Contract

Salary and Work Insights Guide 2026

Pivotal

Welcome

In 2026, contracting continues to play a key role in how businesses build and scale teams. Over the past 12 months, we've seen a steady market, with companies relying on contract talent to stay agile, manage change and access specialist skills when they need them most – without the long-term commitment of a permanent hire.

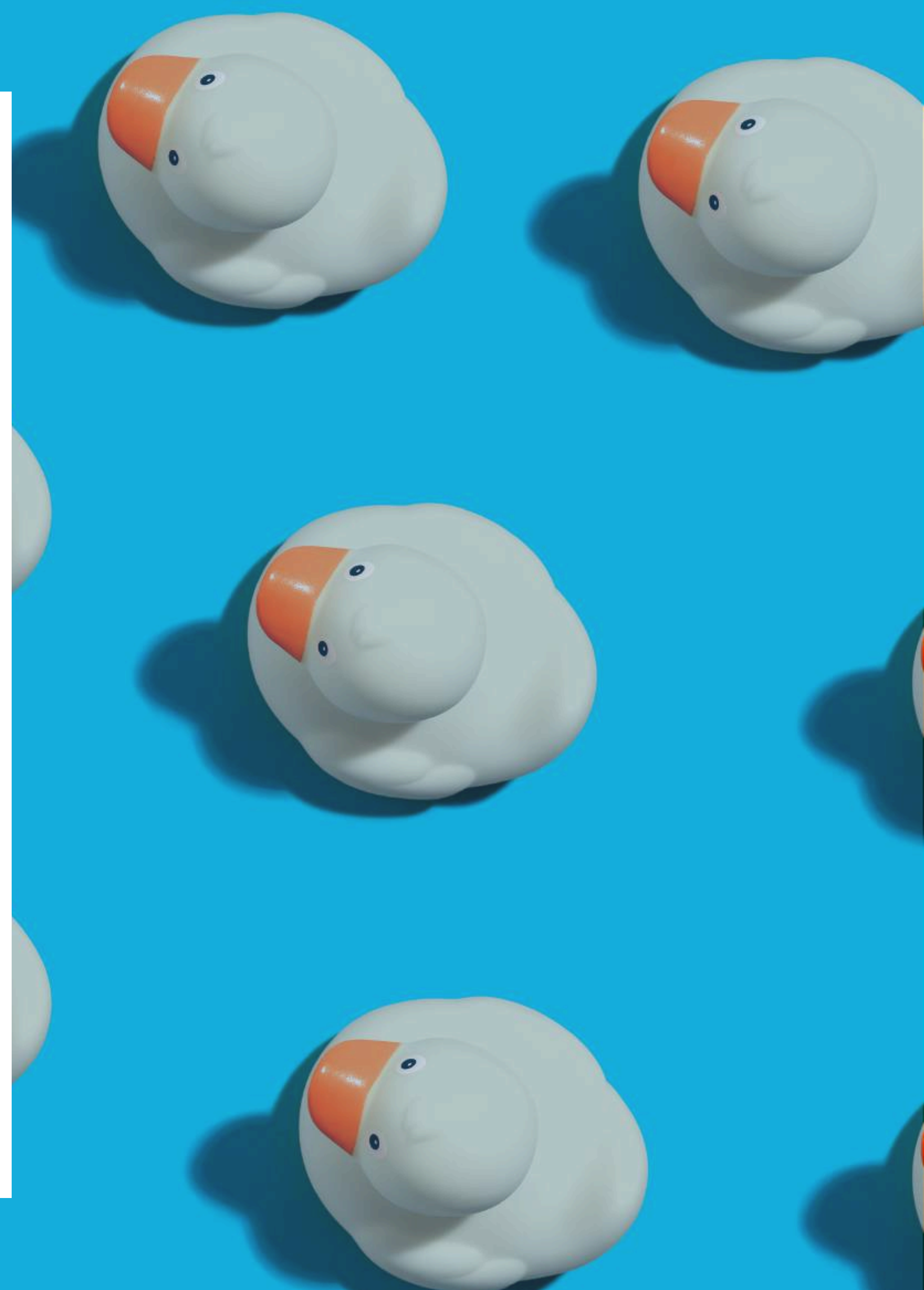
Where demand is coming from is starting to change. Agencies are still using contractors to support new client wins, test new areas or navigate periods of uncertainty, but there has also been a clear increase in demand from brands – particularly DTC businesses – who are using contractors to bridge gaps and maintain momentum. At the same time, contractors themselves remain highly engaged, with 63% saying they are happy in their current role, reinforcing the continued appeal of the model.

