

THE COMING AI TALENT CRUNCH

**Why the rules of AI recruitment
are changing in London**

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

London is cementing its position as Europe's foremost AI hub. Anthropic has quadrupled its UK office capacity to accommodate 800 people. OpenAI is building its largest research hub outside the United States in the capital. Google DeepMind, Meta, Palantir and a wave of well-funded AI-native startups are all expanding in the same postcodes. In the six months to early 2026, AI-linked firms leased more than one million square feet of London office space

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The message is clear: demand for frontier AI talent in London is about to accelerate dramatically.

The problem is that the talent pool is not growing at anything like the same rate. According to the UK government's own AI Labour Market Survey, 35% of organisations already struggle to fill AI roles, 97% report at least one skills gap, and 28% say technical shortages have directly impaired their ability to meet business objectives. AI job postings have risen 81% year-on-year, while the qualified candidate pool has expanded by roughly 24%.

That gap is the central challenge of the next 24 months for any organisation trying to hire in this space.

This report, produced by Findrs, explores what is driving the crunch, why conventional recruitment methods are becoming less effective at exactly the wrong moment, and what a different approach to AI talent acquisition looks like.

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THE DEMAND PICTURE

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A decade of investment anchored by DeepMind, major research labs and leading universities has created a mature talent base spanning AI research, engineering and commercial leadership.

Frederic Groussolles, Partner, Heidrick & Struggles, speaking to CNBC, June 2026

The current wave of expansion is on a different scale to anything seen before. Anthropic has secured office space for up to 800 people in London's Knowledge Quarter, roughly four times the size of its existing UK team. OpenAI has announced its first permanent London office, which will serve as its largest research hub outside the US. Google is moving teams into a new 11-storey building at King's Cross. Cursor, Databricks, Salesforce and Palantir have all announced London headcount growth in the past twelve months.

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And that is before accounting for the parallel demand being generated inside established institutions. Banks, consultancies, defence contractors and large software businesses are all building internal AI capabilities, creating a second tier of competition for the same candidate pool.

AI-NATIVE COMPANIES NOW HIRING IN LONDON	ENTERPRISE SECTORS BUILDING AI TEAMS
OpenAI / Anthropic / Google DeepMind	Financial services & banking
Meta / Microsoft / Oracle / Palantir	Management consultancies
Cognition / Glean / Poolside / Synthesia	Defence & aerospace contractors
LangChain / Dust / Sana / Wayve	Enterprise software vendors
Cursor / Factory / Databricks	Hedge funds & trading firms

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These companies are in a position to offer attractive packages and meaningful work. Lots of people want to work for those companies.

Dan Hyde, Executive Chair, Erevena, speaking to CNBC, June 2026

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THE SUPPLY REALITY

The pool is far smaller than most organisations assume.

A common misconception in conversations about AI hiring is that London must have an abundant supply of AI engineers. The city has a large technology workforce, and there are certainly many capable software engineers. But the number of professionals with genuine depth in the specific disciplines most in demand is considerably smaller.

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The roles that attract the highest competition, and the greatest supply constraint, tend to cluster around:

- Large language model infrastructure and deployment
- AI agents and autonomous systems
- Applied AI and productionised machine learning
- Reinforcement learning and research engineering
- MLOps and model evaluation at scale

In a mapping exercise of AI and agent-focused organisations within a 50-mile radius of Central London, Findrs identified the full range of frontier organisations competing for this talent. A targeted candidate search across those specialist disciplines returned only 123 relevant profiles. That figure is not a sampling limitation. It is a reflection of just how small the genuinely addressable candidate pool is for frontier roles, and how concentrated the competition for it has become.

123

Candidates identified in a targeted mapping of frontier AI, LLM infrastructure, and Agent engineering roles across a 50-mile radius of Central London. Source: Findrs proprietary research, 2026.

Viewed alongside the number of organisations now competing for that pool, including several with virtually unlimited hiring budgets, the scale of the imbalance becomes stark.

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WHAT THE DATA TELLS US

Independent research corroborates what Findrs observes in practice. The UK government's 2025 AI Labour Market Survey found that 35% of organisations struggle to fill AI roles, and that 28% say technical skills shortages have directly impaired their ability to achieve business goals. According to research from the University of Oxford, demand for AI-specific skills across UK job postings surged 21% between 2018 and 2024, while the talent pool has struggled to keep pace.

