



The 2026 Tech, SaaS & Startup Compensation Guide

Base salary, total compensation, and equity benchmarks
for the roles growing tech and SaaS companies hire most,
from individual contributor through executive.

In This Guide

01 Foreword & How to Read These Ranges

The two-speed market, and how to read base salary against total compensation.

02 Engineering & Product Compensation

Base and TC by stage for engineers, full-stack developers, PMs, and engineering managers.

03 Sales & GTM Compensation

Base, OTE, and split design for SDRs, AEs, and first-line sales leadership.

04 Marketing, Customer Success & Operations

Base, TC, and bonus targets across marketing, CS, ops, and enablement.

05 Executive & Leadership Compensation

Planning envelopes for VP and C-suite hires, with equity and incentive ranges.

06 Equity, Bonus & Total Rewards

Grant sizes, vesting norms, bonus targets, and what changed in 2026.

07 Geography & Remote-Pay Adjustments

Metro adjustments, remote-pay models, and Canadian market comparisons.

08 2026 Hiring & Market Context

Hiring signals, layoffs, funding concentration, time-to-fill, and wage growth.

09 Methodology, Sources & Contact

How the ranges were built, the sources used, and how to reach us.

Looking for one number fast? Jump straight to your role and stage in Section 2, 3, 4, or 5.



About Good Work Recruiting

Good Work Recruiting is built and led by Nicole Anderson. Before starting the firm, she spent 14+ years in talent acquisition and career coaching, including a run as in-house Director of Talent Acquisition at PE-backed and Series D companies. That means she's made these exact hires from your side of the table, not just sourced from the outside.

Good Work Recruiting works with founders and hiring teams at tech, SaaS, and startup companies, from Series A through late stage, to fill software engineering, product, GTM, and operations roles with people who are actually the right fit, not just the fastest one to say yes.

Foreword & How to Read These Ranges

Foreword

The 2026 tech and startup labor market is best described as selective, not broadly expanding. Overall hiring in Technology, Information, and Media is running below 2025 levels, and most companies are managing headcount with real discipline. But that headline hides a two-speed market underneath it: AI, infrastructure, security, and other scarce technical capabilities are seeing accelerated hiring and real pay premiums, while generalist software, product, marketing, and operations roles are being filled more selectively, with candidates plentiful and less upward pressure on starting pay.

Venture funding tells the same story. Headline capital deployed in 2026 is strong, but roughly 80% of it is flowing to AI-focused companies. Most non-AI SaaS startups cannot infer that capital is broadly available just because the aggregate numbers look healthy. Seed and angel funding specifically is down both quarter over quarter and year over year.

80%

of Q2 2026 venture investment went to AI-focused startups. Strong headline funding does not mean broadly available budget for a non-AI SaaS company.

For a hiring manager, the practical takeaway is not "tech hiring is dead." It's that budgets are role-specific now. Companies are willing to pay a premium for the handful of roles where the business case is undeniable, and holding a firmer line everywhere else. This guide is built to help you tell the difference between a role that deserves a scarcity premium and one that should be priced at the disciplined end of market.

How to Read These Ranges

Base salary and total compensation are shown separately, because they measure different things.

Base salary is guaranteed annual cash only. Total compensation (TC) means base salary plus target bonus or commission, plus the estimated annualized value of an equity grant. For private-company equity, that estimated value is a modeled figure, not cash in hand and not a guaranteed future outcome. Never compare a candidate's "TC" from a prior offer to your base salary number alone. Normalize both offers into the same components before comparing them.

Ranges reflect real market variance, not a single average.

No single public 2025-2026 source publishes a statistically robust base-and-TC table for every role at every stage. The figures in this guide are triangulated from multiple named platforms and cross-checked against U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics data as a broad-market floor. Where sources disagreed, we kept the range instead of forcing a single number.

Company stage is the strongest lever, and a stronger predictor than a strict headcount count.

Throughout this guide, roles are benchmarked across four stages:

Stage	Practical definition	Approx. headcount
Pre-Seed/Seed	Formation through early product-market fit; early or no revenue	1-30 employees
Series A/B	Product-market-fit validation and initial functional scale	30-250 employees
Series C+/Growth	Material recurring revenue, specialized teams, more formal comp processes	250-1,000 employees
Late-Stage/Pre-IPO	Large private company nearing liquidity or public-company operating standards	1,000+ employees

These headcount figures are a planning convention, not a rule. A capital-efficient SaaS company can be at Series C with 100 employees; a heavily funded AI company can pass 1,000 employees well before it behaves like a conventional "late-stage" business.

Equity is not a substitute for a below-market salary.

It should not be priced as if it were guaranteed cash. A strong offer discloses the mechanics, not just a headline number: share count, fully diluted ownership percentage, strike price, vesting schedule, and current valuation context. Section 6 covers this in full.

