"

| | Grow significantly | Grow slightly | No change | Decline slightly | Decline significantly |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| Q2 / 2023 | 35% | 47% | 9% | 7% | 2% |
| Q2 / 2024 | 38% | 42% | 10% | 7% | 3% |
| Q4 / 2025 | 30% | 30% | 13% | 18% | 9% |

● Grow significantly from where it is now
● Grow slightly from where it is now
● No change in growth
● Decline slightly from where it is now
● Decline significantly from where it is now

# Burnout Has Reached a Tipping Point

After several years of relative stability, burnout among employed tech professionals rose sharply in 2025. Nearly half now reported being burned out, and almost one-quarter described themselves as very burned out—roughly double the level seen in prior years.
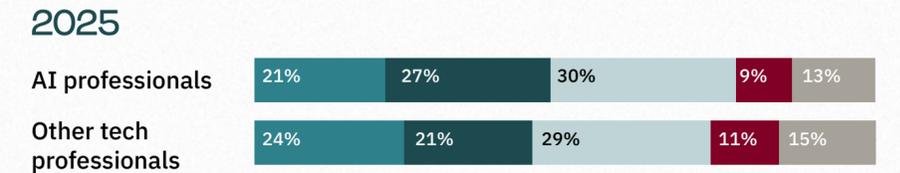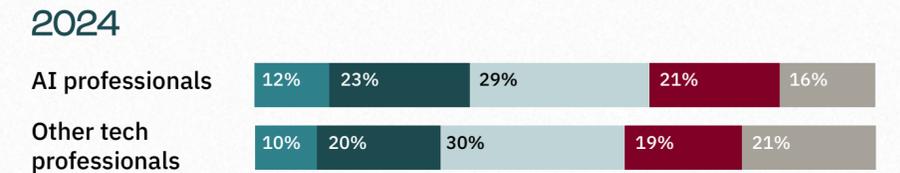
Burnout is also strongly tied to mobility. Seven in ten tech professionals who describe themselves as very burned out are actively job searching, compared with less than half of those who aren't burned out—sustained strain is translating into real retention risk.

Despite differences in confidence and optimism, burnout levels are broadly similar among AI and other tech professionals. Perceived job security and market leverage don't shield workers from sustained workload pressure. Burnout increased significantly from 2024 to 2025 across both groups, with nearly half now reporting high levels—strain is widespread, even among those best positioned in the market. Tech professionals experiencing high burnout are more likely to:

- Want to leave the tech industry
- Seek better leadership and greater workplace flexibility
- Worry about layoffs
- Have 10-19 years of experience
- Work at small companies (fewer than 250 employees)
- Belong to the Millennial generation
- Have been in their current role for 3-9 years

These patterns point to mid-career professionals, often carrying heavy workloads and leadership expectations, bearing the brunt of sustained industry pressure.

## Generally speaking, how burned out do you feel as it relates to your job?

| Q2 / 2024 | 20% | 19% | 29% | 21% | 11% |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| Q4 / 2025 | 14% | 10% | 29% | 23% | 23% |

### 2024

| | 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5 |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| AI professionals | 12% | 23% | 29% | 21% | 16% |
| Other tech professionals | 10% | 20% | 30% | 19% | 21% |

### 2025

| | 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5 |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| AI professionals | 21% | 27% | 30% | 9% | 13% |
| Other tech professionals | 24% | 21% | 29% | 11% | 15% |

● 1    ● 2    ● 3    ● 4    ● 5

Not burned out        Very burned out

What This Signals for Staffing Firms

# Economic uncertainty, layoffs, and burnout are lived experiences shaping every candidate conversation.

Tech professionals aren't asking "what's the upside of this role?" as much as they're asking "will this company be stable?" and "will this job burn me out?"

Reframe how you present roles. Transparency about company financial health, runway, and layoff history is critical. Candidates who've been laid off or watched colleagues lose jobs will scrutinize stability signals closely. Mid-career professionals showing signs of burnout may be high-flight-risk placements unless the role offers meaningful relief from the conditions driving their exhaustion.
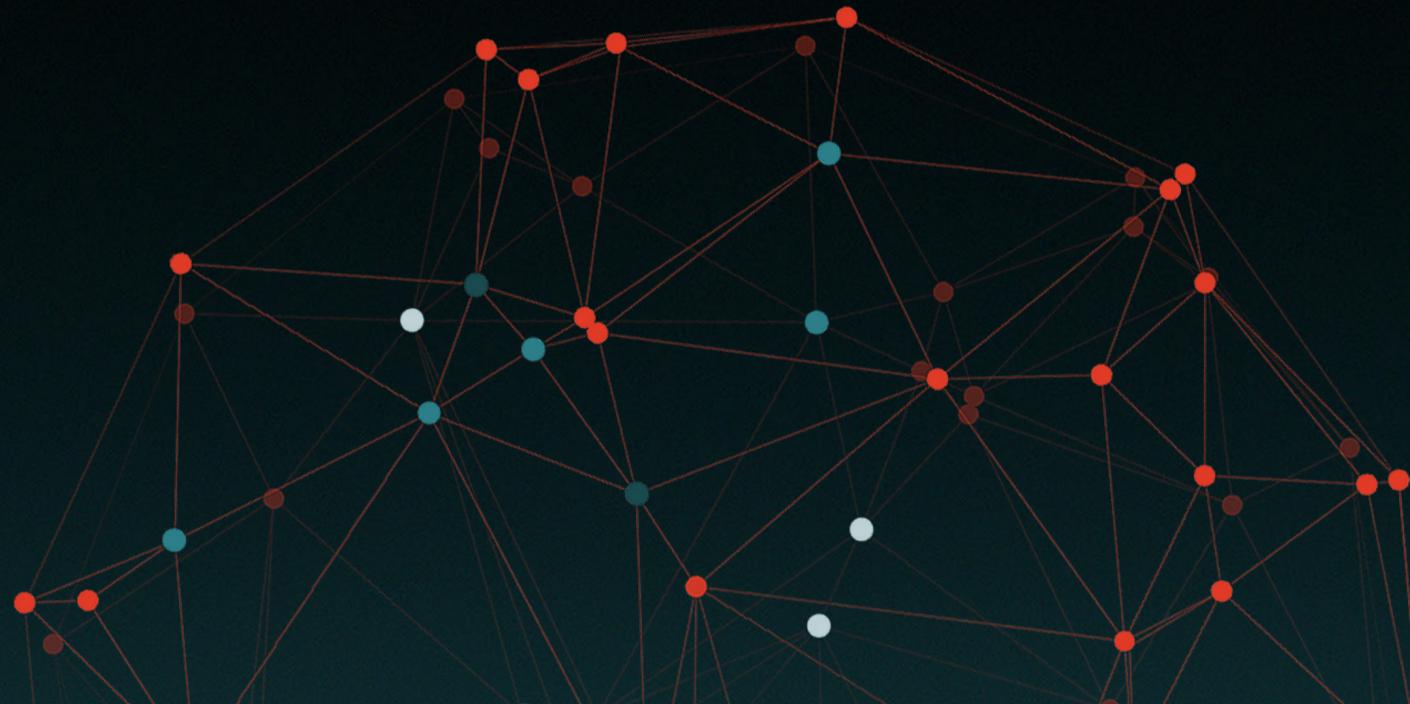
# AI Is Splitting the Talent Pool—and Governance Gaps are Widening
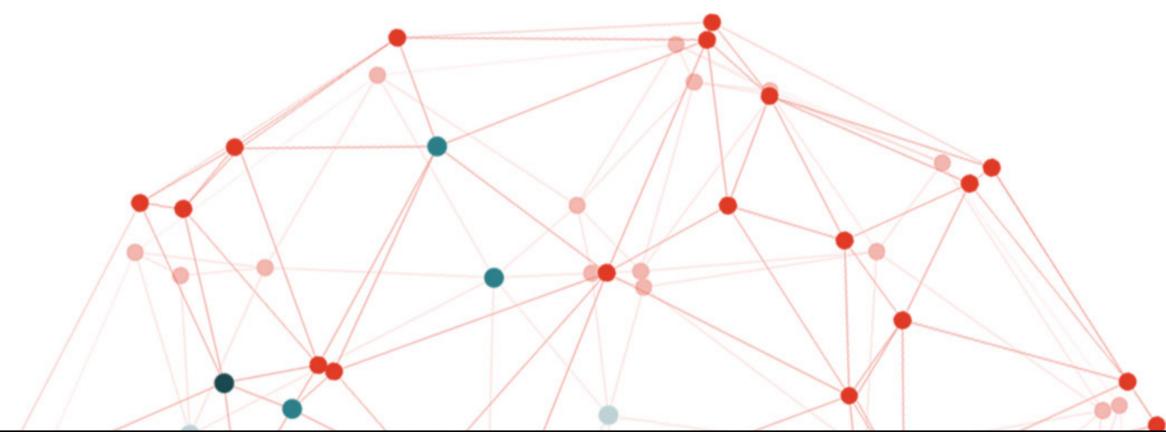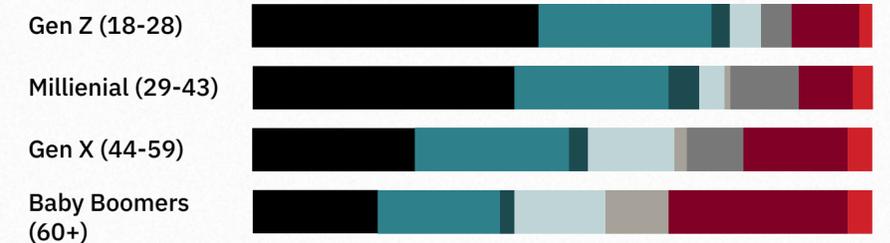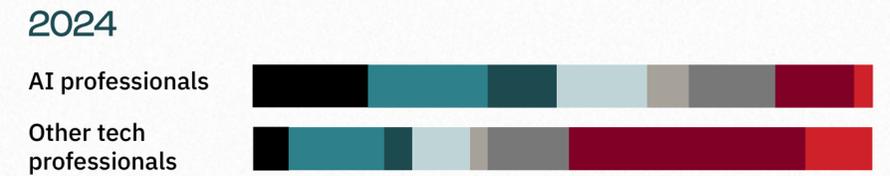
# AI is Becoming Core to Tech Work—Quickly

