Meridian Bridge
GLOBAL

UK TALENT REPORT · OCTOBER 2026

What UK roles really cost, and where else the work can go.

Demand, salaries, time to hire and the full cost of employment for ten in-demand UK roles, compared with the Philippines, India and South Africa. Plus what the Employment Rights Act and recent tax changes mean for your hiring plan.

SUMMARY

Six things UK leaders should know

UK hiring has slowed but pay has not. New employment law and higher employer taxes have raised the cost of every hire, just as AI is changing which roles you need. These are the six numbers that matter most.

1 **Fewer jobs, higher pay.**
UK advertised vacancies were 15% lower year on year in late 2025, yet the average advertised salary rose 7.7% to £42,687. Entry-level vacancies fell 24.7%.

2 **Tech is the exception.**
Tech vacancies grew 4.3% to 126,861 in Q2 2026. AI-related vacancies grew 41.8%, and AI skills now carry a 34.2% wage premium.

3 **The core tech roles pay around £70,000.**
Software, data and DevOps engineers all have a UK median of £70,000. Non-technical support roles sit between £26,500 and £32,500.

4 **Each hire costs 14–16% more than the salary.**
Employer National Insurance at 15% above £5,000 and minimum pension contributions add £3,500 to £11,000 a year per person, before recruitment, equipment and management time.

5 **Offshore base salaries are 62–92% lower.**
For the same roles, mid-level base salaries in the Philippines, India and South Africa are a fraction of UK levels. Through a managed provider, the realistic saving on a customer service seat is closer to 73–77%.

6 **2027 changes the risk of hiring.**
From January 2027, unfair dismissal protection starts after six months and the compensation cap is removed. Probation and hiring decisions carry more weight.

The question for 2027: before you hire, automate or outsource, what will one resolved query, processed invoice or qualified meeting cost you? This report gives you the inputs to answer it.

1 · THE UK MARKET

A cooler market with rising pay

745,448

UK advertised vacancies, down 15.2% year on year

Adzuna, November 2025

£42,687

Average advertised salary, up 7.7% year on year

Adzuna, November 2025

+41.8%

Growth in AI-related tech vacancies

UK tech vacancies, Q2 2026

2 · TECHNICAL ROLES

Top 5 in-demand technical roles

Ranked by UK permanent job adverts in the six months to mid-October 2026. Salaries are UK medians for permanent roles.

#	Role	Permanent ads (6 months)	UK median salary	Trend
1	**Software engineer / developer**	7,584	£65,000–£70,000	Software engineer demand up 24 places year on year
2	**Data engineer**	2,118	£70,000	Steady demand from AI and analytics projects
3	**DevOps / cloud engineer**	1,535	£70,000	Up 156 places year on year
4	**Data analyst**	1,027	£55,000	Core role for reporting and AI readiness
5	**IT service desk analyst**	359	£30,000	High-volume, highly offshorable support role

Source: ITJobsWatch, six months to 15–16 October 2026. Row 1 combines "software engineer" (6,140 ads, £70,000) and "software developer" (1,444 ads, £65,000). AI appears as the 8th most requested skill overall (median £72,500), but dedicated ML engineer adverts remain small in number.

UK median salary, technical roles



Top 5 in-demand non-technical roles

We selected the five most-advertised business support roles that UK mid-market firms most often consider for automation or outsourcing.

#	Role	UK average advertised salary	Why it matters
1	**Customer service advisor**	c. £24,800–£26,500	Paid at or near the National Living Wage (£12.71/hour, £24,785 full-time)
2	**Administrator**	£26,534	First role reshaped by AI drafting and workflow tools
3	**Accounts assistant**	£29,304	Invoices, payables and reconciliations: rules-based and measurable
4	**Sales executive**	£32,427	Outbound prospecting is shifting to AI-assisted SDR models
5	**Business development manager**	£47,188	Relationship role that stays onshore and close to the customer

Sources: Reed.co.uk "Top jobs of 2026", job postings in the 30 days to 23 February 2026 (rows 2–5). Customer service advisor: National Living Wage from 1 April 2026, 37.5 hours a week, 52 weeks; typical advertised pay sits at or just above this floor.