We're also seeing the nature of roles evolve. AI hasn't reduced demand for contractors, but it is changing what clients are looking for. There is increasing demand for talent who can use AI to improve efficiency, interpret data and automate processes, alongside emerging roles in areas such as Creative Strategy, Content and Organic Growth. In Paid Media, creative has become a major performance lever, with Creative Strategists now one of the fastest-growing roles in the market.

There are also important changes on the horizon. The introduction of Joint and Several Liability (JSL) in April 2026 will place greater responsibility on agencies and clients to ensure compliance across the contractor supply chain, particularly when working with umbrella companies. For businesses, this makes it more important than ever to work with trusted partners who can provide transparency and reduce risk. If you'd like to understand how these changes could impact your business, feel free to get in touch and we'd be happy to advise.

We hope this guide gives you a clear view of the contractor market in 2026, helping you make informed decisions – whether you're hiring contract talent or contracting yourself.

Chris Devlin
Co-Founder, Pivotal London



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Contractor Survey Insights

Pivotal surveyed nearly 1,000 professionals for our 2026 Salary & Work Insights Guide. From this group, 132 were contractors and freelancers working across marketing, creative, content and adjacent commercial disciplines. This year's data shows a contractor market led by experienced, mid-to-senior talent. They are choosing contract work for flexibility, variety and autonomy, but are making decisions in an increasingly practical, commercially minded way. The insights below are drawn directly from our contractor survey data.

63% of contractors are happy in their current role

86% prioritise day rate when choosing their next role

WHO TODAY'S CONTRACTORS ARE

- **73% of respondents are based in London**
- **77% are aged 25-44, showing the market is dominated by established professionals**
- **38% had 11+ years of experience before moving into contracting.**
- **64% work in agencies, reinforcing how important contract talent remains across agency teams.**

WHAT CONTRACTORS WANT IN THEIR NEXT ROLE

When choosing their next contract, contractors prioritise:

- **Day rate (85.6%)**
- **Remote or hybrid working (65.6%)**
- **Type of work / projects (45.6%)**
- **Length of contract (45.6%)**
- **Flexibility in working hours (36.8%)**

The message is clear: contractors are prioritising immediate value and working setup over softer brand factors. Rate still leads, but flexibility, good projects and contract security are still important factors. For employers, that means the basics matter: a competitive rate, a clear scope, and a working model that feels realistic and attractive.

WHY PEOPLE CHOOSE CONTRACTING

What contractors enjoy most about contracting:

- **Flexibility and control over time (72.8%)**
- **Exposure to varied projects and industries (65.6%)**
- **Better pay or day rate (60.8%)**
- **Less involvement in company politics (54.4%)**
- **Choosing the type of work they take on (40%)**

HAPPINESS SNAPSHOT

- **63.2% are happy in their current contract role.**
- **16.8% are neither happy nor unhappy.**
- **10.4% are unhappy.**

***9.6% are not currently working.**

38% had 11+ years' experience before moving into contracting

Takeaway for Employers: Despite a more practical, rate-driven market, contractors remain largely positive about their roles and the contracting model overall. This suggests that autonomy and project variety remain key for attracting and retaining top contract talent.

Rates & Working Patterns

The commercial picture is steady rather than booming. Most contractors sit in the mid-market day-rate range, many have seen little movement in rates over the past year, and contract length and flexibility remain central to decision-making.