## AI is no longer peripheral to tech roles.

Today, 35% of tech professionals say they're responsible for designing, developing, or implementing AI solutions—a significant increase from the year before. Daily use of AI for work-related tasks has quadrupled year over year. Generative AI has moved from experimentation to everyday workflow.

Among AI professionals, usage is unsurprisingly already embedded in their workflow: nine in ten use generative AI for work at least weekly, and six in ten use it daily. AI adoption also varies by age, with younger tech professionals reporting more frequent use. Gen Z and Millennials are significantly more likely than Gen X and Baby Boomers to use generative AI at least weekly—and to use it daily.
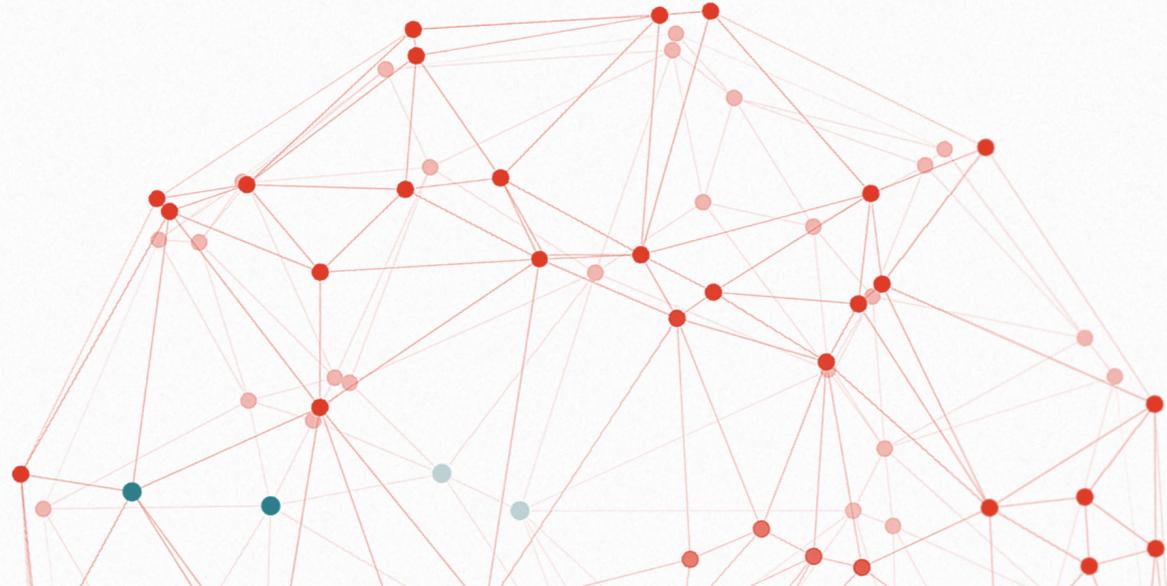
**How often, if ever, do you use generative AI for work-related tasks?**

Q2 / 2024
Q4 / 2025

### 2024

AI professionals

Other tech professionals

### 2025

AI professionals

Other tech professionals

Gen Z (18-28)

Millienial (29-43)

Gen X (44-59)

Baby Boomers (60+)

- ● Every day
- ● A few times a week
- ● Once a week
- ● A few times a month
- ● Once a month
- ● Less than once a month
- ● Never
- ● Never - company has restrictions on using generative AI for work-related tasks

# Perceived Impact of GenAI Has Shifted Sharply

As usage has increased, perceptions of AI's impact have shifted decisively. A significantly larger share of tech professionals said genAI has a "significant impact" on their work, while those saying it has "no impact" have declined sharply.

This shift is most pronounced among AI professionals, who are more likely than a year ago to see meaningful effects on their day-to-day work.

Other tech professionals are also feeling AI's presence more acutely—a year-over-year increase in those reporting a "slight impact" and a decline in those saying AI has no impact at all. Looking ahead, expectations are even clearer: only 4% of tech professionals believe genAI won't impact their work in the next year, while six in ten expect a significant impact.