Geography is an adjustment layer, not a separate set of city-by-city tables.

Apply the adjustments in Section 7 to any base range in this guide.

What this guide is not.

This is a planning tool, not a substitute for a paid, company-specific compensation review. Early-stage companies in particular often combine two or three of these roles into one position. Use the ranges as a starting point for a conversation with candidates and hiring managers, not as a fixed number.

How to use the tables that follow. Find your role, then your stage. Read the base range first and set your cash band there. Then read the TC column as the total package you are competing against, and decide which components — bonus, commission, equity, flexibility — you are using to close the gap.

Engineering & Product Compensation

All figures are annual U.S. dollars. Base salary excludes bonus and equity. Total compensation (TC) is base salary plus target bonus (where applicable) plus the estimated annualized value of an equity grant, generally modeled over a standard four-year vesting schedule.

Role	Stage	Base salary only	Estimated annual TC
Software Engineer, Junior/Mid	Pre-Seed/Seed	\$105,000-\$150,000	\$120,000-\$180,000
Software Engineer, Junior/Mid	Series A/B	\$135,000-\$185,000	\$155,000-\$225,000
Software Engineer, Junior/Mid	Series C+/Growth	\$155,000-\$205,000	\$185,000-\$260,000
Software Engineer, Junior/Mid	Late-Stage/Pre-IPO	\$170,000-\$225,000	\$210,000-\$310,000
Software Engineer, Senior	Pre-Seed/Seed	\$135,000-\$185,000	\$160,000-\$235,000
Software Engineer, Senior	Series A/B	\$165,000-\$225,000	\$200,000-\$300,000
Software Engineer, Senior	Series C+/Growth	\$185,000-\$250,000	\$230,000-\$345,000
Software Engineer, Senior	Late-Stage/Pre-IPO	\$205,000-\$280,000	\$270,000-\$420,000
Software Engineer, Staff/Principal	Pre-Seed/Seed	\$160,000-\$220,000	\$205,000-\$330,000
Software Engineer, Staff/Principal	Series A/B	\$200,000-\$280,000	\$255,000-\$420,000
Software Engineer, Staff/Principal	Series C+/Growth	\$225,000-\$315,000	\$295,000-\$500,000
Software Engineer, Staff/Principal	Late-Stage/Pre-IPO	\$255,000-\$370,000	\$360,000-\$650,000
Full-Stack Developer	Pre-Seed/Seed	\$105,000-\$155,000	\$125,000-\$190,000
Full-Stack Developer	Series A/B	\$135,000-\$190,000	\$160,000-\$235,000
Full-Stack Developer	Series C+/Growth	\$150,000-\$210,000	\$180,000-\$270,000
Full-Stack Developer	Late-Stage/Pre-IPO	\$165,000-\$230,000	\$205,000-\$325,000
Product Manager, Mid	Pre-Seed/Seed	\$115,000-\$165,000	\$135,000-\$205,000
Product Manager, Mid	Series A/B	\$140,000-\$195,000	\$170,000-\$250,000
Product Manager, Mid	Series C+/Growth	\$160,000-\$220,000	\$200,000-\$295,000
Product Manager, Mid	Late-Stage/Pre-IPO	\$180,000-\$240,000	\$230,000-\$345,000
Product Manager, Senior	Pre-Seed/Seed	\$140,000-\$190,000	\$175,000-\$260,000
Product Manager, Senior	Series A/B	\$165,000-\$230,000	\$210,000-\$315,000
Product Manager, Senior	Series C+/Growth	\$190,000-\$260,000	\$245,000-\$375,000
Product Manager, Senior	Late-Stage/Pre-IPO	\$215,000-\$285,000	\$290,000-\$475,000
Engineering Manager	Pre-Seed/Seed	\$150,000-\$205,000	\$185,000-\$285,000
Engineering Manager	Series A/B	\$175,000-\$240,000	\$220,000-\$335,000
Engineering Manager	Series C+/Growth	\$205,000-\$280,000	\$270,000-\$425,000
Engineering Manager	Late-Stage/Pre-IPO	\$230,000-\$320,000	\$320,000-\$550,000

\$210K
SERIES A MEDIAN TC

Anchor point. Levels.fyi's Series A software-engineer offer data show a \$210,000 median TC (25th percentile \$181,000, 75th percentile \$272,000) as of July 2026. Its Series B data show a \$220,000 median TC (\$186,000-\$256,000). These support the Series A/B rows for conventional junior/mid and senior engineers, though geography, role mix, and title normalization all move the number.

What drives the width of these ranges

- **Stage and valuation.** A seed company may grant a larger ownership percentage worth less in current dollars; a late-stage company grants less percentage but at a more credible valuation.
- **Level calibration.** "Senior" at a 15-person company can mean something very different from "senior" at a 400-person company.
- **AI, infrastructure, and security scarcity.** These specialties generally price toward the top of the range regardless of stage.
- **Location and work model** (see Section 7).