UK average salary, non-technical roles



The squeeze on entry-level roles. Entry-level vacancies fell 24.7% year on year, to their lowest level since 2021. The roles that once trained people in how a business works are the ones AI and offshoring are absorbing first. Firms that still need that pipeline will have to build it on purpose.

4 · INTERNATIONAL COMPARISON

The same roles in the Philippines, India and South Africa

Indicative annual base salary for a mid-level employee, converted to pounds. Use these as planning ranges, not quotes: offshore pay varies widely by city, employer and experience.

Role	UK	Philippines	India	South Africa
Customer service agent	**£24,785**	£3,700	£2,300	£4,300
Administrator	**£26,534**	£3,400	£3,100	£5,400
Accounts assistant	**£29,304**	£5,700	£2,500	£10,000
Sales executive	**£32,427**	£2,800*	£2,900	£7,600*
Software engineer	**£70,000**	£11,000	£5,700	£26,400
Data engineer	**£70,000**	£11,000	£9,500	£21,000
DevOps / cloud engineer	**£70,000**	£12,100	£12,700	n/a

Converted at ECB reference rates for 15 October 2026 (£1 = PHP 83.6, INR 125.9, ZAR 21.9). Philippines: Kore BPO Q3 2026 (customer service, mid 1–3 years, Metro Manila); Hivedesk/Talent.com Sept 2026 (virtual assistant, accountant averages); A7 Recruitment July 2026 (tech roles, mid 3–5 years, Metro Manila). India: Kore BPO Q3 2026 (customer service, mid); PayScale 2026 (administrative assistant, accountant, business development executive, software developer, all experience levels); AmbitionBox Oct 2026 (data engineer, 3–6 years); Instahyre May 2026 (DevOps engineer, average ₹14–18 lakh). South Africa: PayScale 2026 (call centre agent, administrative assistant, bookkeeper); PayScale July 2026 (data engineer); OfferZen June 2026 (software developer, 4–6 years). *Based on older or small samples; treat with extra caution. n/a: no reliable 2026 figure found.

Fully loaded cost: two examples

Base salary plus each country's typical employer on-costs (see section 10).

Customer service agent, per year



Software engineer, per year



What you actually pay a provider. A managed provider adds recruitment, facilities, technology, supervision and margin. One 2026 benchmark puts a mid-level Philippines voice agent at about $720–$850 a month all-in, roughly £6,500–£7,700 a year: still 73–77% below the UK fully loaded cost.

5 · TIME TO HIRE

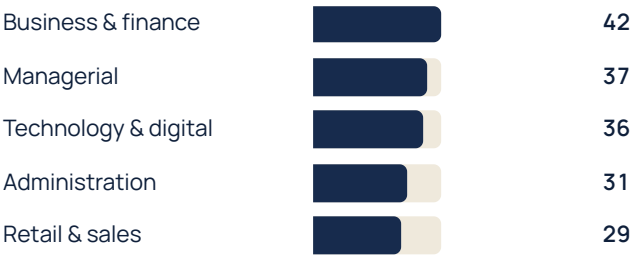
Five to six weeks to fill a UK role

35.9 days
Average time to fill a UK vacancy
Adzuna, November 2025

39.5 days
Average for IT roles, the slowest sector
Adzuna, November 2025

31.4 days
Average for admin roles, among the fastest
Adzuna, November 2025

Time to hire by function (days)



Time to hire by seniority (days)



By function and seniority: StandOut CV survey of 497 UK recruitment managers, converted from weeks. London roles take the longest, at about 39 days. Comparable time-to-hire data for the Philippines, India and South Africa is not published on a consistent basis; ask any delivery partner for their actual time to fill a seat.