## 4%

**Of tech professionals believe genAI won't impact their work in the next year**

## 60%

**Of tech professionals expect genAI to significantly impact their work in the next year**
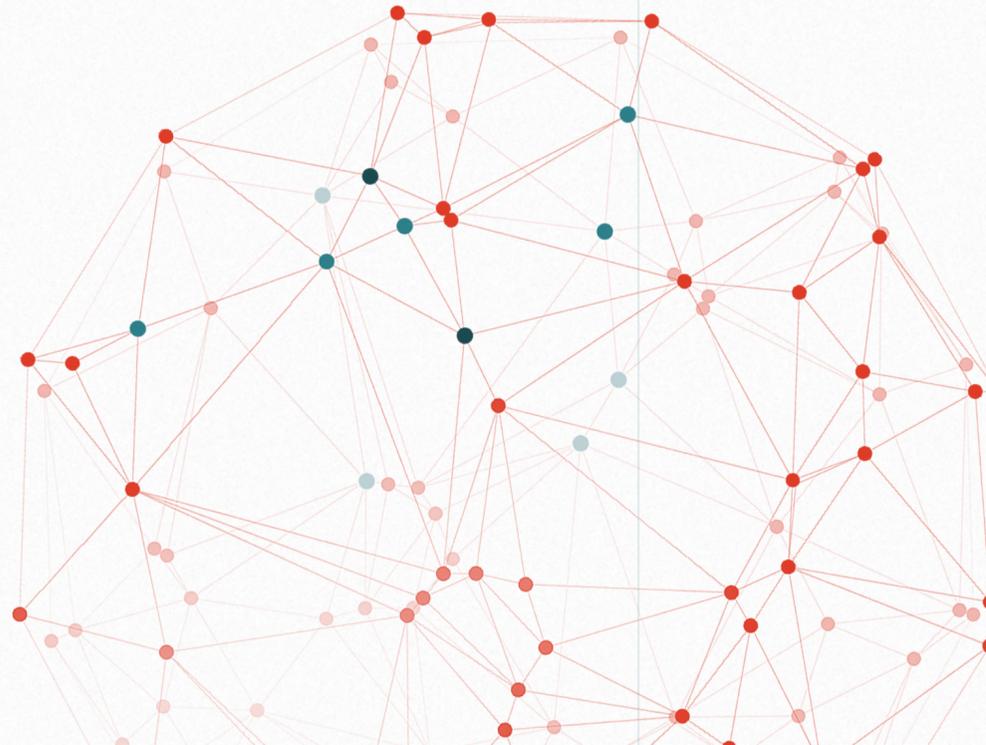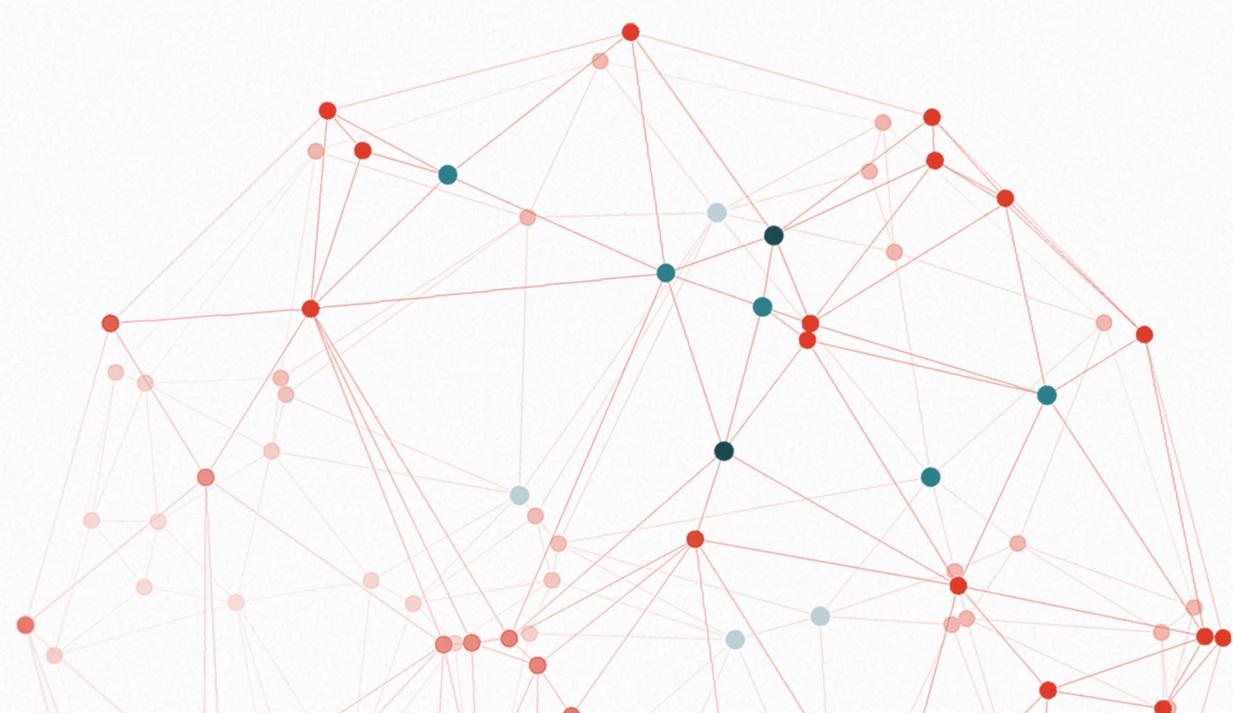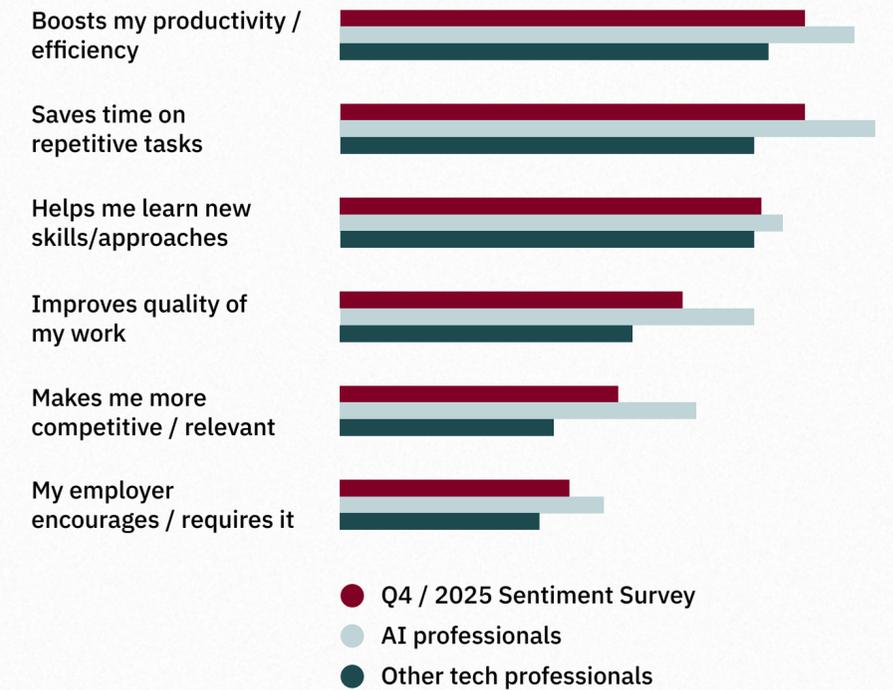
# Why Tech Professionals Are Using GenAI

**Efficiency and time savings drive genAI use at work, particularly for repetitive or time-consuming tasks.**

AI professionals are also significantly more likely to believe that using genAI makes them more competitive and relevant—reinforcing AI as a perceived career advantage rather than a threat within AI-adjacent roles.
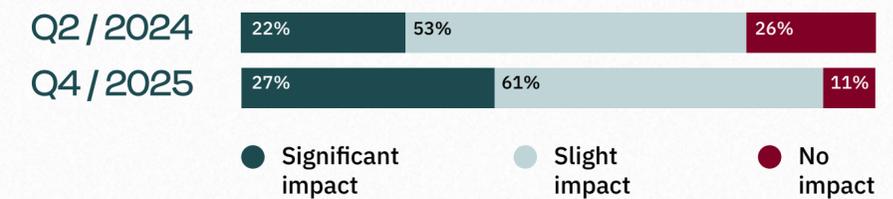
At the same time, 15% of tech professionals say they don't use genAI at work, and nearly half of this group cite trust concerns or a preference for doing the work themselves. Non-use is often driven by skepticism, not lack of access.