A note on titles

Engineering Manager ranges are front-line EM: one team, direct technical contribution still expected. A manager-of-managers or Director of Engineering role should be priced using Section 5's executive framework, not this table. For Product Manager, distinguish consumer/PLG, enterprise B2B, platform/API, and technical/AI product management before benchmarking. A senior PM range built for a mature workflow product will underprice a technical AI platform PM.

BLS cross-reference

The broad-market floor for engineering roles is BLS's Software Developers, Quality Assurance Analysts, and Testers occupational data. It captures government, enterprise, and lower-paying-geography employers alongside startups, so it will generally understate total compensation at well-funded SaaS and late-stage venture-backed companies. Use it as a sanity check on the low end, not as the primary benchmark.

Sales & GTM Compensation

Definitions. Base salary is guaranteed cash only. OTE (on-target earnings) is base plus target variable at 100% quota attainment. It excludes equity, benefits, sign-on awards, and accelerator payouts above target. Sales Manager/Director figures cover a first-line manager through a director managing multiple sellers, not a VP Sales/CRO (see Section 5).

Role	Stage	Base salary	OTE	Base/variable split
SDR/BDR	Pre-Seed/Seed	\$50,000-\$70,000	\$65,000-\$95,000	65/35 to 70/30
SDR/BDR	Series A/B	\$55,000-\$75,000	\$75,000-\$105,000	65/35 to 70/30
SDR/BDR	Series C+/Growth	\$60,000-\$85,000	\$85,000-\$120,000	65/35 to 70/30
SDR/BDR	Late-Stage/Pre-IPO	\$65,000-\$95,000	\$90,000-\$135,000	65/35 to 70/30
AE, Mid-Market	Pre-Seed/Seed	\$70,000-\$105,000	\$120,000-\$175,000	50/50 to 60/40
AE, Mid-Market	Series A/B	\$80,000-\$120,000	\$145,000-\$200,000	50/50, occasionally 55/45-60/40
AE, Mid-Market	Series C+/Growth	\$90,000-\$135,000	\$165,000-\$225,000	50/50, sometimes 55/45
AE, Mid-Market	Late-Stage/Pre-IPO	\$105,000-\$155,000	\$190,000-\$275,000	50/50 or 55/45
AE, Enterprise	Pre-Seed/Seed	\$90,000-\$140,000	\$160,000-\$240,000	50/50, sometimes 40/60 for founding sellers
AE, Enterprise	Series A/B	\$110,000-\$160,000	\$210,000-\$300,000	50/50
AE, Enterprise	Series C+/Growth	\$125,000-\$180,000	\$240,000-\$350,000	50/50, sometimes 55/45
AE, Enterprise	Late-Stage/Pre-IPO	\$140,000-\$210,000	\$275,000-\$425,000	50/50, strategic roles sometimes 55/45
Sales Manager/Director	Pre-Seed/Seed	\$120,000-\$175,000	\$175,000-\$260,000	60/40 to 70/30
Sales Manager/Director	Series A/B	\$140,000-\$210,000	\$220,000-\$325,000	60/40 to 65/35
Sales Manager/Director	Series C+/Growth	\$160,000-\$240,000	\$260,000-\$385,000	60/40 to 65/35
Sales Manager/Director	Late-Stage/Pre-IPO	\$180,000-\$280,000	\$300,000-\$475,000	60/40 to 70/30

Anchor points (RepVue, US, 2026). SDR: \$60,000 median base / \$85,000 median OTE. Mid-market AE: \$90,000 / \$175,000. Enterprise AE: \$135,000 / \$265,000-\$275,000. Director of Sales: \$170,000 median base / \$310,000 median OTE.

40-44%

of AEs report hitting quota, so OTE is plan design at 100% attainment, not expected realized cash for every incumbent.

Commission plan design

Role	Most common target mix	What it's measured on
SDR/BDR	65/35 or 70/30	Meetings held, accepted opportunities, pipeline created
Mid-Market AE	50/50	New ARR/ACV, bookings, sometimes gross profit
Enterprise AE	50/50	New ARR/ACV, strategic bookings, multi-year value
Sales Manager/Director	60/40 to 70/30	Team attainment, regional bookings, forecast accuracy

To back into a target commission rate: target variable pay (OTE minus base) divided by annual quota. Example: a mid-market AE with \$90,000 base, \$180,000 OTE, and a \$1.0M annual quota has \$90,000 target variable, an implied 9% target rate.

Equity for sales roles

Equity runs from roughly \$3,000-\$15,000 annualized value for a seed-stage SDR up to \$30,000-\$150,000+ for a late-stage Sales Director, with initial ownership percentage highest at seed (up to roughly 0.75% for a true founding sales leader) and compressing sharply by late stage. Full equity mechanics and the disclosure checklist are in Section 6.

