2026 Tech Salary Guide

Artificial Intelligence · Physical AI & Robotics
Semiconductors & Hardware

Recruit Year · Los Angeles & London

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ABOUT THIS GUIDE

Welcome from Recruit Year

This salary guide is compiled from live placement data, candidate conversations, and market intelligence gathered by the Recruit Year team across North America, Europe, and APAC throughout 2025 and into 2026. It covers three of the fastest-moving technical verticals in the global economy: Artificial Intelligence, Physical AI & Robotics, and Semiconductors & Hardware.

All figures are presented in USD and represent annual base salary ranges (excluding equity, bonus, and benefits). Remote, hybrid, and on-site premiums are noted where material. Ranges reflect the 25th–75th percentile of offers we have observed; outliers exist at both ends, particularly for rare specialisms and senior leadership roles.

MARKET OVERVIEW

Key Hiring Trends in 2026

Demand for deep technical talent continues to outpace supply across all three verticals we cover. AI and robotics roles in particular are seeing compensation compression — meaning the gap between junior and senior pay is narrowing as companies compete for any qualified talent, not just the most experienced.

■ AI Talent War Intensifies

Foundation-model expertise commands a 25–40% premium over general ML engineering. Inference optimisation and MLOps skills are now as valued as research credentials.

■ Robotics Compensation Catching Up

Physical AI salaries have risen ~18% YoY as automotive, defence, and consumer robotics firms all compete for the same limited pool of controls and embedded engineers.

■ Chip Design Demand Stays Strong

RISC-V, custom silicon, and AI accelerator design roles remain severely undersupplied. Senior RTL and physical design engineers are routinely receiving 3–5 competing offers.

■ Remote Premiums Stabilising

Post-2022 remote premiums are largely gone. Hybrid and on-site roles in San Francisco, Austin, London, and Munich now pay broadly comparably to full-remote positions.

SECTION 1

Artificial Intelligence

AI compensation is the most dynamic in the tech market. Roles directly touching large language models, foundation-model training, or production AI systems carry a meaningful premium. Companies in the US West Coast, New York, and London are the most aggressive bidders.

Role	Entry–Mid (USD)	Senior (USD)	Staff/Principal
ML Engineer	$130k – $175k	$175k – $240k	$240k – $320k+
AI Research Scientist	$160k – $200k	$210k – $290k	$300k – $450k+
Applied AI Engineer	$140k – $185k	$185k – $250k	$250k – $330k+
MLOps / AI Platform Eng	$125k – $165k	$170k – $220k	$220k – $280k+
AI Product Manager	$140k – $180k	$185k – $240k	$245k – $310k+
Data Scientist (AI focus)	$115k – $155k	$160k – $210k	$215k – $270k+
Prompt Engineer / LLM Eng	$120k – $155k	$160k – $210k	$215k – $260k+
Computer Vision Engineer	$130k – $170k	$175k – $230k	$235k – $300k+

Note: Equity (RSU / options) at AI-native companies can add $50k–$200k+ annually to total comp for senior and staff-level roles. Figures above are base salary only.

Regional Adjustments — AI Roles

Region	Adjustment vs. US Median
San Francisco / Bay Area	+15% to +25%
New York City	+10% to +18%
Austin / Seattle	+5% to +12%
London (UK)	–5% to +5% (GBP equivalent)
Berlin / Munich	–15% to –5% (EUR equivalent)
Remote (US-based)	–5% to 0%

SECTION 2

Physical AI & Robotics

The robotics and autonomous systems market has seen sustained compensation growth driven by automotive OEMs, defence primes, consumer robotics start-ups, and industrial automation companies all fishing in the same talent pool. Controls, motion planning, and firmware/embedded expertise are

particularly scarce.

Role	Entry–Mid (USD)	Senior (USD)	Staff/Principal
Robotics Software Engineer	$125k – $165k	$170k – $225k	$230k – $295k+
Controls Engineer	$120k – $158k	$162k – $215k	$220k – $280k+
Motion Planning Engineer	$135k – $175k	$180k – $240k	$245k – $310k+
Embedded / Firmware Eng	$115k – $155k	$158k – $210k	$215k – $270k+
Mechatronics Engineer	$110k – $148k	$152k – $200k	$205k – $260k+
Simulation Engineer (ROS2)	$120k – $160k	$165k – $215k	$220k – $275k+
Robotics Systems Architect	$150k – $195k	$200k – $260k	$265k – $340k+
Hardware / Mechanical Eng	$105k – $142k	$148k – $195k	$200k – $255k+
Autonomy / Perception Eng	$135k – $175k	$180k – $235k	$240k – $305k+

Defence and space sector roles often carry a 10–20% premium but require security clearance, which can extend time-to-hire significantly.

SECTION 3

Semiconductors & Hardware

Chip design talent remains among the most chronically undersupplied in all of tech. The CHIPS Act and equivalent European and Asian investment programmes have increased headcount demand without meaningfully growing the supply of qualified engineers. Physical design and verification engineers are especially scarce.

Role	Entry–Mid (USD)	Senior (USD)	Staff/Principal
RTL / Digital Design Eng	$120k – $160k	$165k – $220k	$225k – $295k+
Physical Design Engineer	$130k – $170k	$175k – $235k	$240k – $310k+
Verification Engineer (UVM)	$115k – $155k	$160k – $215k	$220k – $280k+
FPGA Engineer	$110k – $148k	$152k – $200k	$205k – $260k+
Analog / Mixed-Signal Eng	$125k – $165k	$170k – $230k	$235k – $300k+
DFT Engineer	$118k – $155k	$160k – $210k	$215k – $275k+
Chip Architecture (CPU/GPU)	$160k – $210k	$215k – $280k	$285k – $380k+

Role	Entry–Mid (USD)	Senior (USD)	Staff/Principal
Embedded Systems Engineer	$110k – $148k	$152k – $200k	$205k – $260k+
Hardware Security Engineer	$130k – $170k	$175k – $230k	$235k – $295k+

RISC-V and custom AI accelerator experience commands a 15–30% premium over standard ASIC roles. Tape-out experience is highly valued by fabless companies.

TOTAL COMPENSATION

Beyond Base Salary

In competitive technical markets, base salary is only one component of total compensation. Here is what we typically see offered alongside base for mid-to-senior roles:

Benefit / Component	Typical Range / Structure
Annual Bonus	5% – 25% of base (performance-linked)
RSU / Stock Options	$20k – $200k+ annual vest (varies hugely by stage)
Sign-on Bonus	$10k – $75k (more common in counter-offer situations)
Remote / Hybrid	Widely available; full-remote may carry –5% to –10% base
401(k) Match (US)	3% – 6% employer match, some immediate vest
Health & Dental	Typically employer-funded at 80–100% for self, 50–80% family
L&D Budget	$1,500 – $10,000 per year for conferences, courses, certs
Visa Sponsorship	Common in AI and semiconductor firms; rarer in start-ups

GET IN TOUCH

Ready to make your next move?

Whether you are a candidate exploring what the market looks like for your profile, or a hiring manager trying to benchmark your offer against current market rates — the Recruit Year team is here to help. We offer confidential salary benchmarking calls at no cost.

For Candidates | For Clients

Submit your profile at recruityear.com and speak with one of our specialist consultants about your next role.

Submit a brief at recruityear.com or email us at hiring@recruityear.com for a confidential benchmarking call.

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