

BETTER
QUESTIONS
BRIGHTER
ANSWERS
BIGGER
OPPORTUNITIES

AI-Era and the Reality of Online Research Careers

PEOPLE
INFORMATION
AI
A MORE
INFORMED
TOMORROW

New Roles, Pay, Skills, and the 2026–2031 Outlook for Online Researchers
Skilled in Prompt Design, AI Tools, and Information Verification



PROMPT DESIGN

Turn complex information
into clear, reliable insights...



AI TOOLS



SEARCH & ANALYSIS



Global research trends...



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FACT-CHECKING



Cross-check sources



Verify claims



Assess credibility



Identify bias

KNOWLEDGE NETWORK



DATA INSIGHTS



From information
to opportunity

AI TOOLS

INFORMATION LITERACY

RESEARCH METHODS

THE FUTURE OF WORK

Better prompts
Stronger sources
Clearer insights
Greater impact

RESEARCH
PEOPLE
IDEAS
IMPACT



New Roles

- ▶ AI Research Analyst
- ▶ Prompt Designer
- ▶ Information Verification Specialist
- ▶ Knowledge Curator
- ▶ Research Operations Lead



Pay

Growing demand.
Stronger earning potential.



HIGHER VALUE
SKILLS DRIVE
HIGHER PAY



Skills



Prompt Design



AI Tool Proficiency



Information Verification



Data Analysis



Critical Thinking

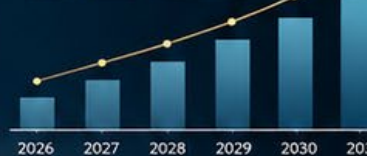


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2026–2031 Outlook

Expanding opportunities for
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AI-Era and the Reality of Online Research Careers

New Roles, Pay, Skills, and the 2026–2031 Outlook for Online Researchers Skilled in Prompt Design, AI Tools, and Information Verification

Author

Naveed Manzoor

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Executive Summary

Artificial intelligence has not ended the need for online researchers. It has changed what they are paid to do. In 2026 the money is moving away from finding information, which AI systems now do in seconds, and toward deciding whether information is true, traceable, and fit for a decision. This paper maps the new research roles that have emerged, what they pay, which qualifications employers and AI platforms expect, and how the market is likely to evolve between 2026 and 2031.

Key findings

- AI skills carry a large and growing pay premium. PwC found that workers with AI skills earned an average wage premium of 62% in 2026, up from 57% the year before¹, while Lightcast found that job postings requiring AI skills offered 28% higher salaries, nearly \$18,000 more per year².
- New research roles are real but fragmented. The most visible are AI training and evaluation work, domain-expert fact-checking of AI output, AI red-teaming, retrieval-augmented generation (RAG) curation, OSINT investigation, and AI governance. Microsoft found that 78% of leaders were considering hiring for AI-specific roles, with AI trainers and AI data specialists at the top of the list³.
- Pay is sharply tiered by verified expertise. Generalist AI rating work is advertised at up to \$15 per hour on some platforms, while credentialed experts are offered \$50 to \$200 per hour⁴. Of 158 AI-training listings that include fact-checking, the median stated rate was \$50 per hour⁵.
- "Prompt engineer" as a stand-alone title is fading, but prompt engineering as a skill is growing fast. Indeed described prompt-engineer listings as "flatlining"⁶, yet U.S. job postings citing prompt engineering rose 261% and postings citing retrieval-augmented generation rose 337% in 2025⁷.

¹PwC. (2026, June 15). AI reshapes global labour market into two distinct paths, rewarding human skills: PwC 2026 Global AI Jobs Barometer [Press release]. <https://www.pwc.com/gx/en/news-room/press-releases/2026/pwc-2026-ai-jobs-barometer.html>

²Lightcast. (2025, July 23). New Lightcast report: AI skills command 28% salary premium as demand shifts beyond tech industry. <https://lightcast.io/resources/blog/beyond-the-buzz-press-release-2025-07-23>

³Microsoft. (2025, April 23). 2025: The year the Frontier Firm is born. Work Trend Index. <https://www.microsoft.com/en-us/worklab/work-trend-index/2025-the-year-the-frontier-firm-is-born>

⁴Keeper. (2026, October). 10 best AI training and data annotation jobs (2026). <https://www.keeper.com/posts/best-ai-training-jobs>

⁵AITrainer.work. (2026, September). AI fact-checking jobs: Who hires and what they pay (2026). <https://aitrainer.work/guides/ai-fact-checking-jobs>

⁶Davis, E. (2025, April 29). AI is taking over for prompt engineers. Entrepreneur. <https://www.entrepreneur.com/business-news/ai-is-taking-over-for-prompt-engineers/490762>

⁷Stanford Institute for Human-Centered AI. (2026). AI Index Report 2026, Chapter 4: Economy. https://hai.stanford.edu/assets/files/ai_index_report_2026_chapter_4_economy.pdf

- Demand exceeds the supply of qualified people. Bain projected that up to one in two U.S. AI jobs could go unfilled by 2027, with demand above 1.3 million and supply below 645,000⁸. The shortage is concentrated in verified, domain-specific talent, not in generalist labeling.
- AI tools still make serious factual errors. In a Tow Center test, eight AI search engines failed to retrieve correct information in more than 60% of 1,600 queries⁹, and leading legal research tools built on RAG hallucinated in more than 17% to more than 34% of benchmark queries¹⁰. Verification is therefore a durable, billable skill.
- Workers who are not AI-literate face a narrowing entry path. Employment of workers aged 22 to 25 in AI-exposed occupations is 19% below where it would have been had it tracked less-exposed peers¹¹, and 66% of leaders said they would not hire someone without AI skills¹².
- Older workers are adopting AI faster than commonly assumed but receive less training. Workers aged 50 and over use generative AI at work at roughly half the rate of colleagues under 40 (17% versus 34%), and more than half received no employer technology training in the past year¹³.

Bottom line. Over the next five years the online researcher who combines AI tool fluency with rigorous verification and a recognizable domain specialty is likely to be among the better-positioned knowledge workers. The researcher who only searches, summarizes, or labels is likely to face falling rates and fewer openings. Section 10 sets out specific action plans for new entrants, working researchers, and late-career professionals.

⁸Bain & Company. (2025, March 4). Widening talent gap threatens executives' AI ambitions [Press release].

<https://www.bain.com/about/media-center/press-releases/20252/widening-talent-gap-threatens-executives-ai-ambitions--bain--company/>

⁹Nieman Lab. (2025, March 10). AI search engines fail to produce accurate citations in over 60% of tests, according to new Tow Center study. <https://www.niemanlab.org/2025/03/ai-search-engines-fail-to-produce-accurate-citations-in-over-60-of-tests-according-to-new-tow-center-study/>

¹⁰Stanford HAI. (2024). AI on trial: Legal models hallucinate in 1 out of 6 (or more) benchmarking queries. <https://hai.stanford.edu/news/ai-trial-legal-models-hallucinate-1-out-6-or-more-benchmarking-queries>

¹¹Brynjolfsson, E., Chandar, B., & Chen, R. (2026, revised August 12). Canaries in the coal mine? Six facts about the recent employment effects of artificial intelligence. Stanford Digital Economy Lab. <https://digitaleconomy.stanford.edu/publication/canaries-in-the-coal-mine-six-facts-about-the-recent-employment-effects-of-artificial-intelligence/>

¹²Microsoft & LinkedIn. (2024, May). AI at work is here. Now comes the hard part. 2024 Work Trend Index Annual Report. <https://www.microsoft.com/en-us/worklab/work-trend-index/ai-at-work-is-here-now-comes-the-hard-part>

¹³AARP Employer Portal. (2026). AI adoption business case. <https://employerportal.aarp.org/ai-adoption/business-case/>

1. Introduction and Scope

1.1 Purpose and Research Questions

Online research has always been a skill set rather than a single job: librarians, market analysts, paralegals, journalists, investigators, and academic assistants all search, evaluate, and synthesize information. Generative AI and AI-driven search engines have automated a large part of the search-and-summarize layer of that work, while creating new demand for people who can direct, test, and verify AI systems. This paper answers six questions:

1. What new types of online research jobs have appeared with AI, and what do they involve?
2. How do these jobs pay, both as salaried employment and as contract or platform work?
3. What qualifications and skills do employers and AI platforms expect?
4. How are requirements, pay, and demand versus supply expected to change over the next five years (2026 to 2031)?
5. How can researchers use retrieval-augmented ("RA") tools and other reliable information sources, and how can they avoid AI hallucinations?
6. What will these shifts mean for less-skilled and non-AI-literate workers, and how should new entrants, working researchers, and near-retirees navigate the market?

1.2 Methodology and Source Selection

The research for this paper was conducted in October 2026. Evidence was drawn from five categories of sources, each with different strengths and biases:

Table 1. Source categories, examples, and bias considerations

Source category	Examples used	Known bias or limitation
Official statistics	U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics (BLS) Occupational Outlook Handbook and 2024–34 projections; EU AI Act text; NIST	Highly reliable but slow; occupational categories do not yet track new AI job titles
Intergovernmental and academic research	World Economic Forum, IMF, Stanford HAI AI Index, Stanford Digital Economy Lab, Tow Center (Columbia), arXiv papers	Strong methods; some studies are preprints or descriptive rather than causal
Consulting and labor-market analytics	PwC, Bain, McKinsey, Lightcast, Indeed Hiring Lab, LinkedIn, Upwork, Microsoft	Large datasets, but firms may have a commercial interest in AI adoption narratives
AI-labor platforms and job aggregators	Mercor, Keeper, AITrainer.work, Salary.com, ZipRecruiter, Indeed, Levels.fyi	Current and granular, but advertised rates are not realized earnings; platforms promote themselves
AI developers and vendors	OpenAI, Anthropic, Vectara	Technically informed; self-interested in how their own products are portrayed

Wherever possible, figures were taken directly from the original publisher rather than from secondary coverage. Where only secondary coverage was available (for example, the Tow Center study via

Nieman Lab), this is indicated in the citation. Salary projections in Section 6 and the demand–supply assessments are the author's estimates; their assumptions are stated in Appendix B and they should be read as scenarios, not forecasts of record.

1.3 Key Definitions

Table 2. Definitions used throughout the paper

Term	Meaning in this paper
Online researcher	Any professional whose core output is information found, evaluated, and synthesized from digital sources, whether employed, freelance, or on an AI-training platform.
AI-augmented research	Research in which AI tools perform part of the searching, reading, extraction, or drafting, while a human sets the question, checks the evidence, and owns the conclusion.
Retrieval-augmented generation (RAG)	An AI design in which a model first retrieves documents from a defined collection and then generates an answer grounded in them. The approach was formalized by Lewis et al. (2020) ¹⁴ . In this paper, "RA tools" means retrieval-augmented and AI research-assistant tools.
Hallucination (confabulation)	NIST defines confabulation as a generative AI system confidently presenting erroneous or false content ¹⁵ . Stanford researchers distinguish "incorrect" answers from "misgrounded" answers that cite a source that does not support the claim ¹⁶ .
AI literacy	The knowledge and skills to use AI systems competently and critically. Since February 2, 2025, the EU AI Act has required providers and deployers of AI systems to take measures to ensure a sufficient level of AI literacy among their staff ¹⁷ .