Practical guidance

Don't compare a candidate's realized prior-year earnings to your stated OTE without asking about their quota, territory, and ramp. A lower cash OTE is only credible if the quota is objectively attainable, the pipeline/PMF evidence is real, and the equity story is genuinely compelling, not used to paper over a weak base.

Marketing, Customer Success & Operations

Base salary excludes bonus and equity. TC is base plus target bonus plus estimated annualized equity value.

Role	Stage	Base salary only	Estimated annual TC
Marketing Manager	Pre-Seed/Seed	\$85,000-\$130,000	\$95,000-\$155,000
Marketing Manager	Series A/B	\$105,000-\$155,000	\$120,000-\$190,000
Marketing Manager	Series C+/Growth	\$125,000-\$180,000	\$150,000-\$230,000
Marketing Manager	Late-Stage/Pre-IPO	\$145,000-\$205,000	\$180,000-\$285,000
Marketing Director/Head of Marketing	Pre-Seed/Seed	\$125,000-\$185,000	\$150,000-\$245,000
Marketing Director/Head of Marketing	Series A/B	\$150,000-\$225,000	\$190,000-\$310,000
Marketing Director/Head of Marketing	Series C+/Growth	\$180,000-\$270,000	\$235,000-\$390,000
Marketing Director/Head of Marketing	Late-Stage/Pre-IPO	\$210,000-\$320,000	\$290,000-\$525,000+
Customer Success Manager, Mid	Pre-Seed/Seed	\$75,000-\$105,000	\$85,000-\$130,000
Customer Success Manager, Mid	Series A/B	\$85,000-\$120,000	\$105,000-\$155,000
Customer Success Manager, Mid	Series C+/Growth	\$95,000-\$135,000	\$120,000-\$180,000
Customer Success Manager, Mid	Late-Stage/Pre-IPO	\$110,000-\$155,000	\$145,000-\$220,000
Customer Success Manager, Senior	Pre-Seed/Seed	\$95,000-\$135,000	\$115,000-\$175,000
Customer Success Manager, Senior	Series A/B	\$110,000-\$150,000	\$140,000-\$205,000
Customer Success Manager, Senior	Series C+/Growth	\$125,000-\$175,000	\$165,000-\$250,000
Customer Success Manager, Senior	Late-Stage/Pre-IPO	\$145,000-\$205,000	\$205,000-\$330,000+
Operations Manager	Pre-Seed/Seed	\$80,000-\$120,000	\$90,000-\$145,000
Operations Manager	Series A/B	\$100,000-\$145,000	\$120,000-\$180,000
Operations Manager	Series C+/Growth	\$120,000-\$170,000	\$150,000-\$225,000
Operations Manager	Late-Stage/Pre-IPO	\$140,000-\$205,000	\$180,000-\$285,000
Business/Sales Enablement Manager	Pre-Seed/Seed	\$95,000-\$135,000	\$110,000-\$170,000
Business/Sales Enablement Manager	Series A/B	\$115,000-\$160,000	\$140,000-\$210,000
Business/Sales Enablement Manager	Series C+/Growth	\$135,000-\$190,000	\$170,000-\$270,000
Business/Sales Enablement Manager	Late-Stage/Pre-IPO	\$155,000-\$225,000	\$205,000-\$345,000

Anchor points. RepVue (Sept 2026) puts CSM at a \$102,400 median base / \$140,000 median OTE nationally, fitting the Series A/B-to-Growth mid-level rows above. The Enablement Index's analysis of 481 U.S. enablement job descriptions (Aug 2026) found a \$156,000 median listed comp, aligning with the Series A/B and Growth rows for enablement.

Bonus targets by stage

Role	Pre-Seed/Seed	Series A/B	Series C+/Growth	Late-Stage/Pre-IPO
Marketing Manager	0-10% of base	5-12%	10-15%	10-20%
Marketing Director/Head	5-15%	10-20%	15-25%	20-35%
CSM, Mid	5-15%	10-20%	15-25%	15-30%
CSM, Senior	10-20%	15-25%	20-30%	20-35%
Operations Manager	0-10%	5-12%	10-20%	10-25%
Business/Sales Enablement Manager	5-15%	10-20%	15-25%	15-30%

Title precision matters here more than anywhere else

Demand generation, product marketing, lifecycle, brand, marketing ops, revenue ops, customer ops, and sales enablement can carry very different market values under the same nominal title. A hands-on generalist "Head of Marketing" at a 15-person seed company and a functional VP leading five specialized teams at a growth company should never be priced off the same anchor. The same caution applies to Operations Manager: distinguish a broad early-stage operator (finance, HR, vendor management, recruiting coordination all at once) from a specialized business/revenue/customer ops role at a mature company.

