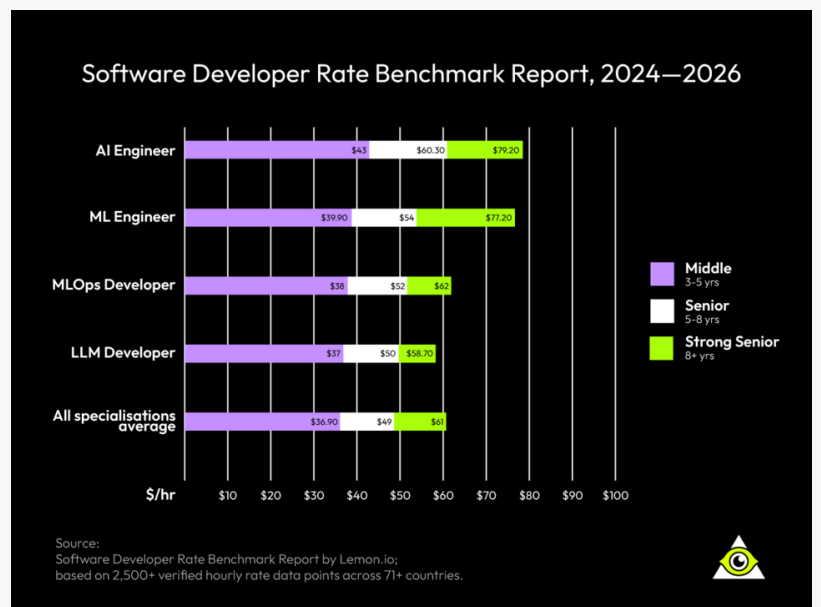


Lemon.io Data Identifies AI Engineers as the Highest-Paid Specialisation in Tech Hiring

AI engineers are now earning significantly more than traditional software developers — commanding rates up to 41% higher, according to new research by Lemon.io.

NEW YORK, NY, UNITED STATES, May 28, 2026 /EINPresswire.com/ -- AI engineers now average \$60/hr, leaving all other senior developers behind at \$44/hr. Lemon.io analysed over 2,500 contracts from 2024–2026 to uncover what's driving this pay gap—and whether it will last. A dramatic paycheck gap has opened up in the tech industry. Artificial intelligence has created a new class of specialised programmers who are out-earning traditional software developers by up to 41% as of May, 2026.



Software Developer Rate Benchmark Report (2024-2026) by Lemon.io

[Software Developer Rate Benchmark Report](#) by Lemon.io, a marketplace for vetted tech talent, reveals what AI engineers do, exactly what they cost in today's market, and what is an optimised, budget-effective hiring roadmap is for startups.

From \$37/h to \$80/h—AI Engineering Market Structure

AI engineers set the market ceiling at \$79.20/hr. This number refers to broad-scope AI generalists who design and deploy machine learning systems, integrate large language models into production, and build infrastructure to keep models reliable at scale.

However, in 2026, the talent pool has also fractured into more distinct high-paying specialities:

- ML Engineers train the data models behind the curtain. True senior talent is scarce enough that a step up to “strong senior” commands a 43% salary bump (\$54/hr for seniors vs \$77.20/hr for strong seniors).
- MLOps Engineers build the infrastructure that keeps live AI running smoothly. Rates range from

\$38/hr to \$62/hr depending on seniority.

- LLM Developers design automated workflows on top of existing models, earning up to \$58.70/hr.

For context: a standard senior back-end developer averages \$42.80/hr—well below any of these AI-focused tiers.

Cost-Effective Early AI Hiring Roadmap

For startups, hiring in the wrong order is a fatal financial mistake. Lemon.io, the platform through which startups hire senior-level AI developers and other engineers, suggests a specific checklist for building an effective team in 2026:

- The foundation ([Python](#) & Django Devs). Python is the universal language of AI. A senior web developer using Python costs around \$43/hr to \$48.70/hr and handles basic data pipelines.
- The first AI Hire (LLM Developer). If you are just plugging existing models (like OpenAI) into your app, a senior LLM developer (\$50/hr) is your best bet to build chatbots and search tools quickly.
- The custom builder (ML Engineer). Only hire a costly ML engineer (\$54/hr+) if your business requires building and training a unique, custom AI model from scratch.

AI Engineers Are Expensive—But Do You Need the Most Expensive One?

The rates reflect a shortage. AI engineers cost more because the combination of software development, statistical modelling, and cloud infrastructure is now rare—and won't scale overnight.

One variable worth watching: [AI-assisted developers](#) are gaining ground as a cost-efficient complement for teams where velocity matters more than model depth.

The practical guidance from Lemon.io: most early-stage products don't need a \$79/hr AI/ML expert on day one. Match the role and seniority to your actual stage—that decision alone can optimise your budget and unlock an opportunity to build your product fast in the first months.

About Lemon.io

Lemon.io is a curated marketplace matching startups and midsize companies with vetted senior software developers. The platform manages the full hiring workflow, including technical screening, matching, contracts, compliance, and payments, with developer matches typically delivered within 24 hours.

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