DAY RATE REALITY

- **The largest single day-rate bracket is £300–£349 (22.8%)**
- **Around 63% of contractors earn between £300 and £499 per day**
- **65.9% are happy with their current day rate**
- **But 53.7% say their rate hasn't changed in the last 12 months**
- **15.5% say their day rate has decreased**

This is a market where rate satisfaction is holding up better than rate growth. Contractors are not necessarily seeing big uplifts, but many are still content if the work is flexible, well paid relative to expectations, and worth doing.

CONTRACT LENGTHS

Average contract length:

- **3–6 months (20%)**
- **6–12 months (19.2%)**
- **2–3 months (12.8%)**
- **1 year or more (11.2%)**

54%

saw no change in their day rate over the last 12 months

The market is split between short-term delivery support and medium-term embedded contracts. That makes contract length an important attraction tool in its own right.

HOW CONTRACTORS ARE ENGAGED

Most common payroll / payment methods:

- **Sole trader / self-employed (40.5%)**
- **Own Limited Company / PSC (29.8%)**
- **Umbrella company (18.2%)**
- **PAYE on the client's payroll (10.7%)**

IR35 status of current / most recent contract:

- **Outside IR35 (51.2%)**
- **Inside IR35 (24.8%)**
- **Not sure / prefer not to say (24%)**

The size of the "not sure" group is a reminder that clarity still matters. Contract structure, tax position and payment model can affect how attractive a role feels, and how quickly a contractor will commit.

MOST RECENT WORKING SETUP

- **Fully remote (43.3%)**
- **Hybrid: three days in the office (16.7%)**
- **Hybrid: two days in the office (15%)**
- **Flexible hybrid: choose when to come in (9.2%)**
- **Hybrid: one day in the office (8.3%)**
- **Fully office-based (3.3%)**

Changes to office requirements in the last 12 months:

- **No change (70%)**
- **In-office days have increased (25%)**
- **They've decreased (5%)**

Takeaway for Employers: The employers best placed to win contractor talent are the ones who are clear upfront on rate, contract length, IR35 position and working model. In a practical market, ambiguity is expensive. Fully remote opportunities, in particular, will give employers a clear edge in securing top contractor talent.

AI Adoption

Contractors that we surveyed are using AI widely, and many are seeing gains in speed and productivity. But confidence is mixed: contractors see the upside, while also recognising the risks around over-reliance, role compression and the future of junior talent.

CONTRACTOR AI USE

- **38.3% are using AI tools daily in their role**
- **24.2% are using AI weekly**
- **Only 8.3% say they have never used AI at work**

HOW MUCH WORK IS AI SUPPORTING?

- **59.8% estimate AI currently supports 0-20% of their work tasks**
- **28% estimate AI supports 21-40% of their tasks**
- **Just over 12% say AI supports 41% or more of their workload**

For most contractors, AI is being used as a support tool. It is helping professionals work faster, sharpen output and spend more time on higher-value thinking – but for the majority it is not yet taking over the bulk of day-to-day work.

TRAINING GAP AND FUTURE OUTLOOK

- **Only 20.8% say their employer has provided formal AI training**
- **66.4% say AI has improved the quality of their output.**
- **49.5% are very or moderately concerned about becoming overly reliant on AI tools**
- **46.7% think AI will affect their job positively over the next five years**
- **34.6% think the impact will be negative**

This is what makes AI such an important theme for the 2026 guide: adoption is high and the benefits are real, but sentiment is becoming more cautious. Contractors are optimistic about productivity, but more measured about the long-term impact on roles, teams and career pathways.

Takeaway for Employers: AI fluency is slowly but surely becoming part of the contractor toolkit. In the not-so-distant future, the market is likely to place even greater value on senior specialists who can combine human judgement with smart AI use.

1 in 2
are concerned about becoming overly reliant on AI

59%
of contractors say AI has improved productivity

WHAT IMPACT IS AI HAVING?