**What are your primary reasons for using GenAI at work? Please select all that apply.**

- Boosts my productivity / efficiency
- Saves time on repetitive tasks
- Helps me learn new skills/approaches
- Improves quality of my work
- Makes me more competitive / relevant
- My employer encourages / requires it

● Q4 / 2025 Sentiment Survey
● AI professionals
● Other tech professionals

**What impact is generative AI having on your work as a tech professional?**

| | Significant impact | Slight impact | No impact |
|---|---|---|---|
| Q2 / 2024 | 22% | 53% | 26% |
| Q4 / 2025 | 27% | 61% | 11% |

● Significant impact   ● Slight impact   ● No impact
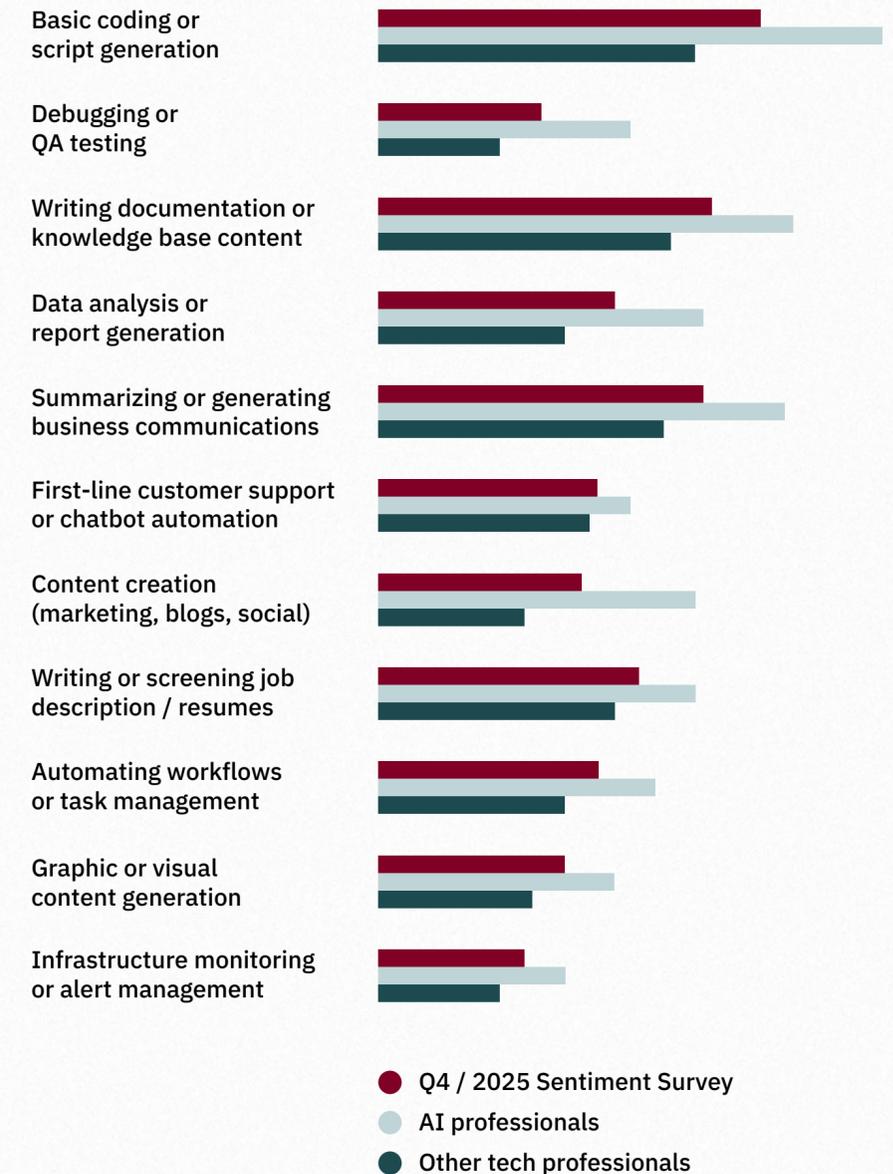
# Automation Is Already Reshaping Core Tasks

GenAI is already replacing or significantly automating core tasks, particularly basic coding or script generation, documentation, and business communications.

These impacts are most visible among AI professionals, who consistently report higher levels of task automation across nearly all workflows.

Despite this, most tech professionals believe AI is currently augmenting work rather than fully replacing roles—a near-term narrative of productivity amplification rather than wholesale job loss. However, three-quarters believe they could maintain their current productivity if AI tools were banned tomorrow. AI is viewed as a powerful accelerator, but not yet indispensable.
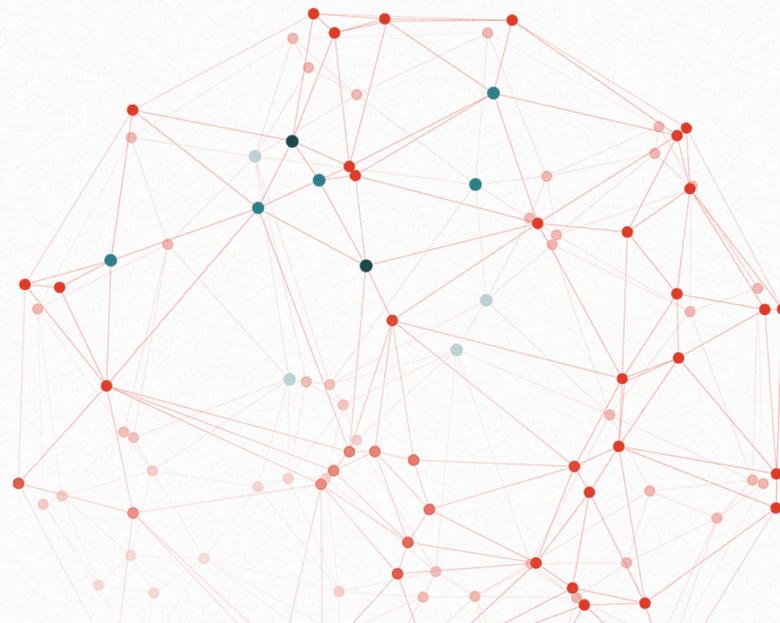
**Which of the following tasks have you seen replaced or significantly automated by GenAI tools at your current/most recent employer? Please select all that apply.**

- Basic coding or script generation
- Debugging or QA testing
- Writing documentation or knowledge base content
- Data analysis or report generation
- Summarizing or generating business communications
- First-line customer support or chatbot automation
- Content creation (marketing, blogs, social)
- Writing or screening job description / resumes
- Automating workflows or task management
- Graphic or visual content generation
- Infrastructure monitoring or alert management

● Q4 / 2025 Sentiment Survey
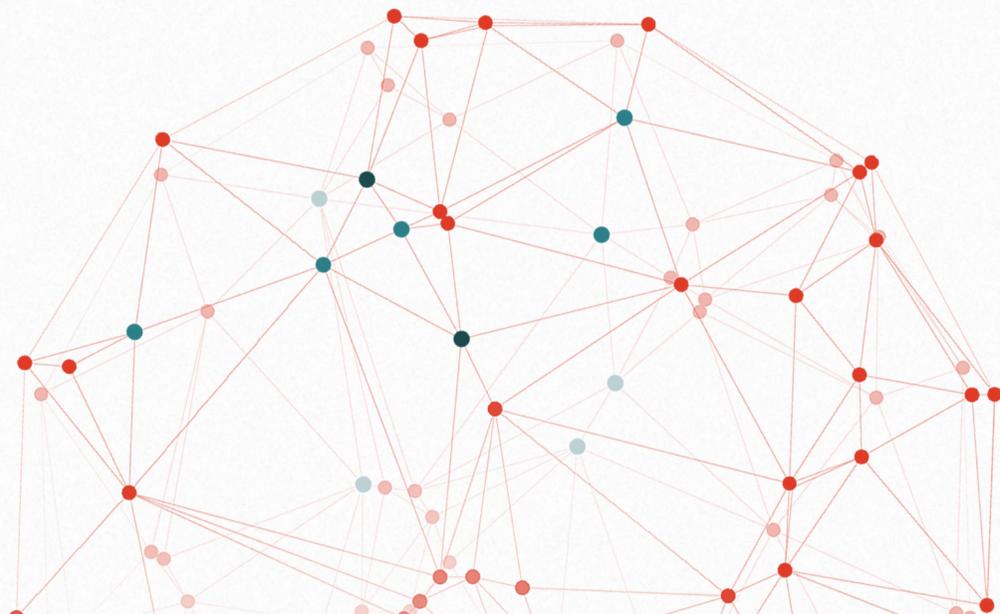● AI professionals
● Other tech professionals
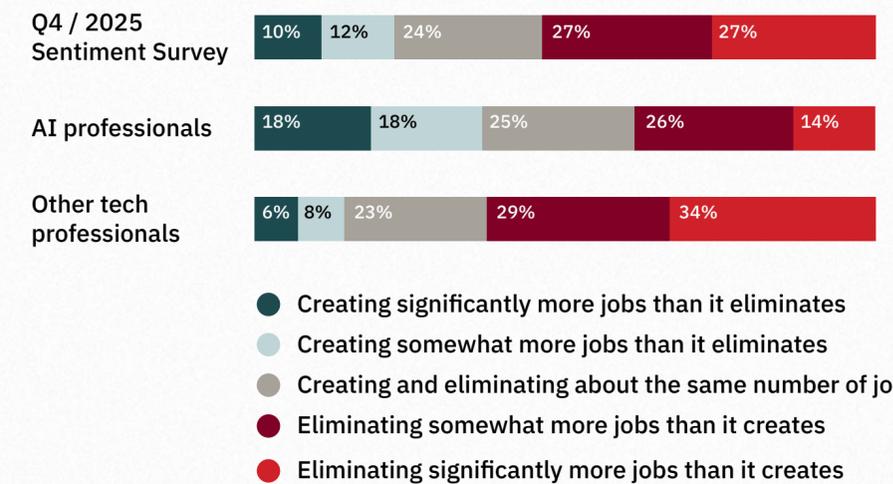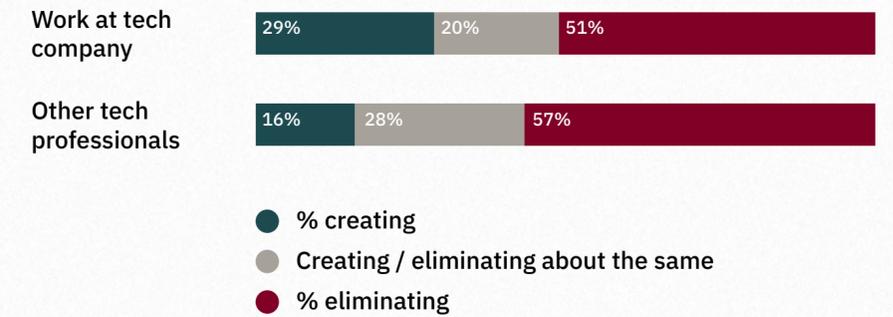
# Job Displacement Fears Vary Widely by Role