¹⁴Lewis, P., Perez, E., Piktus, A., Petroni, F., Karpukhin, V., Goyal, N., Küttler, H., Lewis, M., Yih, W., Rocktäschel, T., Riedel, S., & Kiela, D. (2020). Retrieval-augmented generation for knowledge-intensive NLP tasks. NeurIPS 2020. arXiv:2005.11401. <https://arxiv.org/abs/2005.11401>

¹⁵National Institute of Standards and Technology. (2024). Artificial Intelligence Risk Management Framework: Generative Artificial Intelligence Profile (NIST AI 600-1). <https://nvlpubs.nist.gov/nistpubs/ai/NIST.AI.600-1.pdf>

¹⁶Stanford HAI. (2024). AI on trial: Legal models hallucinate in 1 out of 6 (or more) benchmarking queries. <https://hai.stanford.edu/news/ai-trial-legal-models-hallucinate-1-out-6-or-more-benchmarking-queries>

¹⁷European Union. (2024). Artificial Intelligence Act, Article 4: AI literacy (applies from February 2, 2025). <https://artificialintelligenceact.eu/article/4/>

2. The Labor-Market Context in 2026

2.1 Job Creation and Displacement

The World Economic Forum's Future of Jobs Report 2025, based on a global employer survey, projects that macro trends including technology will create 170 million jobs and displace 92 million by 2030, a net gain of 78 million¹⁸. The same report found that 63% of employers see skills gaps as the main barrier to transformation, and that out of every 100 workers, 59 will need reskilling or upskilling by 2030, of whom 11 are unlikely to receive it¹⁹. The jobs growing fastest in percentage terms include big data specialists and AI and machine learning specialists, while "AI and big data" tops the list of skills rising in importance²⁰.

In the United States, BLS projects total employment to grow 3.1% between 2024 and 2034. Research-intensive analytical occupations are projected to grow much faster: data scientists by 33.5%, operations research analysts by 21.5%, and computer and information research scientists by 19.7%. By contrast, customer service representatives (–5.5%), claims adjusters and investigators (–5.1%), and legal secretaries (–5.8%) are projected to decline²¹. The pattern is consistent: work that judges, models, or investigates information is growing, while work that processes it routinely is shrinking.

2.2 Demand for AI Skills and the Wage Premium

Several independent datasets agree that AI skills are being rewarded, though they measure different things:

Table 3. Independent measures of AI skill demand and pay premium

Source	Finding	Measure
PwC 2026 AI Jobs Barometer	Average wage premium of 62% for workers with AI skills, up from 57% a year earlier; jobs requiring specific AI skills grew 69% versus 9% for all jobs ²²	Job-ad analysis, global

¹⁸World Economic Forum. (2025, January 8). Future of Jobs Report 2025: 78 million new job opportunities by 2030 but urgent upskilling needed to prepare workforces [Press release]. <https://www.weforum.org/media/future-of-jobs-report-2025-78-million-new-job-opportunities-by-2030-but-urgent-upskilling-needed-to-prepare-workforces/>

¹⁹World Economic Forum. (2025, January 8). Future of Jobs Report 2025: 78 million new job opportunities by 2030 but urgent upskilling needed to prepare workforces [Press release]. <https://www.weforum.org/media/future-of-jobs-report-2025-78-million-new-job-opportunities-by-2030-but-urgent-upskilling-needed-to-prepare-workforces/>

²⁰World Economic Forum. (2025, January). Future of Jobs Report 2025: The jobs of the future and the skills you need to get them. <https://www.weforum.org/stories/2025/01/future-of-jobs-report-2025-jobs-of-the-future-and-the-skills-you-need-to-get-them/>

²¹U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics. (2026, July 16). Artificial intelligence, information technology, and employment, 2024–34. The Economics Daily. <https://www.bls.gov/opub/ted/2026/artificial-intelligence-information-technology-and-employment-2024-34.htm>

²²PwC. (2026, June 15). AI reshapes global labour market into two distinct paths, rewarding human skills: PwC 2026 Global AI Jobs Barometer [Press release]. <https://www.pwc.com/gx/en/news-room/press-releases/2026/pwc-2026-ai-jobs-barometer.html>

Source	Finding	Measure
Lightcast (2025)	Postings with AI skills offered 28% higher salaries, about \$18,000 more; 51% of AI-skill postings were outside IT and computer science ²³	1.3 billion postings
LinkedIn via CNBC (2026)	Median salary of a typical AI role \$177,000 versus \$80,000 for non-AI roles ²⁴	Posting pay data
Indeed Hiring Lab (2026)	7.3% of U.S. postings mentioned AI terms as of September 30, 2026, up 3.6 percentage points year over year ²⁵	Posting share
Stanford AI Index 2026	AI jobs (Lightcast definition) were 2.56% of all U.S. postings in 2025 ²⁶	Posting share
Upwork (2026)	Freelance demand for skills explicitly referencing AI grew 109% in 2025 versus 23% for other skills ²⁷	Freelance earnings

The differences between these numbers matter for anyone reading salary claims. The LinkedIn comparison contrasts mostly technical AI roles with all other jobs, so it overstates what a researcher gains from adding AI skills to an existing role. The Lightcast 28% premium, which compares postings with and without AI skills, is a more realistic benchmark for non-engineering researchers.

2.3 How Fast Skills Are Changing

Employers expect 39% of key skills to change by 2030²⁸. PwC found that the skills required for the most AI-exposed jobs changed 2.2 times faster than those of the least exposed jobs between 2019 and 2025, and that new tasks added to AI-exposed roles were 2.5 times more likely to rely on human-intensive capabilities²⁹. PwC calls this a "two-track" market: "professionalised" roles, where AI multiplies expert judgment, grew twice as fast in available jobs and saw salary growth 42% faster

²³Lightcast. (2025, July 23). New Lightcast report: AI skills command 28% salary premium as demand shifts beyond tech industry. <https://lightcast.io/resources/blog/beyond-the-buzz-press-release-2025-07-23>

²⁴CNBC. (2026, August 18). Millennials and Gen Z are landing fast-growing, high-paying AI jobs, according to LinkedIn study. <https://www.cnbc.com/2026/08/18/millennials-and-gen-z-are-landing-fast-growing-high-paying-ai-jobs-linkedin-study.html>

²⁵Indeed Hiring Lab. (2026). Data portal: Share of job postings mentioning AI terms (through September 30, 2026). <https://data.indeed.com/>

²⁶Stanford Institute for Human-Centered AI. (2026). AI Index Report 2026, Chapter 4: Economy. https://hai.stanford.edu/assets/files/ai_index_report_2026_chapter_4_economy.pdf

²⁷Upwork Research Institute. (2026, February 4). In-demand skills 2026: Key skills for an AI-driven economy. <https://www.upwork.com/research/in-demand-skills-2026>

²⁸World Economic Forum. (2025, January). Future of Jobs Report 2025: The jobs of the future and the skills you need to get them. <https://www.weforum.org/stories/2025/01/future-of-jobs-report-2025-jobs-of-the-future-and-the-skills-you-need-to-get-them/>

²⁹PwC. (2026). 2026 Global AI Jobs Barometer: Global report findings. <https://www.pwc.com/gx/en/issues/artificial-intelligence/job-barometer/2026/2026-global-ai-jobs-barometer-global-findings.pdf>

than "democratised" roles, where AI lets less-skilled people do the work³⁰. Online research sits on both tracks, which is the central strategic fact for practitioners.

2.4 Early Warning Signs at the Entry Level

The strongest evidence of harm is concentrated among young entrants. Using ADP payroll data through June 2026, Stanford economists found that employment of workers aged 22 to 25 in AI-exposed occupations stands 19% below where it would have been had it kept pace with less-exposed peers, mainly through reduced hiring; experienced workers show no comparable gap, and declines are concentrated where AI substitutes for rather than complements human tasks³¹. Anthropic's separate analysis found a just-barely significant 14% drop in job-finding rates for young workers in exposed occupations, with no comparable decrease for workers over 25³².

In October 2026, IMF Managing Director Kristalina Georgieva described AI as hitting labor markets like a "slow-moving tsunami," estimating that about 40% of jobs worldwide will eventually be augmented, downgraded, or eliminated, with exposure around 60% in advanced economies³³. PwC adds an important nuance: entry-level roles most exposed to AI are seven times more likely to require traditionally senior skills such as judgment and leadership, and openings for these "seniorised" entry roles grew 35% since 2019 while other entry-level roles declined 10%³⁴. Entry is not closing; the bar to enter is rising.

³⁰PwC. (2026, June 15). AI reshapes global labour market into two distinct paths, rewarding human skills: PwC 2026 Global AI Jobs Barometer [Press release]. <https://www.pwc.com/gx/en/news-room/press-releases/2026/pwc-2026-ai-jobs-barometer.html>

³¹Brynjolfsson, E., Chandar, B., & Chen, R. (2026, revised August 12). Canaries in the coal mine? Six facts about the recent employment effects of artificial intelligence. Stanford Digital Economy Lab. <https://digitaleconomy.stanford.edu/publication/canaries-in-the-coal-mine-six-facts-about-the-recent-employment-effects-of-artificial-intelligence/>

³²Anthropic. (2026, March 5). Labor market impacts of AI: A new measure. <https://www.anthropic.com/research/labor-market-impacts>

³³CNBC. (2026, October 12). World Bank jobs council urges 'crisis-era' employment support measures as IMF warns of AI 'tsunami'. <https://www.cnbc.com/2026/10/12/imf-world-bank-ai-jobs-inflation-.html>

³⁴PwC. (2026, June 15). AI reshapes global labour market into two distinct paths, rewarding human skills: PwC 2026 Global AI Jobs Barometer [Press release]. <https://www.pwc.com/gx/en/news-room/press-releases/2026/pwc-2026-ai-jobs-barometer.html>

3. New Types of Online Research Jobs

The roles below are grouped by the kind of research value they deliver. Job titles vary widely between employers; the descriptions focus on the work itself so that readers can recognize the role behind unfamiliar titles.

3.1 Taxonomy of Emerging Roles

Table 4. Emerging AI-era online research roles

Role family	What the work involves	Where it is found
AI training data specialist / generalist rater	Rating, ranking, and rewriting AI responses (reinforcement learning from human feedback); writing test prompts; basic labeling	Outlier, DataAnnotation, Mercor, Alignerr, Handshake AI and similar platforms ³⁵
Domain-expert AI evaluator and fact-checker	Checking AI answers against authoritative sources in law, medicine, finance, science, or journalism; documenting every error with a citation	Expert marketplaces and AI labs; fact-checking sits inside evaluator, writer, journalist, and domain-expert listings ³⁶
AI search and answer-quality evaluator	Rating AI search answers for factual accuracy, completeness, and source quality	Listed as "search generalist" roles at \$10–\$30 per hour on Mercor ³⁷
AI red-teamer and safety tester	Probing models for harmful, biased, or false outputs; designing adversarial prompts; writing failure reports	AI labs and crowd platforms; typically \$45–\$120 per hour ³⁸
AI-augmented research analyst	Market, competitive, policy, or due-diligence research using AI agents for collection and drafting, with human verification and synthesis	Consulting, corporate strategy, market research firms; BLS projects 7% growth for market research analysts 2025–35 ³⁹
OSINT and digital investigations analyst	Open-source intelligence, identity and asset tracing, disinformation and deepfake analysis using AI-assisted tools	Government contractors, security firms, newsrooms, legal and compliance teams ⁴⁰

³⁵Keeper. (2026, October). 10 best AI training and data annotation jobs (2026). <https://www.keepertax.com/posts/best-ai-training-jobs>

³⁶AITrainer.work. (2026, September). AI fact-checking jobs: Who hires and what they pay (2026). <https://aitrainer.work/guides/ai-fact-checking-jobs>

³⁷AITrainer.work. (2026, September). AI fact-checking jobs: Who hires and what they pay (2026). <https://aitrainer.work/guides/ai-fact-checking-jobs>