On compensation, the picture is equally instructive. Median AI engineer salaries in the UK now sit around £88,750, with London roles commanding a 15-30% premium over the national figure. Specialist roles at frontier labs and financial institutions such as Citadel, Two Sigma and Jane Street routinely offer total packages in the £200,000-£300,000+ range. For employers outside that bracket, the gap between what they can offer and what the best candidates can command elsewhere is widening.

METRIC	UK-WIDE	LONDON
Median AI Engineer salary	£88,750	£95,000+
Senior / specialist roles	Up to £150,000	£100,000 - £265,000+
Orgs struggling to hire AI talent	35%	Higher, given competition density
AI job postings growth (YoY)	81%	81%
AI candidate pool growth (YoY)	24%	24%

Sources: IT Jobs Watch, June 2026; Glassdoor, June 2026; Lorien Insights, 2026; LinkedIn Talent Insights; UK Government AI Labour Market Survey, 2025.

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THE DEMAND PICTURE

THE LINKEDIN-FIRST MODEL IS LOSING ITS EDGE

For the better part of a decade, recruitment in the technology sector has been built around a straightforward premise: purchase a LinkedIn Recruiter licence, run targeted Boolean searches, send a volume of InMail messages, and generate a pipeline of candidates. It was a search problem, and the search tools were good enough that firms willing to invest in them could compete.

That model depended on a critical assumption: that the candidates worth reaching were visible, actively maintaining their profiles, and open to inbound outreach.

For the majority of the technology market, that assumption still broadly holds. For frontier AI talent specifically, it is breaking down.

THE VISIBILITY PROBLEM

A growing number of the strongest AI engineers and researchers are deliberately reducing their public footprint. Several frontier labs have encouraged employees to limit the information they make available externally. Some engineers are removing technical content from their profiles. Others are reducing the information they list altogether. Many simply do not maintain an active presence because they do not need to. The best opportunities reach them through their network long before any recruiter with a database gets involved.

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This creates a fundamental problem for any sourcing methodology that begins and ends with platform search. If the candidates with the deepest expertise are progressively less discoverable through conventional tools, then more searches, more InMails and more AI-assisted outreach automation will not close the gap. They will simply produce increasingly homogeneous pools of the same visible, actively-marketed profiles.

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The future of AI recruitment is not who can search LinkedIn best. It is who knows the people LinkedIn cannot find.

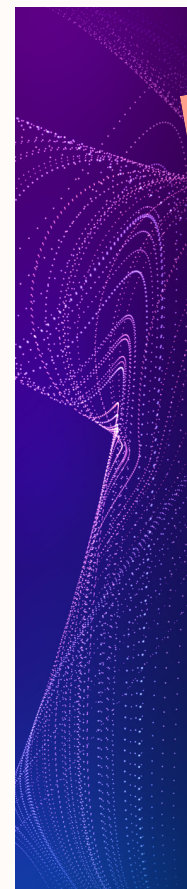
Chris Booth, Founder, Findrs

THE AUTOMATION PARADOX

There is a further dynamic worth noting. LinkedIn has rapidly expanded its AI-assisted recruiter tooling, with features including AI-Assisted Search, bulk personalised messaging and, more recently, an autonomous Hiring Assistant agent. These tools are designed to make outreach faster and more scalable.

The unintended consequence is that the volume of outreach hitting candidate inboxes has risen substantially. For the most in-demand profiles, the signal-to-noise ratio in recruiter messages has deteriorated. In highly competitive tech sectors, InMail response rates are already among the lowest of any industry vertical. For frontier AI candidates receiving significant outreach volume, the threshold for engaging with an unsolicited message is higher than ever.

Faster, higher-volume, AI-generated outreach is making it harder, not easier, to get a meaningful response from the candidates who matter most.



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THE DEMAND PICTURE

FROM SEARCH TO ACCESS

If the search model is losing effectiveness for the candidates most in demand, what replaces it? The answer emerging clearly from the most successful AI hiring programmes is relationships.