Perceptions of AI's impact on jobs diverge sharply across the workforce. AI professionals are nearly evenly split on whether AI will create or eliminate more jobs—a nuanced, experience-driven view.

In contrast, nearly two-thirds of other tech professionals (63%) believe AI will eliminate more jobs than it creates—almost double the share of AI professionals who expect net job loss.

Perceptions also vary by workplace context: tech professionals who work at tech companies are more likely to believe AI will create jobs, while those working outside tech companies are more inclined to expect net job loss. Proximity to AI development and adoption shapes how its workforce impact is understood.

## To what extent do you believe AI is creating versus eliminating jobs in the tech industry?

**Work at tech company:** 29% | 20% | 51%

**Other tech professionals:** 16% | 28% | 57%

- % creating
- Creating / eliminating about the same
- % eliminating

**Q4 / 2025 Sentiment Survey:** 10% | 12% | 24% | 27% | 27%

**AI professionals:** 18% | 18% | 25% | 26% | 14%

**Other tech professionals:** 6% | 8% | 23% | 29% | 34%

- Creating significantly more jobs than it eliminates
- Creating somewhat more jobs than it eliminates
- Creating and eliminating about the same number of jobs
- Eliminating somewhat more jobs than it creates
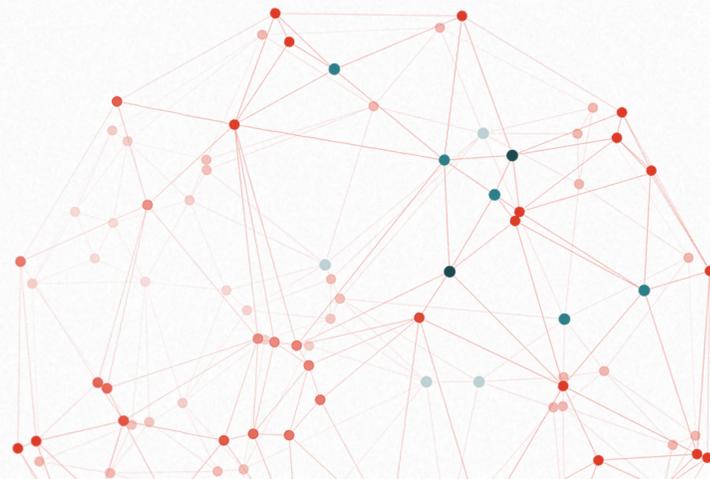- Eliminating significantly more jobs than it creates
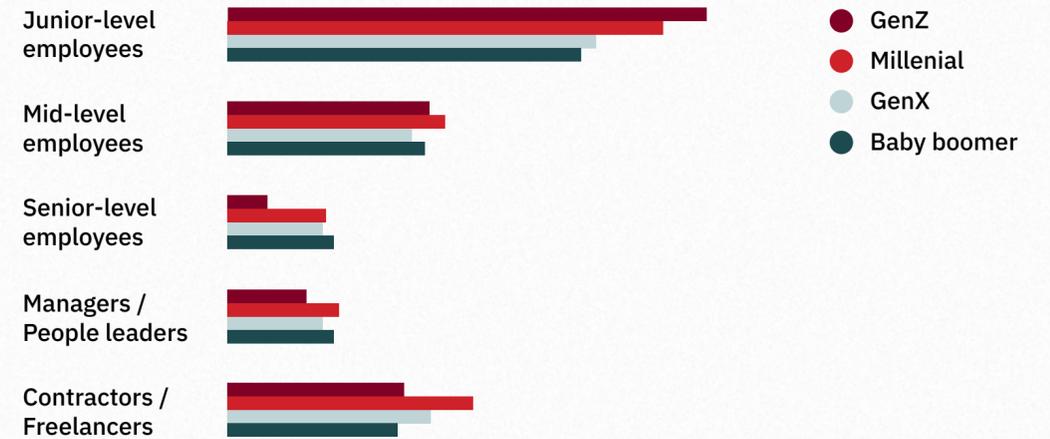
# Job Displacement Fears Vary Widely by Role

**Three-quarters of tech professionals believe junior-level employees are most at risk of AI displacement, while managers and people leaders are viewed as least impacted.**

Tech professionals at large companies are more likely to believe managers will be affected, and younger tech professionals (Gen Z and Millennials) are significantly more likely than Gen X and Baby Boomers to see junior-level roles as most vulnerable.

Concerns about long-term skills relevance reinforce this anxiety: extreme concern about skills becoming obsolete nearly doubles over a 10-year horizon—even among AI professionals—signaling growing unease about career longevity in an AI-driven future.

## Which group(s) do you think are most at risk of AI displacement?

Legend (top chart):
- Q4 / 2025 Sentiment Survey
- AI professionals
- Other tech professionals

Categories (top chart):
- Junior-level employees
- Mid-level employees
- Senior-level employees
- Managers / People leaders
- Contractors / Freelancers
- Other

Legend (bottom chart):
- GenZ
- Millenial
- GenX
- Baby boomer

Categories (bottom chart):
- Junior-level employees
- Mid-level employees
- Senior-level employees
- Managers / People leaders
- Contractors / Freelancers

# Governance Gaps Are Undermining Trust and Adoption

AI use is widespread, but governance hasn't kept pace. Just under half of tech professionals say their employer has introduced formal AI policies, leaving many without clear guidance.

Lack of clarity appears to suppress use: 22% of employees at organizations without clear AI policies say they never use AI for work, compared with just 8% at companies with formal policies.

Trust in responsible AI use also varies sharply. Six in ten AI professionals are confident their employer uses AI responsibly, compared with just 41% of other tech professionals. Among those who say their employer lacks formal AI policies, confidence drops to 26%.

Without clear guardrails, behaviors diverge: one-quarter of employed tech professionals admit to using genAI without their manager's knowledge or approval—highlighting the risks of informal, unsanctioned use. Only two in ten say their employer requires disclosure when AI is used to produce work, though this rises to 40% among AI professionals.