³⁸AITraining.jobs. (2026). Red-teaming and AI safety: What it is and how to start. <https://aitraining.jobs/learn/red-teaming>

³⁹U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics. (2026). Market research analysts. Occupational Outlook Handbook. <https://www.bls.gov/ooh/business-and-financial/market-research-analysts.htm>

⁴⁰ZipRecruiter. (2026, September). OSINT open source intelligence analyst jobs and salary. <https://www.ziprecruiter.com/Jobs/Osint-Open-Source-Intelligence-Analyst>

Role family	What the work involves	Where it is found
Prompt and AI workflow designer (research operations)	Designing reusable prompts, agents, and research pipelines; testing them for accuracy and consistency	Increasingly folded into "AI engineer," analyst, and operations titles ⁴¹
Knowledge curator / RAG content specialist	Selecting, cleaning, and maintaining the document collections AI systems retrieve from; tagging provenance and currency	Enterprises building internal AI assistants; RAG skill postings grew 337% in 2025 ⁴²
AI governance, assurance, and provenance specialist	Documenting AI risks, testing outputs, maintaining audit trails, applying NIST, ISO/IEC 42001, and EU AI Act requirements	Regulated industries, large enterprises, audit firms ⁴³
AI trainer / adoption coach	Teaching staff to use AI tools safely, including research and verification practices	The most-considered new AI role among leaders (32%) ⁴⁴

3.2 What Happened to the "Prompt Engineer"

In 2023 "prompt engineer" was widely promoted as the defining AI job. By 2025, Microsoft's Jared Spataro said the prediction that prompt engineering would be the hot job "is not turning out to be true at all," and Indeed reported that listings using the title were flatlining at about 3,000⁴⁵. Newer models are more conversational and context-aware, which reduces the value of a "perfect prompt" written in isolation.

The skill, however, has not disappeared; it has been absorbed into other jobs. Stanford's AI Index reports that U.S. job postings citing prompt engineering rose 261% in 2025 to 22,227, and postings citing retrieval-augmented generation rose 337% to 12,609⁴⁶. LinkedIn's 2026 Skills on the Rise list places data annotation and prompt engineering under its top category of AI engineering and

⁴¹Davis, E. (2025, April 29). AI is taking over for prompt engineers. Entrepreneur. <https://www.entrepreneur.com/business-news/ai-is-taking-over-for-prompt-engineers/490762>

⁴²Stanford Institute for Human-Centered AI. (2026). AI Index Report 2026, Chapter 4: Economy. https://hai.stanford.edu/assets/files/ai_index_report_2026_chapter_4_economy.pdf

⁴³VerifyWise. (2026). AI governance salaries 2026: What does the market pay? <https://verifywise.ai/blog/ai-governance-salary-report-2026>

⁴⁴Microsoft. (2025, April 23). 2025: The year the Frontier Firm is born. Work Trend Index. <https://www.microsoft.com/en-us/worklab/work-trend-index/2025-the-year-the-frontier-firm-is-born>

⁴⁵Davis, E. (2025, April 29). AI is taking over for prompt engineers. Entrepreneur. <https://www.entrepreneur.com/business-news/ai-is-taking-over-for-prompt-engineers/490762>

⁴⁶Stanford Institute for Human-Centered AI. (2026). AI Index Report 2026, Chapter 4: Economy. https://hai.stanford.edu/assets/files/ai_index_report_2026_chapter_4_economy.pdf

implementation⁴⁷. The practical lesson is to market prompt design as part of a research capability ("I build and validate AI research workflows") rather than as a stand-alone title.

3.3 Employment Models: Salaried, Freelance, and Platform Work

Much of the new AI research work is contract-based. Expert marketplaces now recruit credentialed specialists (physicians, attorneys, engineers, analysts) to evaluate AI outputs for frontier AI labs⁴⁸. Mercor, for example, advertises remote project work for business professionals starting at \$50 per hour, with some specialist forecasting projects listed at \$130–\$210 per hour⁴⁹. On Upwork, freelancers doing AI work earned over 40% more per hour than those doing non-AI work, while demand for repetitive coding work dipped⁵⁰.

Platform work offers fast entry and flexible hours but carries risks: work is often project-based and can stop without notice, some platforms pay only for accepted tasks, and assessments are frequently unpaid⁵¹. Researchers should treat platform income as a bridge or supplement unless they reach the expert tiers where demand is steadier.

⁴⁷CNBC. (2026, February 24). These are the fastest-growing skills in the U.S., according to LinkedIn. <https://www.cnn.com/2026/02/24/the-fastest-growing-skills-in-the-us-according-to-linkedin-theyre-career-currency.html>

⁴⁸Keeper. (2026, October). 10 best AI training and data annotation jobs (2026). <https://www.keeper.com/posts/best-ai-training-jobs>

⁴⁹Mercor. (2026). AI training jobs for business professionals. <https://www.mercor.com/experts/business-operations/>

⁵⁰Axios. (2025, June 30). Exclusive: AI job substitution is real, but narrow, per new study. <https://www.axios.com/2025/06/30/ai-job-vibe-coding-upwork>

⁵¹Keeper. (2026, October). 10 best AI training and data annotation jobs (2026). <https://www.keeper.com/posts/best-ai-training-jobs>

4. How These Jobs Pay

4.1 Salaried Benchmarks (United States)

Table 5. U.S. salary benchmarks for research-related and AI-related roles

Occupation or role	Pay benchmark	Notes and source
Market research analyst	\$78,760 median (May 2025)	Bachelor's degree typical; about 82,000 openings per year ⁵²
Operations research analyst	\$88,940 median (May 2025)	12% projected growth 2025–35 ⁵³
Data scientist	\$120,230 median (May 2025)	35% projected growth 2025–35; about 24,800 openings per year ⁵⁴
Paralegal / legal assistant	\$62,890 median (May 2025)	0% projected change 2025–35; BLS cites AI making legal research more efficient ⁵⁵
OSINT analyst	\$77,848 average; \$94,400 median in posting data	Salary.com (September 2026) ⁵⁶ ; ZipRecruiter (2026) ⁵⁷
Prompt engineer	\$114,181 average base	Indeed (2026) ⁵⁸ ; Levels.fyi reports \$170,000 median total compensation from 19 submissions ⁵⁹
AI governance manager	\$158,750 median base (mid-career)	VerifyWise compilation (2026); junior roles around \$130,000 ⁶⁰

⁵²U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics. (2026). Market research analysts. Occupational Outlook Handbook. <https://www.bls.gov/ooh/business-and-financial/market-research-analysts.htm>

⁵³U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics. (2026). Operations research analysts. Occupational Outlook Handbook. <https://www.bls.gov/ooh/math/operations-research-analysts.htm>

⁵⁴U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics. (2026). Data scientists. Occupational Outlook Handbook. <https://www.bls.gov/ooh/math/data-scientists.htm>

⁵⁵U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics. (2026). Paralegals and legal assistants. Occupational Outlook Handbook. <https://www.bls.gov/ooh/legal/paralegals-and-legal-assistants.htm>

⁵⁶Salary.com. (2026, September 1). OSINT analyst salary in the United States. <https://www.salary.com/research/salary/hiring/osint-analyst-salary>

⁵⁷ZipRecruiter. (2026, September). OSINT open source intelligence analyst jobs and salary. <https://www.ziprecruiter.com/Jobs/Osint-Open-Source-Intelligence-Analyst>

⁵⁸Indeed. (2026). Prompt engineer salary in United States. <https://www.indeed.com/career/prompt-engineer/salaries>

⁵⁹Levels.fyi. (2026). Prompt engineer salary. <https://www.levels.fyi/t/prompt-engineer>

⁶⁰VerifyWise. (2026). AI governance salaries 2026: What does the market pay? <https://verifywise.ai/blog/ai-governance-salary-report-2026>

Occupation or role	Pay benchmark	Notes and source
Typical AI role (mostly technical)	\$177,000 median	LinkedIn data via CNBC; data annotator median \$51,000 ⁶¹

The wide gap between sources for the same title is itself a finding. ZipRecruiter lists a \$60,400 median for "prompt engineering" jobs⁶², Indeed an average of \$114,181⁶³, and Levels.fyi a \$170,000 median total compensation⁶⁴. These differences reflect who is sampled: content-oriented prompt writing pays far less than prompt work inside engineering teams at large technology companies. Researchers should benchmark against the work they will actually do, not the title.

4.2 Hourly and Platform Rates

Table 6. Advertised hourly pay on AI training and evaluation platforms

Platform or segment	Advertised pay (2026)	Typical requirements
DataAnnotation	General \$25–\$50+/hr; coding \$40–\$150+/hr; STEM and professional \$40–\$125+/hr ⁶⁵	No degree for general work; about one-hour starter assessment
Mercor	About \$20–\$50/hr for quality analysis; \$100–\$200/hr for specialist roles ⁶⁶	AI video interview, identity and background checks
Outlier	Generalist up to \$15/hr; finance experts up to \$90/hr; ML experts up to \$150/hr ⁶⁷	Age 18+, English fluency; skill assessments
Handshake AI	\$40–\$125/hr depending on role ⁶⁸	Students and graduates, associate's to PhD; U.S.-based
micro1	Litigation attorneys \$80–\$150/hr; equity research \$180–\$220/hr ⁶⁹	Professional credentials; proctored AI interview

⁶¹CNBC. (2026, August 18). Millennials and Gen Z are landing fast-growing, high-paying AI jobs, according to LinkedIn study. <https://www.cnbc.com/2026/08/18/millennials-and-gen-z-are-landing-fast-growing-high-paying-ai-jobs-linkedin-study.html>

⁶²ZipRecruiter. (2026, September). Salary: Prompt engineering, United States. <https://www.ziprecruiter.com/Salaries/Prompt-Engineering-Salary>

⁶³Indeed. (2026). Prompt engineer salary in United States. <https://www.indeed.com/career/prompt-engineer/salaries>

⁶⁴Levels.fyi. (2026). Prompt engineer salary. <https://www.levels.fyi/t/prompt-engineer>

⁶⁵Keeper. (2026, October). 10 best AI training and data annotation jobs (2026). <https://www.keepertax.com/posts/best-ai-training-jobs>

⁶⁶Keeper. (2026, October). 10 best AI training and data annotation jobs (2026). <https://www.keepertax.com/posts/best-ai-training-jobs>

⁶⁷Keeper. (2026, October). 10 best AI training and data annotation jobs (2026). <https://www.keepertax.com/posts/best-ai-training-jobs>

⁶⁸Keeper. (2026, October). 10 best AI training and data annotation jobs (2026). <https://www.keepertax.com/posts/best-ai-training-jobs>

⁶⁹Keeper. (2026, October). 10 best AI training and data annotation jobs (2026). <https://www.keepertax.com/posts/best-ai-training-jobs>

Platform or segment	Advertised pay (2026)	Typical requirements
AI fact-checking listings	\$5–\$200/hr; median \$50/hr across 153 listings with a stated rate ⁷⁰	Language, writing, journalism, or professional expertise
AI trainer pay overall	\$31/hr national average; median \$25–\$33/hr ⁷¹	Expert tier requires 5–10+ years of domain experience ⁷²