Over the past year, contractors say AI has:

- **Improved productivity or efficiency (58.9%)**
- **Reduced time to deliver work (43.9%)**
- **Freed up time for more strategic or creative tasks (30.8%)**
- **Reduced reliance on agencies or external partners (20.6%)**
- **Resulted in job losses or merged roles (17.8%**
- **Reduced need for junior or entry-level hires (15%)**

2025 vs 2026: What's Changed?

A year can make a big difference. Contractors are still choosing contract work for flexibility, autonomy and interesting projects, but the market has become more practical. Rates remain front of mind, remote working is still deeply embedded, and AI use is rising fast, but contractors are becoming more cautious about its long-term impact. Here's how the contractor market has shifted over the last 12 months.

	2025	2026
Priorities	**96%** prioritised a competitive salary when choosing their next role	**86%** prioritise day rate when choosing their next contract
	38% prioritised challenging / engaging projects	**46%** prioritise type of work / projects
AI	**33%** used AI daily	**38%** use AI daily
	82% believed AI would positively impact their jobs over the next five years	**47%** feel positive about AI's impact on their role over the next five years
Sentiment	**58%** were happy in their current role	**63%** are happy in their current role
	11% were unhappy at work	**10%** are unhappy at work

*These day rates are based on outside IR35

Performance Media (PPC/Paid Social)

Agency Pay rates

Job Title	Years of Exp.	Salary	Day Rate *All Inclusive
Account Executive	0.5 - 1.5	£28k - £33k	£250 - £275
Senior Account Executive	1.5 - 3	£33k - £35k	£275 - £300
Account Manager	3 - 4	£40k - £45k	£350 - £400
Senior Account Manager	4 - 5	£45k - £52k	£375 - £400
Account Director	5 - 6	£52k - £60k	£400 - £450
Senior Account Director	6 - 8	£60k - £70k	£450 - £500
Business Director	8+	£70k - £85k	£500+

*These day rates are based on outside IR35

Programmatic

Agency Day rates

Job Title	Years of Exp.	Salary	Day Rate *All Inclusive
Account Executive	0.5 - 1.5	£28k - £33k	£250 - £300
Senior Account Executive	1.5 - 3	£33k - £40k	£300 - £350
Account Manager	3 - 4	£40k - £50k	£375 - £400
Senior Account Manager	4 - 5	£50k - £58k	£400 - £430
Account Director	5 - 6	£52k - £65k	£435 - £475
Senior Account Director	6 - 8	£65k - £75k	£475 - £520
Business Director	8+	£75k - 90k	£550+

*These day rates are based on outside IR35

SEO

Agency Day rates

Job Title	Years of Exp.	Salary	Day Rate *All Inclusive
SEO Executive	0.5 - 1.5	£28k - £35k	£250 - £300
Senior SEO Executive	1.5 - 3	£35k - £45k	£300 - £350
SEO Manager	3 - 4	£45k - £55k	£350 - £400
Senior SEO Manager	4 - 5	£55k - £65k	£400 - £430
SEO Director	5 - 6	£55k - £65k	£430 - £475
Senior SEO Director	6 - 8	£65k - £75k	£475 - £500
Head of SEO	8+	£75k+	£500+

*These day rates are based on outside IR35

Media Planning

Agency Day rates

Planning and Buying (Comms)

Job Title	Years of Exp.	Salary	Day Rate *All Inclusive
Account Executive	0 - 1.5	£25k - £30k	£250 - £300
Senior Account Executive / Planner	1 - 3	£32k - £38k	£300 - £325
Account Manager	3 - 5	£40k - £45k	£350 - £400
Account Director	6+	£55k	£375 - £400
Business Director	8+	£75k	£425 - £450
Client Partner	10+	£100k+	£450 - £500
Managing Partner	12+	£110k+	

Media Strategy

Job Title	Years of Exp.	Salary	Day Rate *All Inclusive
Strategy Manager	5+	£45k - £50k	£350 - £400
Senior Strategist	7+	£50k - £60k	£375 - £425
Strategy Director	8+	£60k+	£425 - £475
Head of Strategy	10+	£90k+	£450 - £500