How confident are you that your current/most recent employer is using AI responsibly?
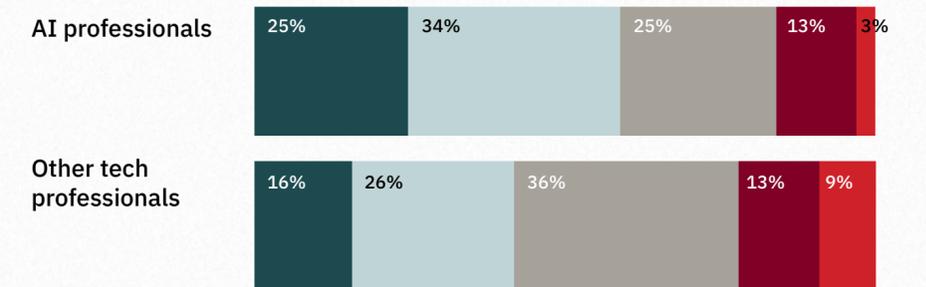
| | Extremely confident | Very confident | Somewhat confident | Not very confident | Not at all confident |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| AI professionals | 25% | 34% | 25% | 13% | 3% |
| Other tech professionals | 16% | 26% | 36% | 13% | 9% |

● Extremely confident
● Very confident
● Somewhat confident
● Not very confident
● Not at all confident

## What This Signals for Staffing Firms
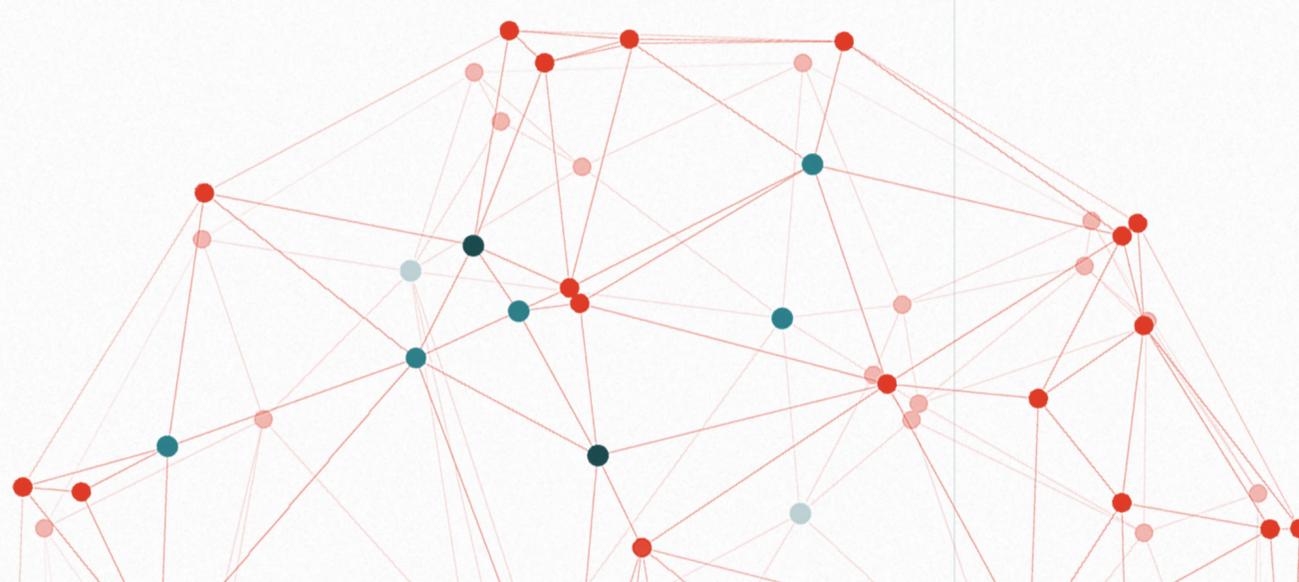
# AI is creating two distinct candidate pools with different expectations, anxieties, and negotiating positions.

AI professionals are confident, high-leverage, and expect employers to demonstrate AI maturity and governance. Other tech professionals are anxious about displacement, less confident in their leverage, and looking for reassurance that AI will augment rather than replace their roles.

For staffing firms, intake conversations with clients need to include questions about AI governance and maturity. Candidates—especially AI professionals—will ask about AI policies, and the absence of clear answers may signal organizational risk. Clients hiring non-AI tech talent should be prepared to address how AI is being integrated into workflows and what that means for job security and skills development.

The junior-level displacement concern is particularly relevant for entry-level tech placements. Clients need to articulate why they're hiring humans for junior roles rather than automating them away. Staffing firms should be prepared to help candidates understand the human+AI collaboration model rather than positioning roles as resistant to AI entirely.

# What This Means for Staffing Firms

## Strategic implications for 2026

The 2026 tech talent market is defined by defensive mobility, eroded confidence, and uneven optimism. For staffing and recruiting firms, success depends on understanding not just that candidates are willing to move, but why they're moving— and what they need to hear to feel secure in that decision.
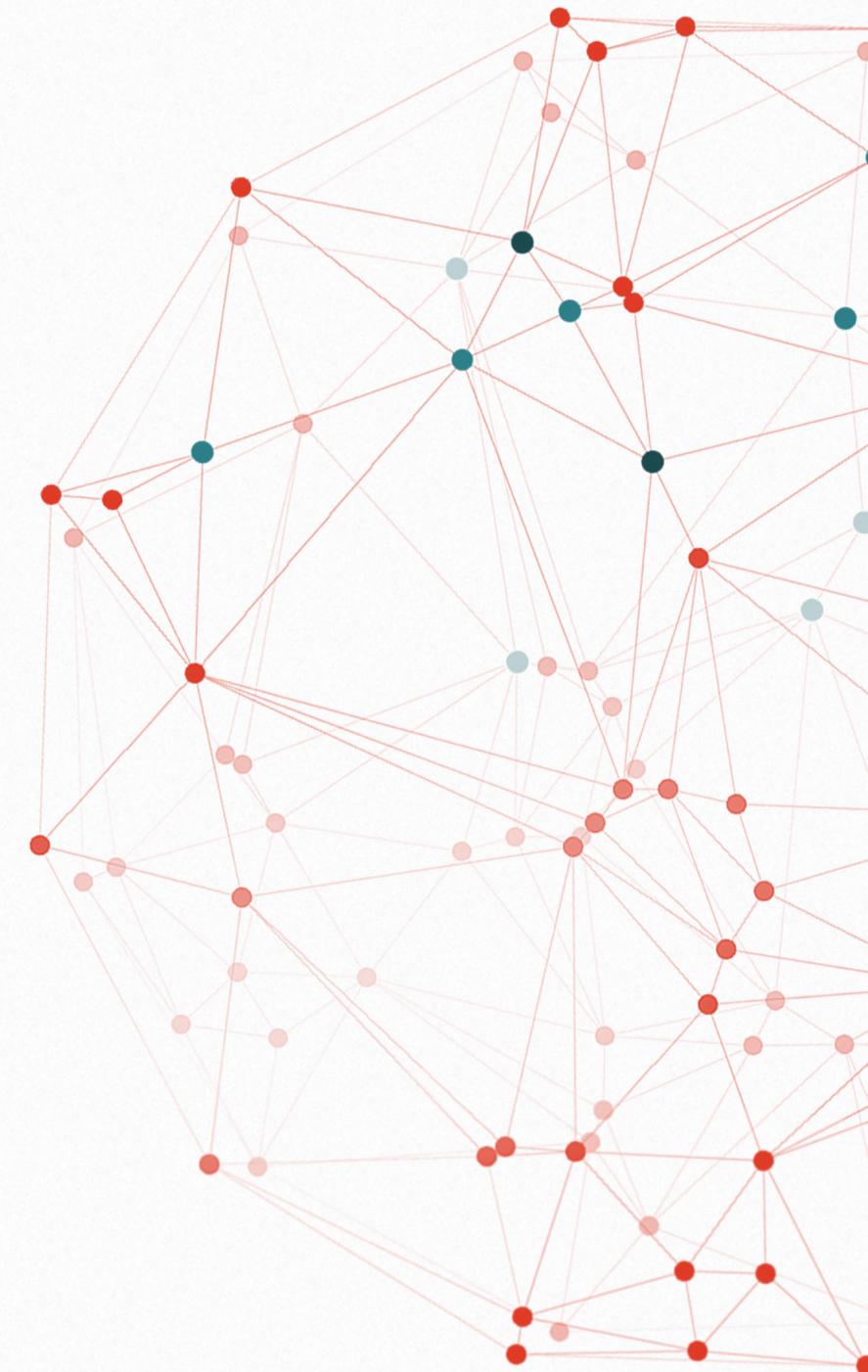
# Reframe How You Position Opportunities

Traditional growth-oriented messaging, such as career advancement, leadership opportunities, and cutting-edge projects, will be less relevant this year. Candidates are moving toward stability, not away from stagnation.