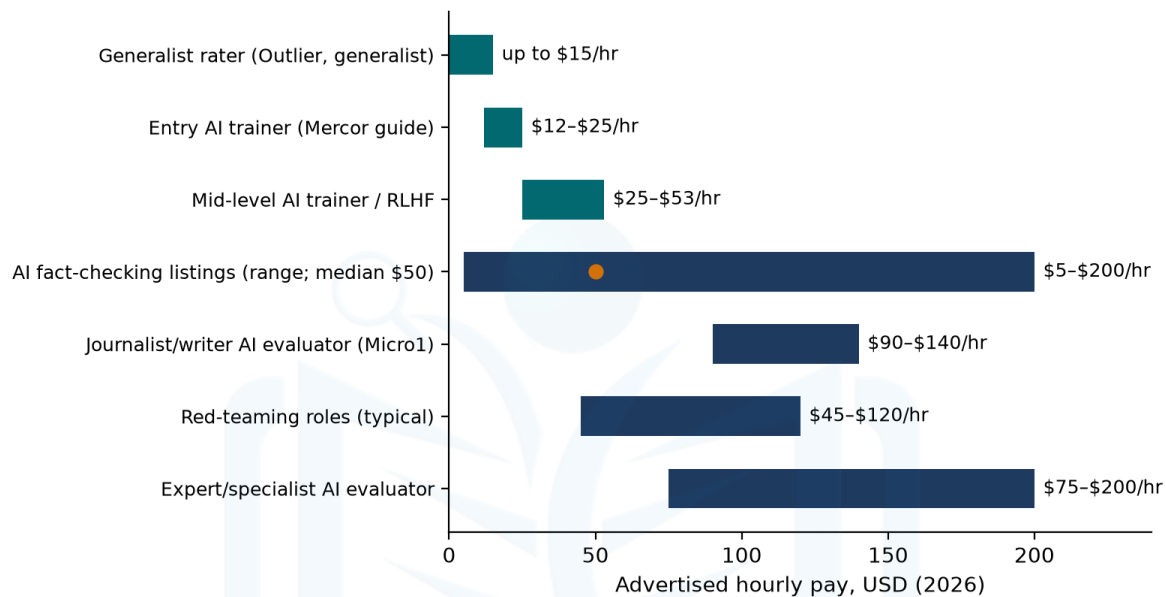


Figure 1. Advertised hourly pay for AI-related research and evaluation work (USD, 2026). Sources: Keeper, Mercor, AITrainer.work, AITraining.jobs.

4.3 What Drives Pay

- **Verified domain expertise.** Mercor describes three tiers: entry-level work at \$12–\$25 per hour needs no prior AI experience, mid-level work at \$25–\$53 requires demonstrated domain fluency, and expert work at \$75–\$200+ requires verifiable credentials or typically 5–10+ years in a field⁷³.

⁷⁰AITrainer.work. (2026, September). AI fact-checking jobs: Who hires and what they pay (2026). <https://aitrainer.work/guides/ai-fact-checking-jobs>

⁷¹Mercor. (2026). AI trainer salary: Hourly rates and 5 ways to increase pay. <https://www.mercor.com/resources/experts/ai-trainer-salary-hourly-rates/>

⁷²Mercor. (2026). AI trainer salary: Hourly rates and 5 ways to increase pay. <https://www.mercor.com/resources/experts/ai-trainer-salary-hourly-rates/>

⁷³Mercor. (2026). AI trainer salary: Hourly rates and 5 ways to increase pay. <https://www.mercor.com/resources/experts/ai-trainer-salary-hourly-rates/>

- **Verification quality.** The higher-paid fact-checking listings ask workers to find factual errors and unsupported claims and document each with a source; journalist and writer evaluator roles at Micro1 were listed at \$90–\$140 per hour⁷⁴.
- **Language and location.** Language roles mostly pay \$8–\$30 per hour, and some research-task roles open only to residents of India and Latin America pay \$8–\$9 per hour⁷⁵.
- **Commoditization.** Generalist pay is falling while expert rates rise; Outlier advertises up to \$15 per hour for generalists⁷⁶.
- **Credentials and governance knowledge.** In AI governance, an IAPP certification is associated with a modest premium, which rises when combined with seniority or a privacy credential⁷⁷.



⁷⁴AITrainer.work. (2026, September). AI fact-checking jobs: Who hires and what they pay (2026). <https://aitrainer.work/guides/ai-fact-checking-jobs>

⁷⁵AITrainer.work. (2026, September). AI fact-checking jobs: Who hires and what they pay (2026). <https://aitrainer.work/guides/ai-fact-checking-jobs>

⁷⁶Keeper. (2026, October). 10 best AI training and data annotation jobs (2026). <https://www.keeper.com/posts/best-ai-training-jobs>

⁷⁷VerifyWise. (2026). AI governance salaries 2026: What does the market pay? <https://verifywise.ai/blog/ai-governance-salary-report-2026>

5. Qualifications and Skills Expected

5.1 Formal Education

Expectations split sharply by tier. Most salaried analytical roles still list a bachelor's degree as the typical entry requirement^{78,79}, and LinkedIn found that 91% of workers in AI roles hold a bachelor's degree or higher⁸⁰. Platform generalist work, by contrast, often requires no degree at all, only an assessment⁸¹. At the expert tier, the qualification is demonstrable expertise: advanced degrees, professional licenses, or many years of practice⁸². LinkedIn notes that employers increasingly look at what people can do rather than titles or degrees⁸³.

5.2 The Skills Stack

Table 7. The AI-era online research skills stack

Skill layer	What employers and platforms test for	Evidence of demand
1. Research foundations	Search strategy and operators, database selection, source evaluation, citation tracing, clear writing	Data analysis appears in 170,396 U.S. AI job postings ⁸⁴
2. AI tool fluency	Prompt design, comparing outputs across models, configuring research agents, structured extraction	Prompt engineering postings +261% in 2025 ⁸⁵
3. Retrieval and knowledge design	Building and curating RAG collections, metadata, document freshness, retrieval testing	RAG postings +337% in 2025 ⁸⁶

⁷⁸U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics. (2026). Market research analysts. Occupational Outlook Handbook. <https://www.bls.gov/ooh/business-and-financial/market-research-analysts.htm>

⁷⁹U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics. (2026). Data scientists. Occupational Outlook Handbook. <https://www.bls.gov/ooh/math/data-scientists.htm>

⁸⁰CNBC. (2026, August 18). Millennials and Gen Z are landing fast-growing, high-paying AI jobs, according to LinkedIn study. <https://www.cnbc.com/2026/08/18/millennials-and-gen-z-are-landing-fast-growing-high-paying-ai-jobs-linkedin-study.html>

⁸¹Keeper. (2026, October). 10 best AI training and data annotation jobs (2026). <https://www.keeper.com/posts/best-ai-training-jobs>

⁸²Mercor. (2026). AI trainer salary: Hourly rates and 5 ways to increase pay. <https://www.mercor.com/resources/experts/ai-trainer-salary-hourly-rates/>

⁸³CNBC. (2026, February 24). These are the fastest-growing skills in the U.S., according to LinkedIn. <https://www.cnbc.com/make-it/2026/02/24/the-fastest-growing-skills-in-the-us-according-to-linkedin-theyre-career-currency.html>

⁸⁴Stanford Institute for Human-Centered AI. (2026). AI Index Report 2026, Chapter 4: Economy. https://hai.stanford.edu/assets/files/ai_index_report_2026_chapter_4_economy.pdf

⁸⁵Stanford Institute for Human-Centered AI. (2026). AI Index Report 2026, Chapter 4: Economy. https://hai.stanford.edu/assets/files/ai_index_report_2026_chapter_4_economy.pdf

⁸⁶Stanford Institute for Human-Centered AI. (2026). AI Index Report 2026, Chapter 4: Economy. https://hai.stanford.edu/assets/files/ai_index_report_2026_chapter_4_economy.pdf

Skill layer	What employers and platforms test for	Evidence of demand
4. Verification and provenance	Claim extraction, lateral reading, quote and number checking, content credentials, deepfake awareness	Fact-checking listing median \$50/hr ⁸⁷
5. Data literacy	Spreadsheets, basic SQL or Python, simple statistics, reading charts critically	Python and SQL among top U.S. AI-posting skills ⁸⁸
6. Domain expertise	Depth in law, health, finance, science, security, policy, or a regional language	Expert AI evaluation \$75–\$200+/hr ⁸⁹
7. Governance and ethics	AI risk frameworks, privacy, copyright, disclosure, audit trails	Data governance and responsible AI on LinkedIn 2026 list ⁹⁰
8. Human judgment skills	Judgment, stakeholder communication, leadership, explaining uncertainty	New tasks in AI-exposed roles 2.5x more likely to be human-intensive ⁹¹

5.3 Credentials and Proof of Capability

Because job titles are unstable, proof of work often matters more than a certificate. The most persuasive signals are: (1) a portfolio of verified research briefs showing sources, method, and corrections; (2) a documented prompt or agent workflow with accuracy testing; (3) a short audit of an AI tool's errors in a familiar domain; and (4) relevant certifications. Useful certification categories include internet research and verification programs such as the Certified Internet Research Specialist (CIRS) curriculum of AOFIRS, AI governance credentials such as the IAPP's AIGP⁹², and vendor AI-fundamentals courses. Certifications are most valuable when paired with experience; on their own they rarely unlock top-tier rates.

⁸⁷AITrainer.work. (2026, September). AI fact-checking jobs: Who hires and what they pay (2026). <https://aitrainer.work/guides/ai-fact-checking-jobs>

⁸⁸Stanford Institute for Human-Centered AI. (2026). AI Index Report 2026, Chapter 4: Economy. https://hai.stanford.edu/assets/files/ai_index_report_2026_chapter_4_economy.pdf

⁸⁹Mercor. (2026). AI trainer salary: Hourly rates and 5 ways to increase pay. <https://www.mercor.com/resources/experts/ai-trainer-salary-hourly-rates/>

⁹⁰CNBC. (2026, February 24). These are the fastest-growing skills in the U.S., according to LinkedIn. <https://www.cnbc.com/make-it/2026/02/24/the-fastest-growing-skills-in-the-us-according-to-linkedin-theyre-career-currency.html>

⁹¹PwC. (2026). 2026 Global AI Jobs Barometer: Global report findings. <https://www.pwc.com/gx/en/issues/artificial-intelligence/job-barometer/2026/2026-global-ai-jobs-barometer-global-findings.pdf>

⁹²VerifyWise. (2026). AI governance salaries 2026: What does the market pay? <https://verifywise.ai/blog/ai-governance-salary-report-2026>

6. Five-Year Outlook, 2026–2031

6.1 Forces Shaping Demand

- **Agentic AI.** AI agents that search, read, and draft autonomously will absorb more routine collection work. Microsoft found 32% of managers planned to hire AI agent specialists within 12–18 months⁹³; the AI Index tracks "AI agent" as a skill in 0.23% of all U.S. postings in 2025⁹⁴.
- **Rising cost of errors.** As AI answers feed legal, medical, and financial decisions, organizations will pay more for people who can certify accuracy. NIST highlights particular concern for confabulation in specialized domains and consequential decisions⁹⁵.
- **Regulation and literacy duties.** The EU AI Act's AI-literacy requirement (in force since February 2025)⁹⁶ and frameworks such as NIST AI 600-1⁹⁷ create documentation and assurance work.
- **Provenance infrastructure.** Content Credentials, the open C2PA standard for recording where digital content came from and how it changed, are spreading across platforms⁹⁸, making provenance analysis a teachable, auditable skill.
- **Better-calibrated models.** OpenAI argues that hallucinations persist because evaluations reward guessing; a model that abstained 52% of the time cut its error rate to 26%, versus 75% for one that rarely abstained⁹⁹. Better abstention reduces some verification load but makes the remaining errors subtler.
- **Automation of hours.** McKinsey estimated that activities accounting for up to 30% of hours worked in the U.S. could be automated by 2030¹⁰⁰.