The questions that determine who can fill frontier roles are no longer primarily about search capability. They are about access:



Who has relationships with engineers who recently left OpenAI, Anthropic or DeepMind?



Who knows which researchers are quietly considering a move into a startup environment?



Who is embedded in the communities where these conversations happen before they happen publicly?



Who has built sufficient trust with passive candidates that a message from them gets a reply?

The shift is from knowing how to search to knowing the people. That distinction matters enormously for any organisation trying to fill a specialist role in 2026, and it is where the gap between generalist and specialist recruiters is widening fastest.

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WHY THIS IS PARTICULARLY ACUTE FOR STARTUPS

The access challenge falls most heavily on the organisations least equipped to solve it unilaterally. Startups and scale-ups cannot match the compensation packages that OpenAI, Anthropic or a top-tier hedge fund can offer. That does not mean they cannot hire excellent people. Many of the most talented engineers actively prefer the ownership, speed and mission clarity that a well-positioned startup offers.

But none of those advantages make any difference if the hiring organisation cannot reach the right candidate in the first place. For a startup, finding the person has become the hardest part of the process.

**142
DAYS**

Average time to hire an AI developer through conventional recruitment processes in 2025. That compares with 52 days for general software developer roles. Source: CompTIA, 2024.

That timeline is not just a cost. It is a strategic liability. The best AI talent is typically in active conversation with multiple organisations simultaneously, and is likely to receive an offer from the one with the fastest process and the strongest initial relationship. Organisations that begin the search process through database trawls and volume outreach are starting from behind.



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THE FINDRS APPROACH

BUILT FOR THE MARKET THAT IS EMERGING, NOT THE ONE THAT EXISTED

Findrs was established around a clear proposition: that in a market where the candidates with the deepest expertise are becoming progressively less discoverable through conventional means, the value of a specialist recruiter lies not in their search infrastructure but in their network, their community presence and their long-term relationships.



RELATIONSHIPS OVER DATABASES

The strongest candidates in frontier AI are known quantities within a relatively small community. Findrs has built a network within that community through years of consistent engagement. When a relevant engineer considers a move, they are more likely to speak to someone they know than to respond to a cold InMail.



COMMUNITY PRESENCE

Being embedded in the spaces where AI engineers actually spend their time, whether that is specific technical communities, research networks or professional groups, creates access to conversations that never reach a public platform. This cannot be replicated through a LinkedIn search strategy.



PASSIVE CANDIDATE ACCESS

The most interesting candidates are rarely actively looking. Identifying them, maintaining a relationship over time, and understanding when the timing is right requires a different investment than reactive sourcing. Findrs builds and maintains relationships with passive candidates as a core part of how we operate.



MARKET INTELLIGENCE

Understanding which engineers are likely to be open to conversations, which organisations they are watching, and what conditions would make a move compelling is intelligence built from genuine market immersion. It produces faster, better-matched introductions than search alone ever could.



LONG-TERM TRUST

The engineers who are most in demand have been burned by recruiters who prioritised their own fee over a good outcome. Findrs is built on the opposite premise. Trust with candidates is a long-term asset, and protecting it is how we access the conversations that matter.

CONCLUSION

The AI talent crunch in London is not a future scenario. It is unfolding now. The concentration of frontier organisations competing for a candidate pool that has not grown at anything like the same rate means that conventional hiring methods are increasingly returning the same limited set of results.

The organisations that will hire most effectively over the next 24 months will not be those with the most sophisticated LinkedIn Recruiter setup. They will be those with genuine access to the conversations that happen before a search ever begins.

For employers, that means thinking about recruiting partnerships differently. Access matters more than volume. Speed of trust matters more than scale of outreach.

For recruitment, it means that the firms best positioned for this market are those who invested in relationships years before the current wave of demand arrived, not those who are starting to build networks now that the crunch is obvious.

The biggest structural challenge in London at the moment is supply.



Mike Wiseman, Head of Campuses, British Land, speaking to CNBC, June 2026

Findrs was built for exactly this market. If you are looking to hire in specialist AI disciplines, or want to understand the landscape before you begin, we would welcome the conversation.

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SOURCES & FURTHER READING

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