For CSM incentive design

A non-commercial CSM should have a smaller bonus tied to adoption, health score, and renewal readiness. A commercial CSM carrying expansion or renewal quota should have a real incentive plan tied to gross/net revenue retention, with clear crediting rules if account executives share the account.

Executive & Leadership Compensation

Public, stage-specific executive data are materially thinner than IC and manager data, especially at Seed through Series B, where titles vary widely and individual negotiation dominates more than any published band. Treat these as planning envelopes, not published medians.

Role	Stage	Base salary only	Estimated annual TC	Bonus/incentive	Initial equity
VP Engineering/Head of Eng	Pre-Seed/Seed	\$160,000-\$230,000	\$220,000-\$450,000	0-15% of base	0.75-2.50%
VP Engineering/Head of Eng	Series A/B	\$190,000-\$285,000	\$285,000-\$575,000	10-25%	0.30-1.50%
VP Engineering/Head of Eng	Series C+/Growth	\$230,000-\$340,000	\$375,000-\$750,000	15-35%	0.12-0.60%
VP Engineering/Head of Eng	Late-Stage/Pre-IPO	\$275,000-\$420,000	\$500,000-\$1,050,000+	20-45%	0.03-0.30%
VP Sales/Head of Sales	Pre-Seed/Seed	\$130,000-\$200,000	\$225,000-\$450,000	40-60% of OTE	0.75-2.50%
VP Sales/Head of Sales	Series A/B	\$170,000-\$260,000	\$300,000-\$575,000	40-55% of OTE	0.30-1.25%
VP Sales/Head of Sales	Series C+/Growth	\$210,000-\$320,000	\$400,000-\$750,000	35-50% of OTE	0.10-0.50%
VP Sales/Head of Sales	Late-Stage/Pre-IPO	\$250,000-\$380,000	\$525,000-\$1,000,000+	35-50% of OTE	0.03-0.25%
VP Marketing/Head of Mktg	Pre-Seed/Seed	\$125,000-\$195,000	\$175,000-\$360,000	0-15%	0.50-1.75%
VP Marketing/Head of Mktg	Series A/B	\$155,000-\$245,000	\$235,000-\$500,000	10-25%	0.20-0.90%
VP Marketing/Head of Mktg	Series C+/Growth	\$195,000-\$300,000	\$320,000-\$650,000	15-35%	0.08-0.40%
VP Marketing/Head of Mktg	Late-Stage/Pre-IPO	\$235,000-\$360,000	\$425,000-\$900,000+	20-45%	0.02-0.20%
Head of People/VP People Ops	Pre-Seed/Seed	\$115,000-\$180,000	\$150,000-\$310,000	0-15%	0.40-1.25%
Head of People/VP People Ops	Series A/B	\$145,000-\$230,000	\$205,000-\$430,000	10-20%	0.15-0.70%
Head of People/VP People Ops	Series C+/Growth	\$180,000-\$280,000	\$285,000-\$575,000	15-30%	0.06-0.30%
Head of People/VP People Ops	Late-Stage/Pre-IPO	\$220,000-\$335,000	\$375,000-\$760,000+	20-40%	0.02-0.15%
COO	Pre-Seed/Seed	\$140,000-\$220,000	\$220,000-\$500,000	0-20%	1.00-4.00%
COO	Series A/B	\$180,000-\$285,000	\$300,000-\$675,000	15-30%	0.50-2.00%
COO	Series C+/Growth	\$230,000-\$360,000	\$425,000-\$900,000	20-45%	0.15-0.90%
COO	Late-Stage/Pre-IPO	\$285,000-\$475,000	\$600,000-\$1,500,000+	25-60%	0.05-0.50%

Anchor point. RepVue's current U.S. VP Sales reference is \$190,000 median base / \$375,000 median OTE, most applicable to a mature Series B through growth-stage sales leader rather than a seed founding seller or a late-stage public-adjacent executive.

On COO specifically

This is the least standardized title in the guide. At seed stage it can describe a cofounder, chief of staff, or broad business operator; at late stage it can be a public-company-caliber executive with P&L and board-level responsibility. Where a non-founder COO is hired pre-product-market fit, expect a lower-cash/higher-equity structure. Where a COO is brought in at late stage to prepare for IPO or M&A, expect substantial cash incentive alongside new-hire and refresh equity.

Public-data limitation to flag with clients

Carta, Pave, Aon Radford, OpenComp, and Option Impact all have deeper executive datasets than what's published freely. These ranges are the best available triangulation, not a single-source survey pull, so at the executive level especially, frame them as a starting philosophy (for example, target the 50th or 65th percentile of similarly funded companies), then validate with a paid benchmark cut before finalizing an offer.

Every executive offer should disclose

Base and target incentive percentage, bonus KPIs and payout thresholds, equity instrument type, share count and fully diluted ownership percentage, strike price and current 409A valuation, vesting/cliff/acceleration terms, and expected dilution. For VP Sales specifically, add quota, territory, ramp period, and commission-plan governance.