⁹³Microsoft. (2025, April 23). 2025: The year the Frontier Firm is born. Work Trend Index. <https://www.microsoft.com/en-us/worklab/work-trend-index/2025-the-year-the-frontier-firm-is-born>

⁹⁴Stanford Institute for Human-Centered AI. (2026). AI Index Report 2026, Chapter 4: Economy. https://hai.stanford.edu/assets/files/ai_index_report_2026_chapter_4_economy.pdf

⁹⁵National Institute of Standards and Technology. (2024). Artificial Intelligence Risk Management Framework: Generative Artificial Intelligence Profile (NIST AI 600-1). <https://nvlpubs.nist.gov/nistpubs/ai/NIST.AI.600-1.pdf>

⁹⁶European Union. (2024). Artificial Intelligence Act, Article 4: AI literacy (applies from February 2, 2025). <https://artificialintelligenceact.eu/article/4/>

⁹⁷National Institute of Standards and Technology. (2024). Artificial Intelligence Risk Management Framework: Generative Artificial Intelligence Profile (NIST AI 600-1). <https://nvlpubs.nist.gov/nistpubs/ai/NIST.AI.600-1.pdf>

⁹⁸Coalition for Content Provenance and Authenticity. (2025). C2PA and Content Credentials explainer (Specification 2.2). <https://spec.c2pa.org/specifications/specifications/2.2/explainer/Explainer.html>

⁹⁹OpenAI. (2025, September 5). Why language models hallucinate. <https://openai.com/index/why-language-models-hallucinate/>

¹⁰⁰McKinsey Global Institute. (2023). Generative AI and the future of work in America. <https://www.mckinsey.com/mgi/our-research/generative-ai-and-the-future-of-work-in-america>

6.2 Expected Timeline of Change

Table 8. Expected evolution of AI-era research work (author assessment)

Period	Expected market developments	What researchers should expect to be asked for
2026–2027	Rapid growth in expert AI evaluation; generalist rating rates under pressure; "prompt engineer" title continues to merge into analyst and AI engineer titles	AI tool fluency as a baseline hiring screen; proof of verification method; domain specialty
2028–2029	Agentic research pipelines common in consulting, finance, and legal; RAG knowledge bases standard in large organizations; AI-assurance roles grow with regulation	Ability to design, test, and document agent workflows; RAG curation; audit trails; provenance checks
2030–2031	Research work largely "human-on-the-loop": AI collects and drafts, humans scope, certify, and explain; premiums concentrate in judgment-heavy roles	Accountability for accuracy, risk sign-off, client communication, multi-source synthesis across languages and media

6.3 Requirements Likely to Appear in Job Descriptions by 2031

1. Demonstrated ability to verify AI-generated claims against primary sources, with an error log.
2. Experience designing and evaluating multi-step AI research workflows or agents.
3. Familiarity with RAG systems: selecting, curating, and refreshing source collections.
4. Knowledge of AI governance frameworks (NIST AI RMF, ISO/IEC 42001, EU AI Act) appropriate to the sector.
5. Provenance and media forensics literacy, including content credentials and synthetic-media detection.
6. A recognized domain specialty or second language that AI systems handle poorly.
7. Clear communication of uncertainty and confidence levels to non-technical decision-makers.

6.4 Estimated Salary Projections

The projections below apply an annual nominal growth rate to a 2026 baseline. The baselines are drawn from Table 5; the "AI-proficient research analyst" baseline applies Lightcast's 28% AI-skill premium¹⁰¹ to the BLS market research analyst median¹⁰². Growth rates assume general wage growth of roughly 3% to 3.5%, plus an additional premium for roles where demand exceeds supply.

¹⁰¹Lightcast. (2025, July 23). New Lightcast report: AI skills command 28% salary premium as demand shifts beyond tech industry. <https://lightcast.io/resources/blog/beyond-the-buzz-press-release-2025-07-23>

¹⁰²U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics. (2026). Market research analysts. Occupational Outlook Handbook. <https://www.bls.gov/ooh/business-and-financial/market-research-analysts.htm>

Bain reported AI-skill compensation growth of 11% per year since 2019¹⁰³; this paper does not assume that rate persists, because the premium should narrow as AI literacy spreads. The low and high columns apply growth rates two percentage points below and above the base case. All values are author estimates (see Appendix B).

Table 9. Estimated U.S. annual pay projections, 2026–2031 (author estimates)

Role (U.S.)	2026 baseline	Base growth / yr	2028 base	2031 base	2031 range (low – high)
AI governance & assurance manager	\$158,750	5.0%	\$175,022	\$202,610	\$184,035 – \$222,655
RAG / data science researcher	\$120,230	4.5%	\$131,294	\$149,828	\$136,029 – \$164,726
Prompt & AI workflow designer	\$114,181	3.0%	\$121,135	\$132,367	\$120,005 – \$145,727
AI-proficient research analyst	\$100,813	4.0%	\$109,039	\$122,654	\$111,306 – \$134,911
OSINT / digital investigations analyst	\$86,100	4.0%	\$93,126	\$104,754	\$95,061 – \$115,221
Market research analyst (all)	\$78,760	3.5%	\$84,370	\$93,542	\$84,847 – \$102,936

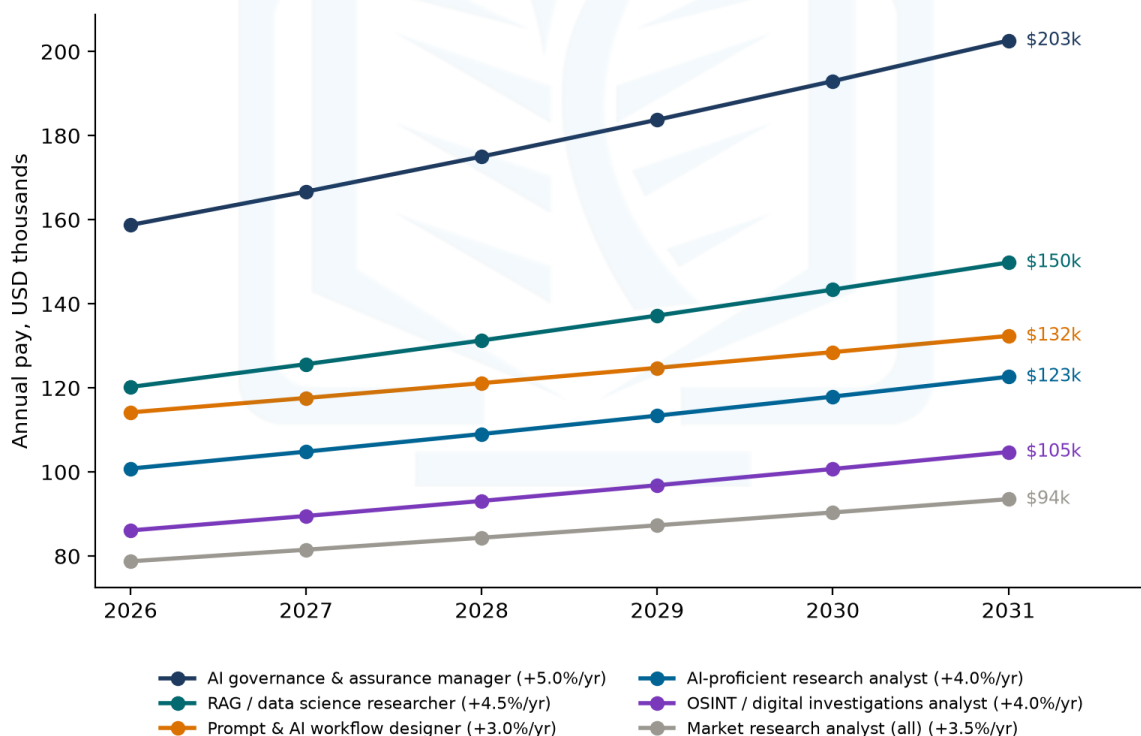


Figure 2. Base-case U.S. pay projections for research-related roles, 2026–2031 (author estimates based on BLS, Indeed, Lightcast, Salary.com, ZipRecruiter, and VerifyWise baselines).

¹⁰³Bain & Company. (2025, March 4). Widening talent gap threatens executives' AI ambitions [Press release].

<https://www.bain.com/about/media-center/press-releases/20252/widening-talent-gap-threatens-executives-ai-ambitions--bain-company/>

For hourly platform work, the author expects divergence rather than uniform growth. Generalist rating and labeling rates, currently clustered around \$15–\$30 per hour^{104,105}, are likely to stay flat or fall in real terms as models generate more of their own training data and offshore supply grows. Expert evaluation rates of \$75–\$200 per hour¹⁰⁶ are likely to hold or rise for scarce specialties (medicine, law, finance, advanced science, low-resource languages), but competition will intensify as more professionals join these marketplaces.

6.5 Demand Versus Supply

Bain's 2025 analysis is the most widely cited quantitative estimate of the AI talent gap. It found that AI-related job postings grew 21% a year since 2019, that 44% of executives say a lack of in-house expertise is slowing AI adoption, and that the gap could leave large shares of AI jobs unfilled by 2027¹⁰⁷.

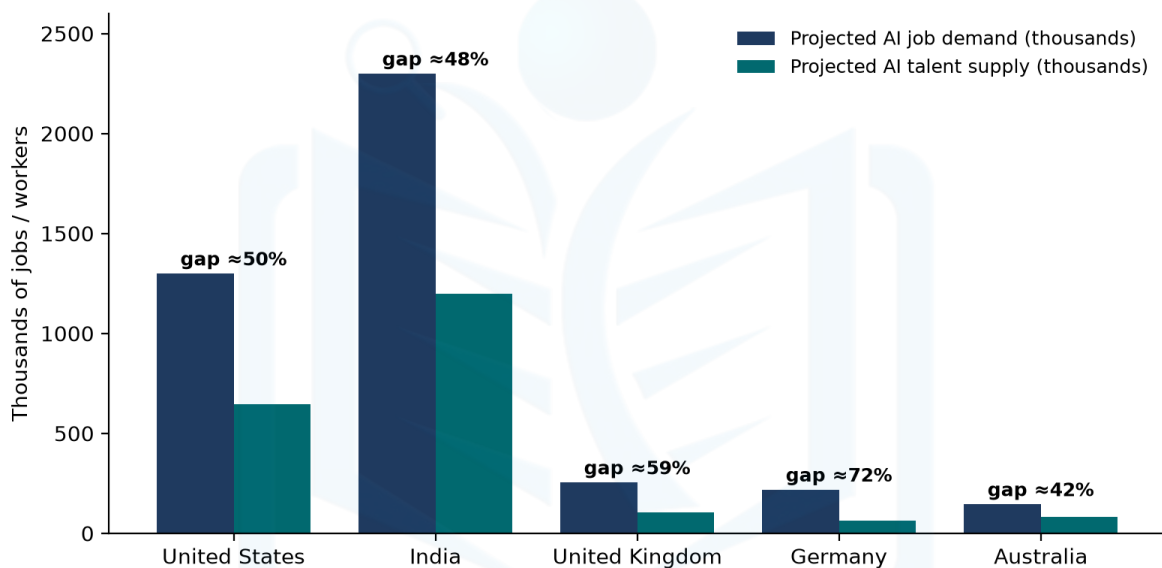


Figure 3. Projected AI talent demand versus supply by 2027 (thousands). Source: Bain & Company (2025). Upper-bound demand figures used where ranges were given.