6 · SKILLS FOR THE NEXT 12 MONTHS

AI literacy moves to the top of the list

Skill area	What employers are looking for
AI and generative tools	Prompt engineering, large language models, chatbot development, MLOps. AI literacy is now the most requested skill among UK employers.
Data and automation	Data-driven decisions, data storytelling, business process automation, workflow optimisation
Risk and governance	Governance, risk and compliance, cyber risk management, ethical decision-making, statutory reporting
Commercial delivery	Strategic planning, technology roadmapping, sales negotiation, relationship management
Human skills	Problem-solving, adaptability, willingness to learn, teamwork and communication

Sources: LinkedIn Skills on the Rise 2026 (UK, data December 2024 to November 2025); MyPerfectCV employer research, July 2026. 54% of UK workers do not meet the Government's Essential Digital Skills baseline (FutureDotNow). Mid-career workers who add AI skills report 8–12% pay uplifts (Hays).

The AI skills in demand, and what they cost

AI-related UK tech vacancies grew 41.8% in a year, and AI skills now carry a 34.2% wage premium. Specialist AI roles are the most expensive hires in the market, and the gap with offshore talent is widest here.

UK salaries for AI and data roles



Mid-point base salaries, Pearson Carter Data & AI Salary Guide 2026 (prompt engineers also £99,000). It advises offering 10–15% more for scarce senior generative-AI talent. These sit above the section 2 medians because they cover specialist roles.

AI and data roles: UK compared with offshore

Role	UK	Philippines	India	South Africa
Machine learning / AI engineer	**£99,000**	£12,500	£17,500	£26,200
Data scientist	**£83,000**	n/a	n/a	£21,000
Data engineer	**£78,000**	£11,000	£9,500	£21,000

Indicative mid-level base salaries converted at ECB rates for 15 October 2026. Philippines: PayMetric Labs 2026 (AI/ML engineer, mid-level ₱87,000 a month); A7 Recruitment 2026 (data engineer). India: Recrew 2026 (AI/ML engineer, 2–5 years, ₹22 lakh average); AmbitionBox 2026 (data engineer). South Africa: Glassdoor via Digital Regenesys (ML engineer mid-level R450,000–R700,000); PayScale July 2026 (data scientist, data engineer).

The AI skills employers will pay for in the next 12 months

Skill	Where it is used
Large language models and prompt design	Building and tuning AI assistants, agents and chatbots for customer service, sales and internal knowledge
MLOps and AI engineering	Putting models into production, monitoring cost and accuracy, controlling token spend
Process automation	Redesigning workflows so AI handles volume and people handle exceptions
AI governance and risk	Data protection, model risk, EU AI Act readiness, audit trails and human review

The practical model. Few mid-market firms need a £100,000 AI team in-house. A small UK lead who owns the business case and governance, supported by AI engineers offshore at a fifth of the cost, is often the faster and cheaper route.

What successful offshoring looks like

The firms that succeed don't buy the cheapest seat. They pick the right work, measure it before and after, and stay in control from the UK. Deloitte's 2024 Global Outsourcing Survey of more than 500 executives found that 83% already use AI within outsourced services, and that skilled talent and agility now rank alongside cost as reasons to outsource.

What good looks like

- **Fix the process first.** Moving a broken process offshore makes it cheaper, not better.
- **Start with the right work.** High-volume, rules-based tasks with clear quality measures go first. Judgement and key relationships stay in the UK.
- **Baseline the cost per outcome.** Know what one resolved query or processed invoice costs today, so you can prove the saving.
- **Pilot, then scale.** Run 5–10 seats in parallel with the UK team for 60–90 days, with agreed exit criteria.
- **Keep governance in the UK.** A named UK owner, weekly service reviews and monthly KPI reporting to the board.
- **Choose the partner for culture.** Attrition, training and leadership matter more than the rate card.
- **Design for AI from day one.** Automate the repeatable work, and have people handle exceptions and quality checks.
- **Contract for outcomes.** Tie fees to results, such as cost per resolved ticket, not just headcount.

Warning signs

- The business case counts savings but not management time, transition cost or rework.
- No written process documentation before transition.
- Staff attrition above 30–40% a year at the partner.
- No UK GDPR data processing agreement or clear international data transfer safeguards.
- Quality measured only on speed, not on resolution or customer outcome.
- AI tools added without measuring their running cost per task.