Equity, Bonus & Total Rewards

Equity grants by role level and stage

Initial new-hire equity as a percentage of fully diluted ownership:

Role level	Pre-Seed/Seed	Series A/B	Series C+/Growth	Late-Stage/Pre-IPO
Individual contributor	0.01-0.15%	0.005-0.08%	0.002-0.04%	0.001-0.02%
Manager	0.03-0.25%	0.01-0.12%	0.005-0.06%	0.002-0.03%
Director	0.10-0.60%	0.05-0.30%	0.02-0.15%	0.005-0.08%
VP	0.50-2.50%	0.20-1.25%	0.08-0.60%	0.02-0.30%
C-suite, non-founder	1.00-5.00%	0.50-2.50%	0.15-1.00%	0.05-0.50%

These assume a venture-backed software company and a meaningful full-time role. Early technical hires, especially founding engineers, AI/ML talent, and security specialists, can land above the top of the Seed range. A first manager or director can out-earn (in equity) a later hire with the same title, because they carry organizational-creation risk that a later hire doesn't.

Standard option pool. A Series A employee pool typically runs 15-20% of fully diluted shares, usually created before the round closes, which places the dilution on pre-round shareholders. The older 10-15% guideline still shows up in equity guides but shouldn't be treated as the current U.S. median.

Vesting

The standard remains four years with a one-year cliff: nothing vests in year one, 25% vests at the one-year mark, then the remaining 75% vests monthly (1/48th per month) through month 48. This is still the dominant convention; there's no credible evidence of a broad market shift away from it in 2025-2026.

Situation	Common structure
Standard employee grant	4 years, 1-year cliff, then monthly
Executive hire	Same schedule; double-trigger acceleration is more typical than single-trigger, even for key executives
Founder restricted stock	Commonly 4 years/1-year cliff; 83(b) election may apply, get legal advice
Post-termination exercise window	Often 90 days for ISOs; some startups extend it as a differentiator
Refresh grants	New multi-year grants, more common at growth/late-stage for retention

Bonuses outside sales

Cash bonuses outside sales are not universal at early stage, but become standard as companies mature:

Role level	Pre-Seed/Seed	Series A/B	Series C+/Growth	Late-Stage/Pre-IPO
IC	0-5% of base, often none	0-10%	5-15%	10-20%
Manager	0-10%	5-15%	10-20%	15-25%
Director	5-15%	10-20%	15-30%	20-40%
VP	10-25%	15-30%	20-40%	30-60%
C-suite, non-founder	10-30%	20-40%	30-60%	40-100%+

9.7%
SALARY

38.6%
EQUITY

Pave found promoted employees received an average 9.7% salary increase but a 38.6% equity increase; employees rated above expectations without promotion got 4.5% salary increases versus 11.0% equity increases. Companies are increasingly using equity, not base salary, as the primary lever to reward performance and retention.

Benefits and flexibility by stage

Reward element	Pre-Seed/Seed	Series A/B	Series C+/Growth	Late-Stage/Pre-IPO
Medical/dental/vision	Common, employer contribution varies	Common, richer employer-paid tiers	Standard, broader plan choice	Standard, comprehensive
Unlimited PTO	Common	Common, some shift to accrued as they scale	Mixed	Mixed, formal accrued more common
Remote/WFH support	Informal stipend	Typical home-office stipend	Structured stipend, co-working options	Formal policy, equipment refresh
401(k)	Often available, rarely matched	Increasingly available, small matches emerging	Common, often 3-4% match	Common, competitive match
Professional development	Modest or none	Annual learning budget	Formal L&D programs	Structured budgets, mobility programs
Parental leave	Varies widely	Increasingly used as a differentiator	Formal paid programs expected	Competitive, often with fertility/adoption support

Equity value in 2026: what's actually changed

The equity market is not uniformly down, it's concentrated. AI companies received roughly 40% of startup investment dollars on Carta's platform in 2025, rising to 54% in early 2026, and median post-money valuations at Seed (\$24M) and Series A (\$78.7M) hit records in Q4 2025. That means AI-native companies can grant equity off rapidly appreciating cap tables, while non-AI companies may face flatter valuations or more conservative grant practices.

A practical wrinkle worth explaining to clients and candidates: the funding round's preferred-share price is not the employee option strike price. Options are typically priced off a 409A fair-market-value appraisal of common stock, commonly 40-70% of the preferred price in the same round. A lower 409A can mean a lower strike price, better for new hires if the company recovers, or it can signal real company risk. Neither reading is automatic.