¹⁰⁴Keeper. (2026, October). 10 best AI training and data annotation jobs (2026). <https://www.keeper.com/posts/best-ai-training-jobs>

¹⁰⁵Mercor. (2026). AI trainer salary: Hourly rates and 5 ways to increase pay. <https://www.mercor.com/resources/experts/ai-trainer-salary-hourly-rates/>

¹⁰⁶Mercor. (2026). AI trainer salary: Hourly rates and 5 ways to increase pay. <https://www.mercor.com/resources/experts/ai-trainer-salary-hourly-rates/>

¹⁰⁷Bain & Company. (2025, March 4). Widening talent gap threatens executives' AI ambitions [Press release]. <https://www.bain.com/about/media-center/press-releases/20252/widening-talent-gap-threatens-executives-ai-ambitions--bain-company/>

Bain's figures cover AI jobs broadly, including engineering. For research roles specifically, no official supply count exists, so Table 10 gives the author's qualitative assessment by segment, based on the pay and posting evidence above.

Table 10. Demand–supply balance by research segment (author assessment)

Research segment	2026 balance	2031 outlook	Rationale
Generalist AI rating and labeling	Oversupplied	Oversupplied	Low entry barriers; generalist pay already falling ¹⁰⁸
Basic search-and-summarize research	Oversupplied	Shrinking	Directly substituted by AI search and agents
AI-augmented domain research analyst	Balanced to tight	Tight	Growth in analytical occupations ¹⁰⁹ ; AI premium ¹¹⁰
Expert AI evaluator and fact-checker	Undersupplied	Tight	Expert rates of \$75–\$200+/hr signal scarcity ¹¹¹
RAG and knowledge curation	Undersupplied	Undersupplied	RAG postings +337% in 2025 ¹¹²
OSINT and verification of media	Tight	Undersupplied	Deepfakes and provenance standards increase need ¹¹³
AI governance and assurance	Undersupplied	Tight	Regulatory duties ¹¹⁴ ; high salaries ¹¹⁵

¹⁰⁸Keeper. (2026, October). 10 best AI training and data annotation jobs (2026). <https://www.keeper.com/posts/best-ai-training-jobs>

¹⁰⁹U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics. (2026, July 16). Artificial intelligence, information technology, and employment, 2024–34. The Economics Daily. <https://www.bls.gov/opub/ted/2026/artificial-intelligence-information-technology-and-employment-2024-34.htm>

¹¹⁰Lightcast. (2025, July 23). New Lightcast report: AI skills command 28% salary premium as demand shifts beyond tech industry. <https://lightcast.io/resources/blog/beyond-the-buzz-press-release-2025-07-23>

¹¹¹Mercor. (2026). AI trainer salary: Hourly rates and 5 ways to increase pay. <https://www.mercor.com/resources/experts/ai-trainer-salary-hourly-rates/>

¹¹²Stanford Institute for Human-Centered AI. (2026). AI Index Report 2026, Chapter 4: Economy. https://hai.stanford.edu/assets/files/ai_index_report_2026_chapter_4_economy.pdf

¹¹³Coalition for Content Provenance and Authenticity. (2025). C2PA and Content Credentials explainer (Specification 2.2). <https://spec.c2pa.org/specifications/specifications/2.2/explainer/Explainer.html>

¹¹⁴European Union. (2024). Artificial Intelligence Act, Article 4: AI literacy (applies from February 2, 2025). <https://artificialintelligenceact.eu/article/4/>

¹¹⁵VerifyWise. (2026). AI governance salaries 2026: What does the market pay? <https://verifywise.ai/blog/ai-governance-salary-report-2026>

7. Retrieval-Augmented Tools and Reliable Sources

7.1 What RA Tools Do Well and Where They Fail

Retrieval-augmented tools, such as AI search engines, enterprise assistants, and research assistants that answer from uploaded documents, ground a language model's answer in documents retrieved at query time. The original RAG work showed that this produces more specific and more factual language than a model relying only on what it memorized during training¹¹⁶. Grounding is the single most effective design choice for reducing fabrication, but it does not eliminate error.

The Stanford RegLab study is the clearest test. Its authors found that commercial legal research tools built on RAG hallucinated less than general-purpose chatbots, yet Lexis+ AI produced incorrect information more than 17% of the time and Westlaw AI-Assisted Research more than 34% of the time; a previous study had found general chatbots hallucinated on legal queries 58% to 82% of the time^{117,118}. The errors that remained were often "misgrounded": correct-sounding statements attached to sources that do not support them¹¹⁹. This is the failure mode researchers most need to check for, because a citation creates false confidence.

7.2 Tapping Reliable Information Sources

An RA tool is only as reliable as the collection it retrieves from. The most important practical step is to point the tool at authoritative sources, either by restricting search to trusted domains or by uploading a curated set of documents. Table 11 ranks source types by default reliability.

Table 11. Source reliability tiers for AI-assisted research

Tier	Source types	How to use them with AI tools
Tier 1	Primary records: official statistics (e.g., BLS, Eurostat), legislation and court records, regulatory filings, standards documents, original datasets	Restrict search to official domains; upload the original PDF; ask the tool to quote table and page numbers
Tier 2	Peer-reviewed research and reputable preprints with methods; systematic reviews	Check DOI metadata and retraction status; the Retraction Watch database is now openly available through Crossref ¹²⁰

¹¹⁶Lewis, P., Perez, E., Piktus, A., Petroni, F., Karpukhin, V., Goyal, N., Küttler, H., Lewis, M., Yih, W., Rocktäschel, T., Riedel, S., & Kiela, D. (2020). Retrieval-augmented generation for knowledge-intensive NLP tasks. NeurIPS 2020. arXiv:2005.11401. <https://arxiv.org/abs/2005.11401>

¹¹⁷Stanford HAI. (2024). AI on trial: Legal models hallucinate in 1 out of 6 (or more) benchmarking queries. <https://hai.stanford.edu/news/ai-trial-legal-models-hallucinate-1-out-6-or-more-benchmarking-queries>

¹¹⁸Magesh, V., Surani, F., Dahl, M., Suzgun, M., Manning, C. D., & Ho, D. E. (2024). Hallucination-free? Assessing the reliability of leading AI legal research tools. Stanford RegLab. https://law.stanford.edu/wp-content/uploads/2024/05/Legal_RAG_Hallucinations.pdf

¹¹⁹Stanford HAI. (2024). AI on trial: Legal models hallucinate in 1 out of 6 (or more) benchmarking queries. <https://hai.stanford.edu/news/ai-trial-legal-models-hallucinate-1-out-6-or-more-benchmarking-queries>

¹²⁰Crossref. (2026). Retraction Watch [Documentation]. <https://www.crossref.org/documentation/retrieve-metadata/retraction-watch/>

Tier	Source types	How to use them with AI tools
Tier 3	Established news organizations with corrections policies; professional associations; intergovernmental reports	Prefer the original report over coverage of it; compare at least two independent outlets
Tier 4	Industry, consulting, and vendor research	Useful for current data but note commercial interest; look for sample size and method
Tier 5	Blogs, forums, social media, aggregators, AI-generated pages	Use only as leads; trace every claim upstream to a higher tier before use

For images, video, and audio, provenance metadata adds a further layer. C2PA defines provenance as the facts about the history of a piece of digital content, and its Content Credentials standard lets publishers attach verifiable records of origin and edits¹²¹. Absence of credentials does not prove a file is fake, but their presence and integrity are useful evidence.

7.3 A Source Reliability Scoring Rubric

The rubric below lets a researcher score a source quickly and record the score with each claim. A total of 12 or more indicates a source suitable for decision-grade use; 8–11 requires corroboration; 7 or less should be used only as a lead.

Table 12. Five-criterion source reliability rubric (author framework)

Criterion	3 points	2 points	1 point
Proximity	Original record or dataset	Direct report of the original	Secondhand or unattributed
Authority	Official or peer-reviewed	Recognized expert or outlet	Unknown author
Method transparency	Method and data published	Method summarized	No method given
Currency	Current for the claim	Somewhat dated	Outdated or undated
Independence	No stake in the conclusion	Some interest, disclosed	Undisclosed commercial or political interest

¹²¹Coalition for Content Provenance and Authenticity. (2025). C2PA and Content Credentials explainer (Specification 2.2). <https://spec.c2pa.org/specifications/specifications/2.2/explainer/Explainer.html>

8. Avoiding Hallucinations and Increasing Reliability

8.1 Why AI Systems Hallucinate

OpenAI's 2025 analysis argues that models hallucinate because standard training and evaluation reward guessing over acknowledging uncertainty: an accuracy-only score gives no credit for "I don't know," so a model learns to produce a confident answer even when it lacks the facts. Arbitrary, low-frequency facts such as a specific date are especially prone to error¹²². NIST adds that users may trust the confident presentation and act on or spread false information, and that confabulated citations can mislead further¹²³. For researchers, the implication is that fluency is not evidence, and a tool's confidence tells you little about its accuracy.

8.2 How Often Errors Occur

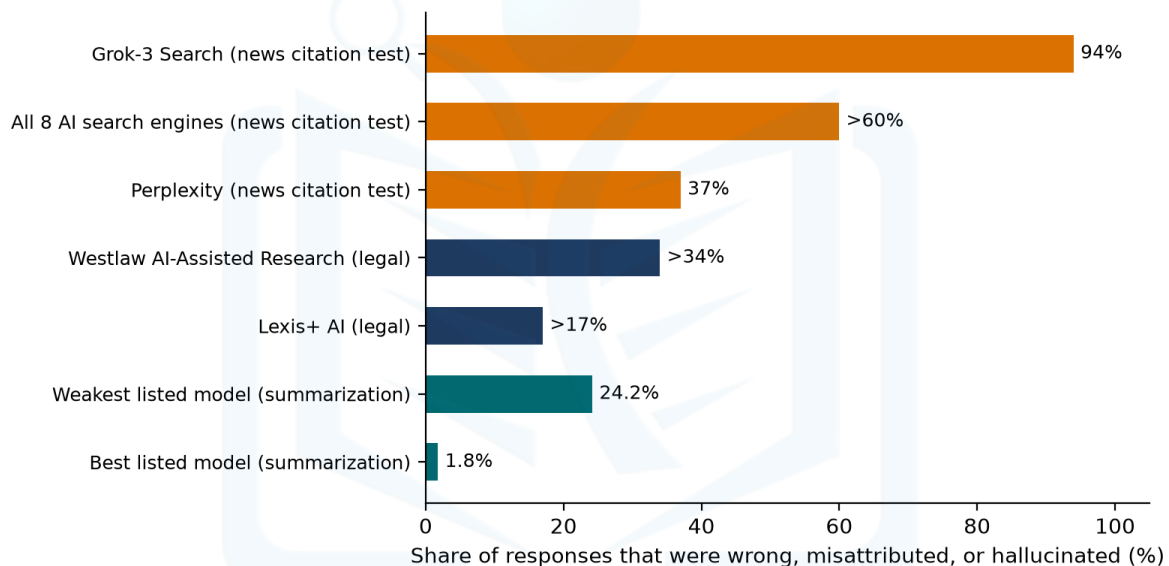


Figure 4. Measured error and hallucination rates by task. Sources: Tow Center via Nieman Lab (2025); Stanford RegLab/HAI (2024); Vectara Hallucination Leaderboard (updated October 16, 2026). Rates are not comparable across tests.