Sourcing outreach and role positioning should lead with security signals: company financial health, low turnover rates, transparent hiring timelines, and clear paths to job stability.

Remote work options have become a top-three motivator for switching. Clients that can offer flexibility have a competitive advantage. Clients offering hybrid or remote arrangements should emphasize this early in the process, and staffing firms should prioritize roles with flexibility when targeting high-flight-risk segments.

For AI talent specifically, positioning should emphasize the client's AI maturity and governance practices. AI professionals are motivated by companies that are advanced in AI adoption, and they're significantly more likely to trust employers with formal AI policies. AI placements may hinge on organizational readiness, not just compensation.

# Understand Which Candidates Are Primed to Move

High-flight-risk segments—women, Black and African American tech professionals, Gen X, mid-career workers with 5-9 or 15-19 years of experience, small company employees, and those who've been in their roles for 3-9 years—represent high-probability passive candidates.

These groups are more likely to report burnout, layoff concerns, and low confidence in job stability, which means they may be receptive to outreach even if they're not actively searching.

Retention risk is real. Candidates who are very burned out—particularly mid-career Millennials at small companies—are significantly more likely to be actively job searching. Flag burnout risk to clients during the placement process. These candidates may churn quickly if the new role replicates the conditions they're fleeing.
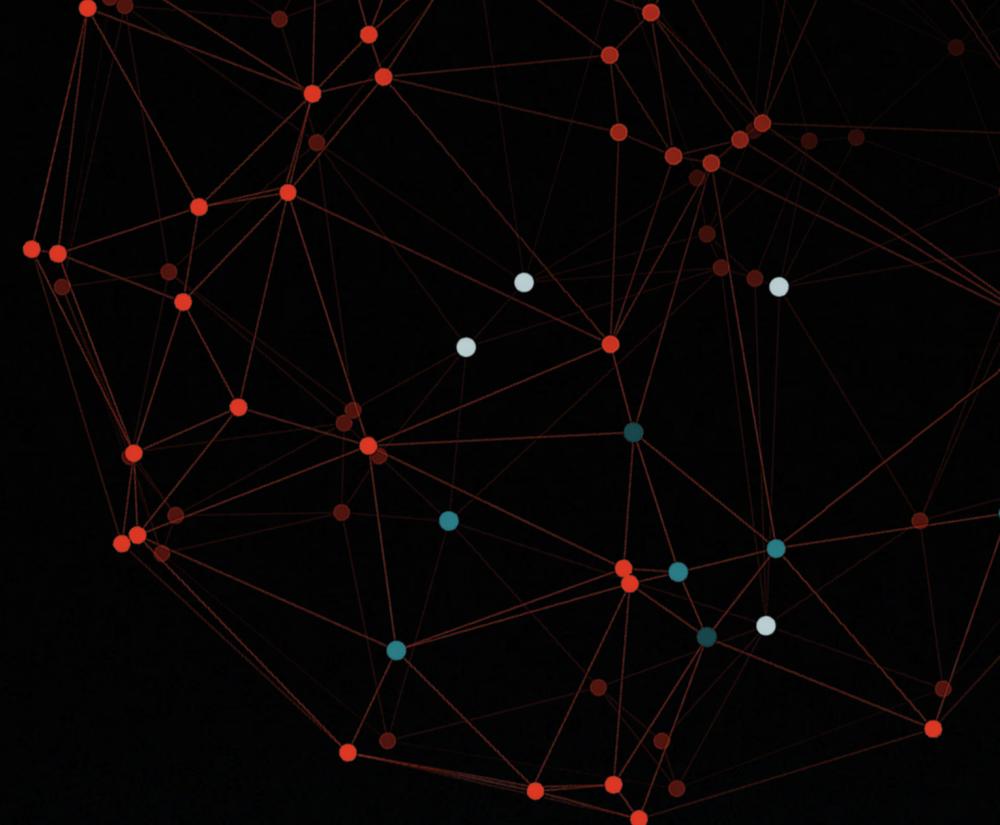
# Address Candidate Skepticism Head-On

**Ghost jobs and underemployment have eroded trust in hiring processes.**

Eight in ten tech professionals believe they applied to a ghost job in the past year, and just over half applied below their skill level simply to secure employment. Transparency and speed are critical differentiators.

Staffing firms that can provide clarity—real roles, real hiring managers, real timelines—will stand out in a market where candidates are increasingly skeptical. The willingness to apply below skill level suggests candidates may be more open to roles they'd have passed on in stronger markets, though closing them requires addressing their underlying security concerns rather than assuming desperation equals easy placement.

# Navigate the AI Divide in Candidate Conversations

**AI professionals and other tech professionals are experiencing the market differently.**
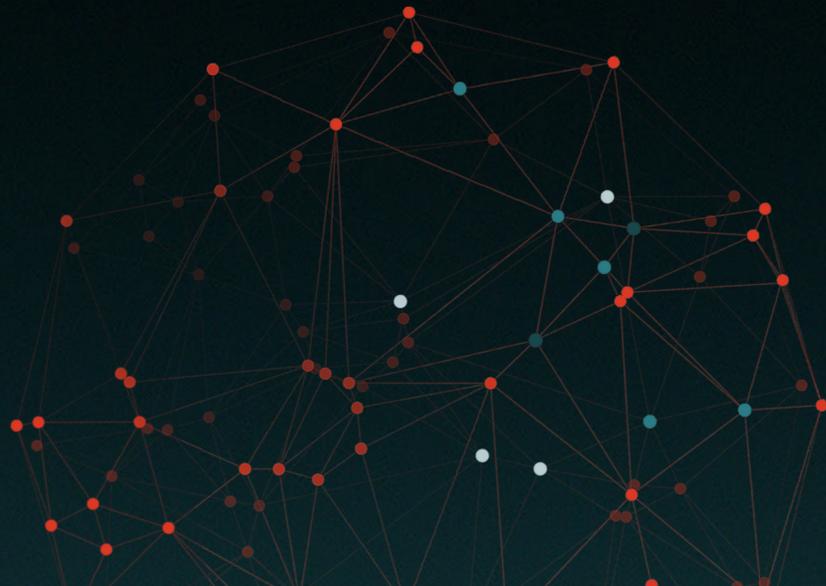
AI professionals are more confident, more optimistic about the economy, and more likely to believe they hold leverage in hiring. Other tech professionals are more pessimistic, more concerned about job displacement, and more likely to feel employers hold power.

Adjust your pitch based on the candidate's proximity to AI work. For AI professionals, emphasize innovation, AI maturity, and cutting-edge work. For other tech professionals, address AI anxiety directly—explain how the role incorporates AI as an augmentation tool rather than a replacement threat, and emphasize job security and skills development opportunities.

Clients should also be prepared to answer questions about AI governance. Candidates—especially AI professionals—will ask whether the company has formal AI policies, and the absence of clear answers may signal organizational risk. Staffing firms can add value by helping clients articulate their AI strategy and governance practices before they become deal-breakers in candidate conversations.