A typical first 120 days

Weeks 1–4: Design
Baseline costs, choose processes, select partner, agree KPIs.

Weeks 5–8: Build
Recruit, train and set up systems and data access.

Weeks 9–16: Parallel run
Run alongside the UK team and hit the quality gates before go-live.

Month 5 onward: Steady state
Report monthly on cost per outcome, then extend what works.

The test of success. Twelve months in, cost per outcome is lower, quality is the same or better, and your UK team spends its time on higher-value work. If you can't measure all three, you can't prove it worked.

Guidance based on Meridian Bridge Global's experience running multi-region delivery, and Deloitte's 2024 Global Outsourcing Survey.

9 · EMPLOYMENT RIGHTS ACT AND TAX

What has changed, and what is coming

Employment Rights Act 2025

6 April 2026
Statutory Sick Pay from the first day of sickness, with no lower earnings limit. Higher collective redundancy awards.

7 April 2026
Fair Work Agency launched to enforce employment rights.

1 October 2026
Employment tribunal time limits extended from three to six months.

30 October 2026
Duty to take reasonable steps to prevent sexual harassment, including by third parties.

January 2027
Unfair dismissal protection after six months, not two years. Compensation cap removed.

2027 (dates to be confirmed)
Fire-and-rehire limits, zero-hours restrictions, flexible working reforms, bereavement leave.

Employer tax and pay

April 2025, still in force
Employer National Insurance at 15% above £5,000 a year. Employment Allowance up to £10,500 for eligible employers.

1 April 2026
National Living Wage £12.71 an hour (21+); £10.85 for ages 18–20.

April 2028 to 2031
Income tax and NI thresholds stay frozen for three more years.

April 2029
Only the first £2,000 of pension salary sacrifice will be free of National Insurance.

Planned
A Growth and Skills Levy replaces the Apprenticeship Levy.

What it means for hiring. A six-month probation now ends exactly when full dismissal rights begin, and tribunal awards are uncapped. Expect UK employers to hire more cautiously, extend use of contractors and managed services, and invest more in onboarding and performance management in the first six months.

10 · COST TO EMPLOYER

UK: what a salary really costs

Salary	Employer NI (15% above £5,000)	Pension (3% of qualifying earnings)	Total cost	Uplift
£24,785 (National Living Wage)	£2,968	£556	**£28,309**	+14.2%
£32,427 (sales executive)	£4,114	£786	**£37,327**	+15.1%
£70,000 (software engineer)	£9,750	£1,321	**£81,071**	+15.8%

Statutory costs only, before Employment Allowance. Recruitment, equipment, software, office space, training and management time typically add more on top.

Offshore: typical employer on-costs

Country	Main statutory costs	Typical uplift on salary
Philippines	13th-month pay (8.33%); SSS 10%, PhilHealth 2.5% and Pag-IBIG 2%, each capped	c. 12–24%
India	Provident Fund 12% of basic pay (capped); ESI 3.25% for lower earners; gratuity provision	c. 3–10%
South Africa	UIF 1% (capped); Skills Development Levy 1%; COIDA; market-standard benefits such as medical aid and a 13th cheque	c. 15–35%

WHAT TO DO NEXT

Before you hire, outsource or automate

- **Price the outcome, not the seat.** Work out what one resolved query, processed invoice or qualified meeting costs today, with people, AI and offshore options side by side.
- **Plan for the six-month line.** Tighten recruitment, onboarding and probation reviews before January 2027.
- **Route work deliberately.** Keep judgement and relationships in the UK, automate the repeatable, and send volume to the location with the best cost and quality.
- **Check the AI bill.** Token, platform and escalation costs grow with volume. Measure them before you scale.

Book a Token-to-ROI Health Check

In two weeks, we tell you what your AI and outsourcing options really cost per outcome, and give you a clear verdict: scale it, fix it or stop it.

hello@meridianbridge.global

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