Error rates depend heavily on the task. When summarizing a supplied document, the best model on Vectara's leaderboard hallucinated 1.8% of the time and the weakest listed model 24.2%¹²⁴. When asked to identify the source of news excerpts, AI search engines were wrong more than 60% of the time overall, ranging from 37% for Perplexity to 94% for Grok-3 Search, and Gemini and Grok-3

¹²²OpenAI. (2025, September 5). Why language models hallucinate. <https://openai.com/index/why-language-models-hallucinate/>

¹²³National Institute of Standards and Technology. (2024). Artificial Intelligence Risk Management Framework: Generative Artificial Intelligence Profile (NIST AI 600-1). <https://nvlpubs.nist.gov/nistpubs/ai/NIST.AI.600-1.pdf>

¹²⁴Vectara. (2026, updated October 16). Hallucination leaderboard [GitHub repository]. <https://github.com/vectara/hallucination-leaderboard>

produced more fabricated links than correct ones¹²⁵. The safest uses of AI in research are therefore those where the source text is supplied and the task is to extract or summarize it; the riskiest are open-ended questions about attribution, citations, and niche facts.

8.3 A Ten-Step Verification Protocol

1. **Define the claim set.** Before using AI output, list every factual claim, number, quote, and citation it contains.
2. **Ground the tool.** Supply or restrict the tool to Tier 1–2 sources (Table 11) instead of open web answers wherever possible.
3. **Demand locators.** Require a URL plus page, table, paragraph, or timestamp for every claim, so each can be checked in under a minute.
4. **Open every cited source.** Confirm the source exists, is the one named, and actually says what is claimed; watch for "misgrounded" citations¹²⁶.
5. **Trace upstream.** If a source cites another, follow the chain to the original record and cite that instead.
6. **Check numbers independently.** Recompute percentages and totals, and confirm units, dates, and geographic scope.
7. **Cross-check with a second method.** Ask a different model or run a conventional search; disagreements mark claims needing human review.
8. **Run a verification pass.** Use Chain-of-Verification: plan verification questions, answer them independently of the draft, then revise; this method reduced hallucinations across several tasks¹²⁷.
9. **Label confidence.** Mark each claim as verified, partially verified, or unverified, and say so in the deliverable rather than dropping the label.
10. **Keep an audit trail.** Record prompts, tool versions, sources, and corrections. NIST recommends documenting the origin and history of generated data¹²⁸.

¹²⁵Nieman Lab. (2025, March 10). AI search engines fail to produce accurate citations in over 60% of tests, according to new Tow Center study. <https://www.niemanlab.org/2025/03/ai-search-engines-fail-to-produce-accurate-citations-in-over-60-of-tests-according-to-new-tow-center-study/>

¹²⁶Stanford HAI. (2024). AI on trial: Legal models hallucinate in 1 out of 6 (or more) benchmarking queries. <https://hai.stanford.edu/news/ai-trial-legal-models-hallucinate-1-out-6-or-more-benchmarking-queries>

¹²⁷Dhuliawala, S., Komeili, M., Xu, J., Raileanu, R., Li, X., Celikyilmaz, A., & Weston, J. (2023). Chain-of-verification reduces hallucination in large language models. arXiv:2309.11495. <https://arxiv.org/abs/2309.11495>

¹²⁸National Institute of Standards and Technology. (2024). Artificial Intelligence Risk Management Framework: Generative Artificial Intelligence Profile (NIST AI 600-1). <https://nvlpubs.nist.gov/nistpubs/ai/NIST.AI.600-1.pdf>

8.4 Prompt Patterns That Improve Reliability

Pattern 1: Grounded answer with abstention

Answer ONLY from the documents provided. For every sentence, cite the document name and page or section.

If the documents do not contain the answer, reply "Not found in the provided sources" instead of guessing.

List any claims you are uncertain about separately at the end.

Pattern 2: Claim extraction for audit

Extract every factual claim from the text below as a numbered table with columns: claim, number or date involved,

cited source, exact supporting quote from that source, and "supported / not supported / source not found".

Do not add new information.

Pattern 3: Chain-of-verification

Step 1: Draft an answer. Step 2: Write five questions that would expose errors in the draft.

Step 3: Answer each question independently using only the sources, without looking at the draft.

Step 4: Rewrite the answer, correcting anything the checks contradicted, and list what changed.

Pattern 4: Adversarial second opinion

You are a skeptical fact-checker. Identify the three weakest claims in the following answer,

explain why each may be wrong or outdated, and name the primary source that would settle it.

8.5 Organizational Controls

Teams using AI for research should formalize these practices. NIST AI 600-1 recommends assigning responsibility for periodic review of content provenance and incident monitoring, and retaining records of testing and content transparency methods¹²⁹. In practice this means a written AI-use policy, a required human reviewer for any external deliverable, a shared error log that is used to refine prompts and tool choices, and periodic spot audits of published work.

¹²⁹National Institute of Standards and Technology. (2024). Artificial Intelligence Risk Management Framework: Generative Artificial Intelligence Profile (NIST AI 600-1). <https://nvlpubs.nist.gov/nistpubs/ai/NIST.AI.600-1.pdf>

8.6 The Overconfidence Trap

Tools are only half of reliability; the other half is the researcher's attention. In a Microsoft Research survey of 319 knowledge workers, higher confidence in AI was associated with less critical thinking, while higher confidence in one's own abilities was associated with more¹³⁰. Respondents said they spent less critical effort on routine, low-stakes tasks under time pressure¹³¹. Researchers should deliberately slow down on any claim that will be published, cited, or used in a decision, however routine it appears.



¹³⁰Microsoft Research. (2025). The future of AI in knowledge work: Tools for thought at CHI 2025. <https://www.microsoft.com/en-us/research/blog/the-future-of-ai-in-knowledge-work-tools-for-thought-at-chi-2025/>

¹³¹Microsoft Research. (2025). The future of AI in knowledge work: Tools for thought at CHI 2025. <https://www.microsoft.com/en-us/research/blog/the-future-of-ai-in-knowledge-work-tools-for-thought-at-chi-2025/>

9. Impact on Non-AI-Literate and Less-Skilled Workers

9.1 The Evidence

- Hiring preferences are already shifting: 66% of leaders said they would not hire someone without AI skills, and 71% would rather hire a less experienced candidate with AI skills than a more experienced one without them¹³².
- 41% of employers plan to reduce their workforce where AI automates tasks, although about half plan to transition staff from AI-exposed roles into other parts of the business¹³³.
- Young entrants are most affected: the 19% employment shortfall for ages 22–25 in AI-exposed occupations operates mainly through reduced hiring¹³⁴.
- Routine information-processing occupations are projected to shrink or stall, including customer service representatives (–5.5%, about 153,700 jobs, 2024–34)¹³⁵ and paralegals (0% change, 2025–35)¹³⁶.
- PwC found that salaries in "democratised" roles grew 42% more slowly than in "professionalised" roles¹³⁷, implying that workers who use AI only as a shortcut, without adding judgment, gain the least.

9.2 Five-Year Impact Scenarios by Worker Profile

Table 13. Five-year impact by worker profile (author assessment)

Worker profile	Likely impact by 2031	Primary risk
Non-AI-literate researcher doing search and summarization	Fewer openings, lower rates, more competition from AI-equipped generalists	Substitution of core tasks
Generalist platform rater without a specialty	Flat or falling hourly pay; volatile project availability	Commoditization and offshoring

¹³²Microsoft & LinkedIn. (2024, May). AI at work is here. Now comes the hard part. 2024 Work Trend Index Annual Report. <https://www.microsoft.com/en-us/worklab/work-trend-index/ai-at-work-is-here-now-comes-the-hard-part>

¹³³World Economic Forum. (2025, January 8). Future of Jobs Report 2025: 78 million new job opportunities by 2030 but urgent upskilling needed to prepare workforces [Press release]. <https://www.weforum.org/media/future-of-jobs-report-2025-78-million-new-job-opportunities-by-2030-but-urgent-upskilling-needed-to-prepare-workforces/>

¹³⁴Brynjolfsson, E., Chandar, B., & Chen, R. (2026, revised August 12). Canaries in the coal mine? Six facts about the recent employment effects of artificial intelligence. Stanford Digital Economy Lab. <https://digitaleconomy.stanford.edu/publication/canaries-in-the-coal-mine-six-facts-about-the-recent-employment-effects-of-artificial-intelligence/>

¹³⁵U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics. (2026, July 16). Artificial intelligence, information technology, and employment, 2024–34. The Economics Daily. <https://www.bls.gov/opub/ted/2026/artificial-intelligence-information-technology-and-employment-2024-34.htm>

¹³⁶U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics. (2026). Paralegals and legal assistants. Occupational Outlook Handbook. <https://www.bls.gov/ooh/legal/paralegals-and-legal-assistants.htm>

¹³⁷PwC. (2026, June 15). AI reshapes global labour market into two distinct paths, rewarding human skills: PwC 2026 Global AI Jobs Barometer [Press release]. <https://www.pwc.com/gx/en/news-room/press-releases/2026/pwc-2026-ai-jobs-barometer.html>

Worker profile	Likely impact by 2031	Primary risk
AI-literate researcher without verification discipline	Employable but exposed to reputational damage from AI errors	Publishing hallucinated content
AI-literate domain specialist with verification skills	Rising demand and pay; access to expert evaluation and assurance work	Need to keep pace with tool change
Late-career expert who adopts AI tools	Strong position for advisory, evaluator, and mentoring roles	Age bias and under-investment in training

9.3 Older and Late-Career Workers

The data on older workers is mixed but more encouraging than the stereotype. Workers aged 50 and over use generative AI at work at roughly half the rate of colleagues under 40 (17% versus 34%), more than half received no technology training from their employer in the past year compared with 27% of younger workers, and 20% reported being passed over for training in favor of younger colleagues¹³⁸. At the same time, the number of workers 50 and over listing AI and similar technologies as job skills on LinkedIn grew 25% over five years, nearly double the rate of younger workers, and the gap in LinkedIn Learning participation narrowed from 13.5% in 2022 to 1.6% in 2025¹³⁹. 56% of workers aged 50 and over see AI as at least partly an opportunity¹⁴⁰.

For late-career researchers the key asset is accumulated domain judgment, which is exactly what expert AI evaluation markets pay for. The Stanford data showing no comparable employment gap for experienced workers¹⁴¹ reinforces that experience is protective when it is combined with, rather than substituted by, AI.

¹³⁸AARP Employer Portal. (2026). AI adoption business case. <https://employerportal.aarp.org/ai-adoption/business-case/>

¹³⁹AARP. (2025, December 9). Older workers are building new tech skills, AARP-LinkedIn research finds. <https://www.aarp.org/work/employers/new-tech-skills-study/>

¹⁴⁰AARP Employer Portal. (2026). AI adoption business case. <https://employerportal.aarp.org/ai-adoption/business-case/>

¹⁴¹Brynjolfsson, E., Chandar, B., & Chen, R. (2026, revised August 12). Canaries in the coal mine? Six facts about the recent employment effects of artificial intelligence. Stanford Digital Economy Lab. <https://digitaleconomy.stanford.edu/publication/canaries-in-the-coal-mine-six-facts-about-the-recent-employment-effects-of-artificial-intelligence/>

10. Navigating the Market: Conclusive Advice

The advice below is the author's synthesis of the evidence in this paper. It is organized by career stage, with a practical sequence for each.

10.1 For Those Entering Online Research Work

The entry rung is narrower and higher than before, so new entrants must arrive with proof of senior-style judgment, not just tool familiarity¹⁴².

Table 14. Twelve-month roadmap for new entrants

Timeframe	Actions
Months 1–3	Learn research foundations (search operators, databases, source evaluation) and daily AI tool use; complete one structured internet research course; start a verification log of AI errors you catch.
Months 4–6	Choose one domain specialty and one secondary skill (data analysis, a second language, or OSINT); build three portfolio briefs with full source trails and documented AI corrections.
Months 7–9	Take paid assessments on reputable AI training platforms to gain experience and income; aim for domain-specific projects rather than generalist rating.
Months 10–12	Publish a short audit of an AI tool in your domain; apply for analyst, evaluator, or research-operations roles; add an AI governance or verification credential.