# Prepare Clients for a Retention-Focused Market
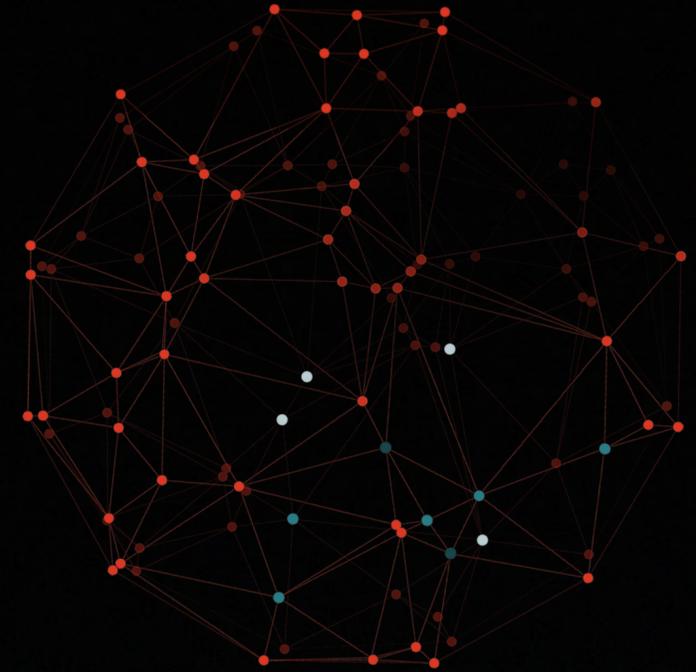
Hiring is only half the equation. Burnout, layoff anxiety, and weak long-term confidence in tech's growth are creating retention risks that extend beyond the placement.

Mid-career professionals, women, Black and African American tech professionals, and those at small companies are at higher risk of churn. Clients need retention strategies, not just hiring strategies.

Position yourselves as strategic partners by helping clients understand which candidates are at risk and what conditions drive turnover. Candidates moving primarily for job stability will churn quickly if the new employer experiences layoffs or financial instability within the first year. Candidates moving to escape burnout will churn if workload expectations remain unsustainable.

Intake conversations should go beyond skills and experience to include questions about company stability, workload expectations, and retention plans. Staffing firms that help clients think through these dynamics will differentiate themselves in a market where placements are harder to close and easier to lose.

# Navigating the Defensive Market with Tech-Specific Intelligence
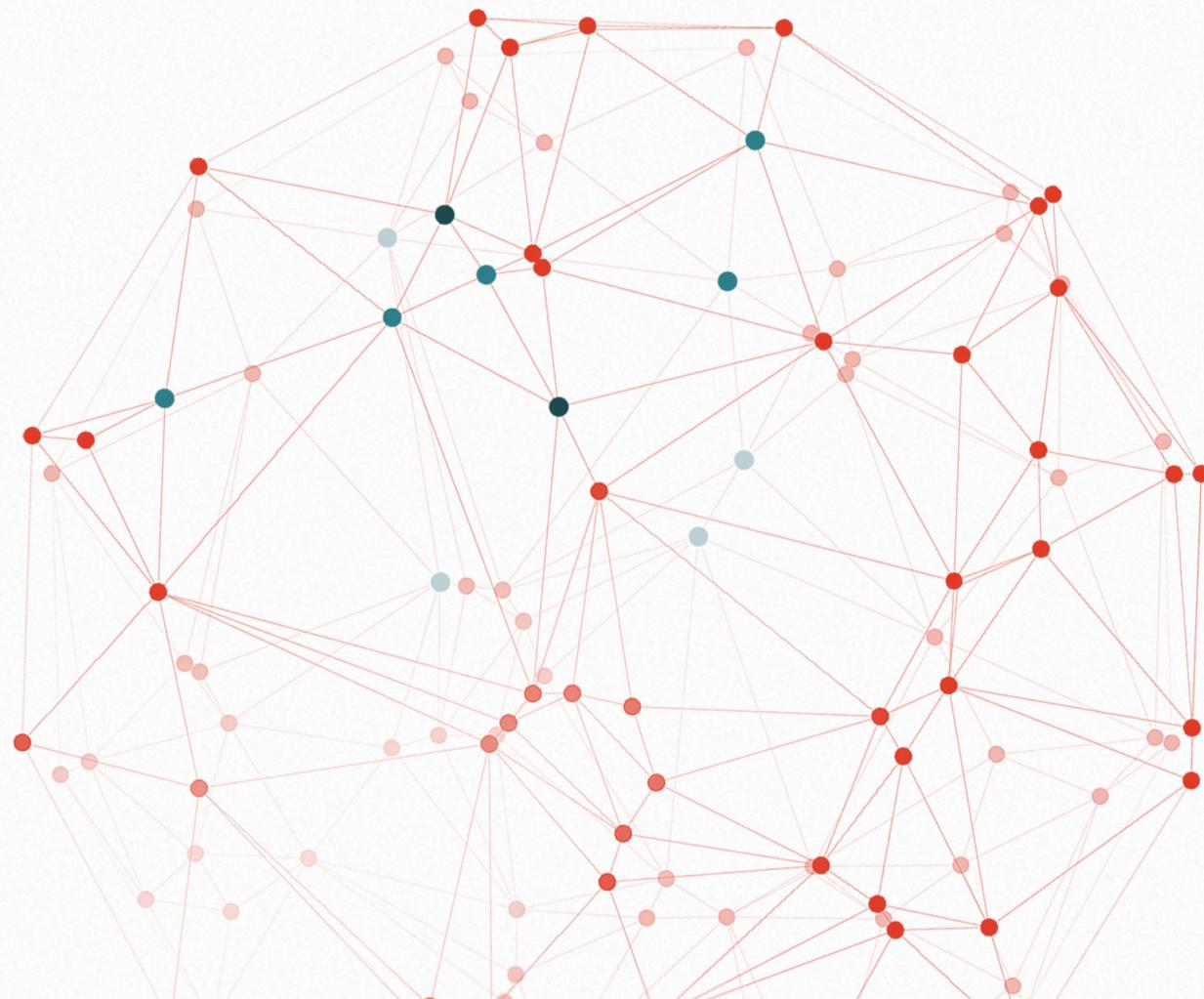
The tech job market in 2026 isn't defined by optimism or opportunity, but by caution, anxiety, and defensive decision-making.

Tech professionals are willing to move, but they're doing so from a position of uncertainty rather than confidence. For staffing and recruiting firms, this creates both challenge and opportunity: candidates are motivated to listen, but they're also harder to close and more likely to churn if their underlying concerns aren't addressed.

Success in this environment depends on understanding not just what candidates want, but why they want it—and what they fear. Stability has replaced growth as the primary driver of mobility. Remote work remains a competitive advantage, not just a perk. AI is splitting the talent pool into high-confidence and high-anxiety segments, each requiring different messaging and reassurance. Governance gaps are creating trust deficits that candidates will scrutinize closely.

Staffing firms that can translate these insights into action—reframing how they position opportunities, targeting high-flight-risk segments, addressing skepticism with transparency, and helping clients think through retention risk—will win placements competitors miss.

Dice has been at this tech job market dance for 30 years. We're the only tech-focused career platform, connecting staffing firms with engaged tech professionals who aren't active on generalist job boards. We give you direct access to the motivated, tech-specific talent that defines today's defensive market. With verified profiles, ultra-detailed search capabilities, and ongoing market intelligence like this report, we help staffing firms move faster and place smarter, even when confidence is low and caution is high.

The market may be defensive, but the opportunities are real. The firms that understand why candidates are moving, and what they need to feel secure in that decision, will be the ones who succeed.

Dice's hiring solutions help thousands of companies find and filter through millions of quality technology professional profiles, so you can quickly fill your open roles with the best tech talent. Equipped with AI matching tools, employer branding solutions and hiring insights tailored to individual recruiting needs, Dice makes it easy for recruiters and HR managers to post their jobs, source ideal talent and elevate their brands all in one place.

With a fresh perspective on connecting technology professionals to the companies that need them, Dice is the trusted way to hire and get hired in tech.

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