Planning and Buying (Digital)

Job Title	Years of Exp.	Salary	Day Rate *All Inclusive
Digital Account Executive	0 - 1.5	£25k - 30k	>£250
Senior Digital Account Executive	1.5 - 3	£32k - 38k	£250 - £300
Digital Account Manager	3 - 5	£40k - 45k	£350 - £400
Digital Account Director	6+	£55k	£375 - £400
Digital Business Director	8+	£75k	£425 - £450
Head of Display / Digital	10+	£90k+	£450 - £550

Planning & Buying (AV)

Job Title	Years of Exp.	Salary	Day Rate *All Inclusive
AV Account Executive	0 - 1.5	£25k - £33k	
AV Senior Account Executive	1.5 - 3	£35k - £38k	£300 - £325
AV Account Manager	3 - 4	£40k - £45k	£350 - £400
AV Account Director	5+	£55k - £60k	£375 - £400
AV Business Director	7+	£70k+	£425 - £450
Head of AV	10+	£100k+	£500 - £550

*These day rates are based on outside IR35

Agency Day rates

PR

PR - Agency

Job Title	Years of Exp.	Salary	Day Rate *All Inclusive
Account Executive	0 - 2	£25k - £29k	
Senior Account Executive	2 - 3	£30k - £33k	
Account Manager	3 - 4	£35k - £42k	£290 - £340
Senior Account Manager	4 - 6	£42k - £46k	£320 - £370
Account Director	5 - 7	£48k - £55k	£360 - £420
Senior Account Director	7 - 9	£56k - £67k	£390 - £460
Associate Director	8+	£68k - £80k	£440 – £540
Director	9/10+	£80k+	£550+

PR - In-House

Job Title	Years of Exp.	Salary	Day Rate *All Inclusive
Press Officer / Comms Assistant	0 - 2	£25k - £32k	£150 - £250
Senior Press Officer	2 - 4	£32k - £38k	£150 - £250
PR / Communications Manager	4 - 7	£40k - £54k	£300 - £450
Senior PR/ Communications Manager	7 - 10	£54k - £70k	£300 - £450
PR Director	10 - 15	£70k - £85k	£400 - £450+
Head of Communications	12+	£85k+	£400 - £450+

Creative & Content

Agency Day rates

Creative Strategy

Job Title	Years of Exp.	Salary	Day Rate *All Inclusive
Entry / Junior	1 - 2	£30k - £40k	
Mid-level	2 - 4	£40k - £60k	£350 - £450
Senior	4 - 8	£55k - £75k	£450 - £550
Head / Lead	8+	£70k+	£550+

Content

Job Title	Years of Exp.	Salary	Day Rate *All Inclusive
Content creator	2 - 4	£35k - £50k	£200 - £300
Social Media Manager	3 - 5	£45k - £60k	£250 - £350
Content strategist	5 - 8	£65k - £90k	£350 - £500
Influencer Marketing Manager	4 - 7	£55k - £70k	£300 - £400

Creative

Job Title	Years of Exp.	Salary	Day Rate *All Inclusive
Junior Digital Designer	1 - 3	£25k - £35k	£180 - £250
Midweight Digital Designer	3 - 6	£35k - £45k	£250 - £300
Senior Digital Designer	6 - 8	£45k - £65k	£300 - £350

Job Title	Years of Exp.	Salary	Day Rate *All Inclusive
Motion Graphics Designer	3 - 8	£40k - £80k	£300 - £500
Video Editor	2 - 6	£30k - £55k	£250 - £400
Videographer	2 - 6	£25k - £55k	£300 - £500
3D Designer	3 - 8	£40k - £70k	£300 - £500

Job Title	Years of Exp.	Salary	Day Rate *All Inclusive
Art Director	3 - 8	£30k - £80k	£300 - £500
Artworker	3 - 8	£30k - £55k	£250 - £400
Creative Copywriter	2 - 7	£30k - £70k	£250 - £450
Presentation Designer	3 - 8	£35k - £70k	£300 - £500