- Do not compete on speed of searching; AI wins that race. Compete on accuracy, judgment, and explanation.
- Avoid paying for "guaranteed" AI job placements; check platform terms, whether assessments are paid, and whether pay is only for accepted tasks¹⁴³.
- Treat generalist platform work as a bridge, not a destination, given falling generalist rates¹⁴⁴.

10.2 For Working Researchers Who Need Better Skills

1. **Audit your task mix.** List what you do weekly and mark tasks AI can already do. Plan to automate those and shift time to verification, synthesis, and client advice.
2. **Build one validated AI workflow.** Design a repeatable prompt or agent pipeline for your most common research task, test it on past projects where you know the answer, and measure its error rate.

¹⁴²PwC. (2026, June 15). AI reshapes global labour market into two distinct paths, rewarding human skills: PwC 2026 Global AI Jobs Barometer [Press release]. <https://www.pwc.com/gx/en/news-room/press-releases/2026/pwc-2026-ai-jobs-barometer.html>

¹⁴³Keeper. (2026, October). 10 best AI training and data annotation jobs (2026). <https://www.keepertax.com/posts/best-ai-training-jobs>

¹⁴⁴Keeper. (2026, October). 10 best AI training and data annotation jobs (2026). <https://www.keepertax.com/posts/best-ai-training-jobs>

3. **Add retrieval skills.** Learn to build and maintain a curated document collection for an RA tool in your domain; this is one of the fastest-growing skills¹⁴⁵.
4. **Formalize verification.** Adopt the ten-step protocol (Section 8.3) and the source rubric (Table 12), and show them to clients or managers as part of your deliverable.
5. **Move up the value chain.** Reposition from "researcher" to "research lead," "AI-assisted analyst," or "verification specialist," and price on accountability rather than hours.
6. **Credential selectively.** Add one credential in verification or governance that clients in your sector recognize.
7. **Explore expert evaluation work.** With five or more years in a domain, expert AI evaluation can pay \$75–\$200+ per hour¹⁴⁶ and builds current AI experience.

10.3 For Late-Career Researchers Approaching Retirement

- **Monetize judgment, not stamina.** Expert evaluator, reviewer, and mentor roles reward decades of domain knowledge and allow flexible, part-time schedules^{147, 148}.
- **Learn just enough AI to direct it.** Focus on three skills: grounded prompting, verification of AI output, and explaining AI limitations to others. You do not need to learn to code.
- **Ask for training explicitly.** Two-thirds of older workers want more skills training, rising to 94% when employers explicitly request it¹⁴⁹; request it in writing and document participation.
- **Plan a phased transition.** Convert full-time work into advisory, consulting, quality-review, or teaching roles over two to three years rather than stopping abruptly.
- **Capture your knowledge.** Turn your methods and checklists into training material, courses, or curated RAG collections; institutional knowledge is a scarce input for AI systems.
- **Protect yourself.** Be cautious with platforms requiring extensive unpaid assessments or personal data, and keep records of rates and accepted tasks.

¹⁴⁵Stanford Institute for Human-Centered AI. (2026). AI Index Report 2026, Chapter 4: Economy. https://hai.stanford.edu/assets/files/ai_index_report_2026_chapter_4_economy.pdf

¹⁴⁶Mercor. (2026). AI trainer salary: Hourly rates and 5 ways to increase pay. <https://www.mercor.com/resources/experts/ai-trainer-salary-hourly-rates/>

¹⁴⁷Keeper. (2026, October). 10 best AI training and data annotation jobs (2026). <https://www.keeper.com/posts/best-ai-training-jobs>

¹⁴⁸Mercor. (2026). AI trainer salary: Hourly rates and 5 ways to increase pay. <https://www.mercor.com/resources/experts/ai-trainer-salary-hourly-rates/>

¹⁴⁹AARP Employer Portal. (2026). AI adoption business case. <https://employerportal.aarp.org/ai-adoption/business-case/>

10.4 For Employers and Educators

Employers should treat AI literacy as an organization-wide obligation, as the EU AI Act already requires for those it covers¹⁵⁰; preserve entry-level hiring by redesigning junior roles around verification and supervised AI use rather than eliminating them; and include older workers in training on equal terms. Educators should teach verification, provenance, and RAG design alongside search skills, and assess students on documented method as well as answers.



¹⁵⁰European Union. (2024). Artificial Intelligence Act, Article 4: AI literacy (applies from February 2, 2025). <https://artificialintelligenceact.eu/article/4/>

11. Conclusion

The AI transition is splitting online research into two markets. In the first, search, summarization, and generalist labeling are being automated or commoditized, and pay is under pressure. In the second, demand is rising for researchers who can direct AI tools, ground them in authoritative sources, verify every claim, and stand behind the result. The evidence on wage premiums^{151,152}, talent shortages¹⁵³, and persistent AI error rates^{154,155} all points the same way: reliability is becoming the scarce product.

Over the next five years, the researcher's value will rest less on access to information and more on accountability for it. Those entering the field should build verified portfolios and a specialty from the start. Those already working should automate their routine tasks and reinvest the time in verification and judgment. Those nearing retirement should turn their experience into expert review, mentoring, and curated knowledge. In every case, the guiding principle is the same: use AI to find more, and use human discipline to trust less until the evidence is checked.

¹⁵¹PwC. (2026, June 15). AI reshapes global labour market into two distinct paths, rewarding human skills: PwC 2026 Global AI Jobs Barometer [Press release]. <https://www.pwc.com/gx/en/news-room/press-releases/2026/pwc-2026-ai-jobs-barometer.html>

¹⁵²Lightcast. (2025, July 23). New Lightcast report: AI skills command 28% salary premium as demand shifts beyond tech industry. <https://lightcast.io/resources/blog/beyond-the-buzz-press-release-2025-07-23>

¹⁵³Bain & Company. (2025, March 4). Widening talent gap threatens executives' AI ambitions [Press release]. <https://www.bain.com/about/media-center/press-releases/20252/widening-talent-gap-threatens-executives-ai-ambitions--bain--company/>

¹⁵⁴Nieman Lab. (2025, March 10). AI search engines fail to produce accurate citations in over 60% of tests, according to new Tow Center study. <https://www.niemanlab.org/2025/03/ai-search-engines-fail-to-produce-accurate-citations-in-over-60-of-tests-according-to-new-tow-center-study/>

¹⁵⁵Stanford HAI. (2024). AI on trial: Legal models hallucinate in 1 out of 6 (or more) benchmarking queries. <https://hai.stanford.edu/news/ai-trial-legal-models-hallucinate-1-out-6-or-more-benchmarking-queries>

Appendix A. Glossary

Table 15. Glossary of terms

Term	Definition
Agentic AI	AI systems that plan and execute multi-step tasks, such as searching, reading, and drafting, with limited human input.
C2PA / Content Credentials	An open technical standard for recording the origin and edit history of digital content ¹⁵⁶ .
Chain-of-Verification (CoVe)	A method in which a model drafts an answer, plans verification questions, answers them independently, and revises ¹⁵⁷ .
Lateral reading	Checking a source by leaving it and reading what other independent sources say about it.
Misgrounded citation	A citation that exists but does not support the claim attached to it ¹⁵⁸ .
OSINT	Open-source intelligence: information gathered from publicly available sources for investigation or analysis.
RLHF	Reinforcement learning from human feedback: training AI models using human ratings and rankings of their outputs.
RAG	Retrieval-augmented generation: grounding an AI answer in documents retrieved at query time ¹⁵⁹ .
Red-teaming	Deliberately probing an AI system to find harmful, false, or unsafe behavior.

Appendix B. Projection Methodology

Salary projections (Table 9 and Figure 2) use compound growth: projected pay in year t equals the 2026 baseline multiplied by $(1 + g)$ raised to the power $(t - 2026)$. Base growth rates were assigned as follows:

- Market research analysts, all: 3.5% per year, approximating general wage growth for a field projected to grow 7%¹⁶⁰.

¹⁵⁶Coalition for Content Provenance and Authenticity. (2025). C2PA and Content Credentials explainer (Specification 2.2). <https://spec.c2pa.org/specifications/specifications/2.2/explainer/Explainer.html>

¹⁵⁷Dhuliawala, S., Komeili, M., Xu, J., Raileanu, R., Li, X., Celikyilmaz, A., & Weston, J. (2023). Chain-of-verification reduces hallucination in large language models. arXiv:2309.11495. <https://arxiv.org/abs/2309.11495>

¹⁵⁸Stanford HAI. (2024). AI on trial: Legal models hallucinate in 1 out of 6 (or more) benchmarking queries. <https://hai.stanford.edu/news/ai-trial-legal-models-hallucinate-1-out-6-or-more-benchmarking-queries>

¹⁵⁹Lewis, P., Perez, E., Piktus, A., Petroni, F., Karpukhin, V., Goyal, N., Küttler, H., Lewis, M., Yih, W., Rocktäschel, T., Riedel, S., & Kiela, D. (2020). Retrieval-augmented generation for knowledge-intensive NLP tasks. NeurIPS 2020. arXiv:2005.11401. <https://arxiv.org/abs/2005.11401>

¹⁶⁰U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics. (2026). Market research analysts. Occupational Outlook Handbook. <https://www.bls.gov/ooh/business-and-financial/market-research-analysts.htm>

- AI-proficient research analyst and OSINT analyst: 4.0% per year, adding about half a point for persistent but narrowing AI and verification premiums¹⁶¹.
- Prompt and AI workflow designer: 3.0% per year, reflecting title consolidation¹⁶² despite rising skill demand¹⁶³.
- RAG and data science researcher: 4.5% per year, reflecting 35% projected growth for data scientists¹⁶⁴.
- AI governance and assurance manager: 5.0% per year, reflecting regulatory demand¹⁶⁵ and current undersupply¹⁶⁶.

The 2026 baselines mix median and average figures from different sources and dates (BLS figures are May 2025 medians), so they indicate relative position rather than precise pay. The low and high scenarios subtract or add two percentage points to each base rate. The projections do not account for inflation shocks, recessions, or a sudden step-change in AI capability, any of which could move outcomes outside the ranges shown. Demand–supply assessments (Table 10) and impact scenarios (Table 13) are qualitative judgments by the author drawing on the cited evidence.

¹⁶¹Lightcast. (2025, July 23). New Lightcast report: AI skills command 28% salary premium as demand shifts beyond tech industry. <https://lightcast.io/resources/blog/beyond-the-buzz-press-release-2025-07-23>

¹⁶²Davis, E. (2025, April 29). AI is taking over for prompt engineers. Entrepreneur. <https://www.entrepreneur.com/business-news/ai-is-taking-over-for-prompt-engineers/490762>

¹⁶³Stanford Institute for Human-Centered AI. (2026). AI Index Report 2026, Chapter 4: Economy. https://hai.stanford.edu/assets/files/ai_index_report_2026_chapter_4_economy.pdf

¹⁶⁴U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics. (2026). Data scientists. Occupational Outlook Handbook. <https://www.bls.gov/ooh/math/data-scientists.htm>

¹⁶⁵European Union. (2024). Artificial Intelligence Act, Article 4: AI literacy (applies from February 2, 2025). <https://artificialintelligenceact.eu/article/4/>

¹⁶⁶VerifyWise. (2026). AI governance salaries 2026: What does the market pay? <https://verifywise.ai/blog/ai-governance-salary-report-2026>

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