Every equity offer should disclose: option/RSU count and fully diluted ownership percentage, instrument type (ISO, NSO, RSU, restricted stock), strike price and current 409A valuation, most recent preferred financing valuation and date, vesting/cliff/acceleration/post-termination exercise window, refresh-grant philosophy, and whether any tender, secondary, or IPO path exists, without implying liquidity is guaranteed.

Geography & Remote-Pay Adjustments

Use geography as a cost-of-labor adjustment to the national ranges above, not a cost-of-living reimbursement. These two things measure different problems and lead to different bands if confused.

U.S. metro adjustments

Metro	Adjustment vs. national	Notes
San Francisco Bay Area	+20% to +30%	Deepest concentration of AI, infrastructure, and founder talent
New York City	+15% to +25%	Fintech, enterprise SaaS, adtech; often near-SF for experienced talent
Seattle	+10% to +20%	Strong technical market, big-tech competition
Boston	+8% to +15%	AI, biotech, enterprise software, university-linked talent
Austin	+5% to +12%	Growing market, cash bands still below coastal hubs
Denver	+5% to +12%	Established SaaS/remote-worker market
Chicago	+5% to +12%	Strong enterprise/fintech/B2B base

Example. A national senior SWE base range of \$180,000-\$220,000 becomes roughly \$216,000-\$286,000 in the Bay Area, \$207,000-\$275,000 in NYC, and \$189,000-\$246,000 in Austin/Denver/Chicago. Don't mechanically scale equity by the same percentage. Location differentiates cash more than it differentiates equity, which is driven more by level, scarcity, and stage.

Remote-pay models in use

Model	Approx. usage	How it works
Tiered geographic bands (3-5 zones)	~50%	Anchored to SF/NYC, discounted in lower-cost markets
Flat national rate	~30%	Same range regardless of U.S. location
Local-market/granular	~20%	Pay set to employee's specific metro

Fully remote roles remain genuinely scarce in the broader market (Robert Half found only 3% of Q2 2026 postings analyzed were fully remote, 10% hybrid, 87% on-site), which means flexibility itself functions as a piece of total rewards even at companies using location-adjusted pay.

Cost of labor vs. cost of living

Use cost of labor (what comparable employers pay for comparable work in a location) to set base pay. Use cost of living (housing, taxes, transportation) only for relocation support or hardship conversations, not as the compensation formula itself. Two cities can have similar living costs and very different talent-market prices; conflating the two is hard to defend consistently across employees.

Canada: Toronto and Vancouver

Base salary only, illustrative FX at C\$1.38 = US\$1.00:

Market and level	Local base range	USD equivalent
Toronto, junior SWE	C\$75,000-C\$104,000	US\$54,000-US\$75,000
Toronto, mid SWE	C\$104,000-C\$155,000	US\$75,000-US\$112,000
Toronto, senior SWE	C\$155,000-C\$205,000	US\$112,000-US\$149,000
Vancouver, junior SWE	C\$85,000-C\$126,000	US\$62,000-US\$91,000
Vancouver, mid SWE	C\$126,000-C\$175,000	US\$91,000-US\$127,000
Vancouver, senior SWE	C\$175,000-C\$231,000	US\$127,000-US\$167,000

Toronto and Vancouver cash compensation runs 35-55% below Tier 1 U.S. hub cash bands for equivalent engineering roles, and the gap widens further once RSUs and equity-at-scale are factored into total comp. Treat Canada as its own compensation system: separate legal entity, payroll, benefits, and CAD-denominated offers, not a U.S. band converted at spot FX.

Practical rules for setting geo-adjusted ranges

1. Set the national base range by role, level, and stage first (Sections 2-5).
2. Treat SF and NYC as Tier 1 (+20-30% / +15-25%).
3. Treat Seattle as Tier 1.5 (+10-20%) for scarce technical talent.
4. Treat Boston, Chicago, Austin, and Denver as Tier 2 (+5-12%), with room to differentiate by role-specific data.
5. Pay national/Tier 1 rates for scarce roles (AI, security, executive) regardless of location, when the cost of losing the candidate exceeds the discount.
6. Keep equity level- and stage-based, not location-based.
7. Set a clear policy for voluntary moves (grandfather vs. adjust) before you need one.

2026 Hiring & Market Context

The two-speed market

Talent segment	2026 signal	Compensation implication
Generalist software, product, ops, GTM	More selective hiring, abundant candidates	Less upward pressure on starting pay, tighter ranges
AI/ML, AI infra, data, security, some technical leadership	Concentrated funding, acute scarcity	Targeted premiums, faster processes, more retention equity
Revenue-critical GTM roles	Hiring tied to proven ICP and efficient growth	Variable-pay design and quota realism matter more than headline OTE
Executive/functional leadership	Selective demand for capital-efficient operators	Lengthy searches, but bespoke equity/outcome-tied packages for strong candidates

Overall U.S. tech/SaaS hiring is running below 2025 levels: LinkedIn's Technology, Information, and Media hiring was 2.1% lower in May 2026 than May 2025, and still more than 30% below its February 2020 pace. That is a market correction, not a collapse, and it is not evenly distributed: AI-related hiring is accelerating hard while most other categories cool.