*These day rates are based on outside IR35

Marketing & Growth

Brand Day rates

Marketing

Job Title	Years of Exp.	Salary	Day Rate *All Inclusive
Marketing Executive	1 - 3	£25k - £40k	£250 - £300
Marketing Manager	3 - 5	£40k - £60k	£350 - £375
Marketing Senior Manager	5 - 8	£60k - £80k	£400 - £450
Head of Marketing	8 - 12	£80k - £110k	£500 - £600
Director / VP of Marketing	10 - 15	£90k - £130k	£700 - £900
CMO	15+	£140k - £220k	£750 - £1000

Growth Marketing

Job Title	Years of Exp.	Salary	Day Rate *All Inclusive
Growth Marketing Executive	1 - 3	£30k - £45k	£250 - £300
Growth Marketing Manager	3 - 5	£45k - £70k	£350 - £375
Growth Marketing Senior Manager	5 - 8	£70k - £90k	£400 - £450
Head of Growth Marketing	8 - 12	£90k - £120k	£450 - £550
Director / VP of Marketing	10 - 15	£120k - £180k	£500 - £600
CMO	15+	£160k - £250k	£650 - £1000

Performance Marketing

Job Title	Years of Exp.	Salary	Day Rate *All Inclusive
Performance Marketing Executive	1 - 3	£25k - £50k	£250 - £300
Performance Marketing Manager	3 - 5	£50k - £65k	£350 - £375
Senior Performance Marketing Manager	5 - 7	£65k - £80k	£400 - £450
Head of Performance Marketing	7 - 10	£80k - £120k	£500 - £600
Director of Performance Marketing	10+	£120k+	£650 - £1000

Brand Marketing

Job Title	Years of Exp.	Salary	Day Rate *All Inclusive
Brand Manager	3 - 5	£40k - £60k	£250 - £300
Senior Brand Manager	5 - 8	£60k - £85k	£350 - £375
Head of Brand	8 - 12	£80k - £110k	£400 - £450
Director of Brand Marketing	10 - 15	£110k - £140k	£500 - £600
VP of Brand Marketing	12 - 15+	£100k - £170k	£650 - £1000
Chief Brand Officer (CBO)	15+	£160k - £220k+	£650 - £1000

*These day rates are based on outside IR35

CRM & SEO

Brand Day rates

CRM & Retention

Job Title	Years of Exp.	Salary	Day Rate *All Inclusive
CRM Executive	1 - 3	£30k - £45k	£250 - £300
CRM Manager	3 - 5	£45k - £55k	£350 - £375
Senior CRM Manager	5 - 7	£55k - £65k	£400 - £450
Head of CRM	7 - 10	£65k - £100k	£500 - £600
CRM Director	10+	£100k+	£700 - £900

SEO & Organic

Job Title	Years of Exp.	Salary	Day Rate *All Inclusive
SEO Executive	1 - 3	£30k - £40k	£250 - £300
SEO Manager	3 - 5	£45k - £60k	£350 - £400
Senior SEO Manager	5 - 7	£60k - £80k	£400 - £450
Head of SEO	7 - 10	£80k - £100k	£500 - £600
SEO Director	10+	£100k - £120k+	£700 - £900

We also recruit permanent roles across Marketing, Sales, Media & Creative. To make a general hiring enquiry, contact us on our website.

View our open contract roles here.

About Pivotal Contract

The contractor market offers businesses a powerful solution to access specialised skills, scale quickly, and remain agile in uncertain times. By understanding what contractors value – competitive pay and flexibility – employers can attract the very best freelance talent.

Pivotal can support your hiring for marketing, creative, content, and product contract roles. We have an extensive talent network of top contractors with hard-to-find skills, and immediate availability for quick hiring turnarounds.

If you think a contract solution could be the way forward for your business, don't hesitate to get in touch with our friendly team today:

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