Layoffs and freezes

There's no single authoritative 2026 layoff count. Trackers disagree substantially by methodology: Crunchbase's narrower U.S. tracker counted roughly 4,500 announced layoffs by early September 2026 versus about 127,000 for all of 2025, while broader global trackers report much higher totals. The safer framing for clients: restructuring persists but is increasingly strategic. Companies are cutting duplicated layers, support functions, and growth programs not tied to revenue or AI strategy, while protecting AI, infrastructure, security, and core product-engineering headcount.

Where freezes show up in practice: backfilling only business-critical departures, using contractors or fractional leaders instead of full-time hires, delaying non-essential ops/brand/content roles, and combining roles (product marketing plus growth, CS plus implementation).

Stage pattern. Seed/pre-seed stay lean by design. Series A/B faces the sharpest tension between growth expectations and runway. Later-stage SaaS is most likely to restructure mature GTM and G&A when growth doesn't justify the cost structure.

Venture funding effects on hiring budgets

Headline 2026 funding is strong (\$392B raised across US/Canada in H1 2026) but heavily concentrated: about 80% of Q2 investment went to AI-focused startups, and seed/angel funding is down 15% quarter over quarter and 27% year over year. The practical read for our clients: most non-AI SaaS companies should not assume capital is broadly available just because the aggregate headlines look strong. Budgets are role-specific, not uniform, and equity is no longer automatically persuasive to candidates who are increasingly evaluating dilution, strike price, and liquidity horizon alongside the nominal grant.

Time-to-fill

75
DAYS, TECHNICAL

60
DAYS, BUSINESS

No universal government figure exists, but Ashby's applicant-tracking dataset (through March 2026) shows a 75-day median time to first fill for technical roles and 60 days for business roles. Use 60-75 days as a practical baseline for a specialized technical search, and expect longer for senior engineering, AI/ML, security, and enterprise sales leadership.

Wage growth

Private-industry wages grew 3.4% in the 12 months ending March 2026 (BLS). There is no clean government series isolating software-role wage growth specifically, but the takeaway is consistent across sources: broad tech cash pay is not in a bidding war. Growth for generalist roles is running close to or below the broader private-sector rate. Skill-specific premiums, particularly AI/ML, are the exception, not the rule.

Top hiring challenges in 2026

1. AI talent scarcity sitting alongside generalist talent abundance, producing simultaneous hiring caution and intense competition for a narrow slice of roles.
2. Cash-budget and runway discipline, even with strong headline funding, because capital is concentrated in a small number of late-stage AI deals.
3. Remote versus in-office expectations shrinking candidate pools for hybrid/in-office roles, especially for scarce technical and senior talent.
4. Closing candidates on risk-adjusted value: runway, traction, leadership quality, and equity value now get scrutinized together. Equity alone rarely closes a gap if cash is materially below market.

The message for 2026 offers

Frame it this way: market-priced cash for the role, differentiated upside and flexibility on top of it, and scarcity premiums reserved for roles where the business case actually supports them. Avoid treating equity as an automatic discount on salary. Make the equity mechanics transparent enough that a candidate can genuinely assess the trade-off, not just the headline number.

The one-line version. Pay market for the role you are actually hiring, pay a premium only where scarcity is real, and make the upside legible enough that a candidate can price it themselves.

Methodology, Sources & Contact

Methodology

This guide draws on named startup and tech compensation platforms (Carta, Pave, Levels.fyi, RepVue, Ravel, OpenComp), venture and labor-market research (Crunchbase, KPMG, LinkedIn Economic Graph), current job listings on startup-hiring platforms, and U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics occupational wage data as a broad-market cross-check, cross-referenced against each other rather than pulled from any single source.

Base salary and total compensation figures are labeled separately throughout, since they measure different things. Equity is expressed both as an estimated annualized dollar value (for the base/TC tables) and as a percentage of fully diluted ownership (for the equity-specific tables in Sections 5 and 6), because a percentage alone means little without valuation context, and a dollar estimate alone hides how much ownership and future dilution risk it represents.

Where public, statistically representative stage-by-role data did not exist for a role, most notably at the executive level, we built a planning range by triangulating platform data, current job-listing evidence, and BLS occupational data as a floor, and labeled it as a planning envelope rather than a survey result. BLS occupational wages should be read as a broad-market sanity check throughout this guide, not as a startup/SaaS benchmark: they don't isolate venture stage, equity, or software-specific pay practices, and will generally understate total compensation at well-funded, venture-backed companies.

Figures were compiled in September 2026 and reflect the market as of that date. Compensation data moves; treat any range older than two quarters as directional.

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