

2026 Compensation Survey Report

 **CTO Craft** / ALBANY[★]

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Introduction

Welcome to the 4th Annual CTO Craft x Albany Compensation Survey Report.

Since its launch in 2023, this survey has grown into one of the most comprehensive benchmarks for technology leadership compensation. This year, 477 senior technology leaders shared detailed data on their overarching compensation, benefits, work models, and career outlook.

The 2026 edition builds on three prior years of data, enabling genuine trend analysis for the first time. The result is not just a snapshot of 2026, but a picture of how technology leadership compensation, retention, and working life have evolved through economic recovery, the AI revolution, and the stabilisation of post-pandemic norms.



Insight from CTO Craft

Andy Skipper
Founder, CTO Craft



Having now run this survey for four years, it feels less like a snapshot and more like watching the culture of technology leadership evolve in real time. What stands out in 2026 is how stable some fundamentals have become, even as everything around us continues to move at speed.

On the surface, the headlines look familiar. Compensation levels remain broadly consistent with 2025 patterns: the US and Canada still lead on cash, Western Europe continues to use equity creatively, and Founder CTOs are still trading salary for ownership. But underneath, the levers actually keeping leaders in their roles are now unambiguous. Equity has emerged as the clearest retention signal in the dataset, and once again, leadership quality and culture dominate both the “reasons to leave” and “reasons to stay” lists. That combination reinforces what we’ve been hearing across the CTO Craft community for years now: pay needs to be fair, but trust and alignment are non-negotiable.

One of the most important developments since last year is the sharpening of the equity story. In 2025 we talked about the growing use of equity and the different frameworks for valuing it. The 2026 data goes further, showing that leaders with meaningful long-term incentives are significantly less likely to be planning an exit, even when their base salaries look similar to those who are. For boards and founders, that is a very practical message: if you want your CTO or VP of Engineering to think and behave like an owner, you have to design compensation that genuinely makes them one.

The gender picture also illustrates how structural issues play out over time rather than in a single year’s salary numbers. On paper, women in this dataset report comparable or even higher cash than men, but they are less likely to hold long-term incentives and report lower confidence in both new- roles and in-role negotiations.

Combined with a small but very real group who avoid pay conversations altogether, that creates a compounding disadvantage that won’t be fixed by a one-off adjustment. As a community, we need to treat negotiation confidence, equitable access to LTIP, and transparent career paths as core leadership responsibilities, not “nice-to-have” inclusion initiatives.

Work models are another area where the noise and the data don’t quite match. In 2025, we highlighted the dominance of hybrid and remote work and the early signs of a push back to the office for some leaders. The 2026 results show that remote and hybrid roles still command strong compensation, but remote leaders are also more likely to be planning a move and more likely to cite burnout. That chimes with what we see in the community. Flexibility is now table stakes, but it comes with the responsibility to design sustainable ways of working, especially for senior people whose boundaries are hardest to maintain.

The final, and perhaps most encouraging, shift is around AI. Last year we talked about organisations moving from “we need AI” to genuine use-cases. This year’s data shows AI, data and ML strategy sitting firmly within the CTO remit for a clear majority of respondents, particularly at C-suite level. In other words, AI is no longer a side project or a specialist function, it has become part of what it means to be a technology leader. Our role at CTO Craft is to continue creating spaces where leaders can compare approaches, share what is actually working, and be honest about the trade-offs, from team design to personal workload.

Across all of this, one theme from last year remains unchanged: the human core of the role. The data continues to tell us that people leave when they lose faith in leadership, culture, or mission, and they stay when those things are strong and visible. As our community grows, our focus at CTO Craft will stay on helping leaders build that kind of environment. One where compensation is fair, equity is meaningful, AI is thoughtfully integrated, and, above all, trust runs both ways.

Insight from Albany

James Goodrich
CEO, Albany



Henry Draper
Managing Partner, Albany



Albany's commentary is based primarily on live executive search and candidate negotiation experience. This means our perspective is strongest where leaders are moving between roles, rather than negotiating internally within their existing organisation.

Reviewing this report, what is most striking is that it is far more than a compensation survey. It is a practical guide to attracting, motivating and retaining senior technology leaders and an unfiltered view into what they genuinely value when evaluating opportunities.

Remuneration remains one of the most powerful leadership levers available to businesses, but the data reinforces something we see in every executive search: compensation only works when it aligns with an individual's motivations, ambitions and appetite for risk.

While clear patterns emerge across funding stages, company maturity and leadership scope, the strongest hiring decisions are rarely made by benchmarking salary alone. The most successful organisations understand how cash compensation, equity, long-term incentives, flexibility, autonomy and career trajectory combine to create genuine alignment.

What has changed most over the last four years is not necessarily what leaders value, but how sophisticated they have become in evaluating it. Senior candidates are increasingly assessing the real economic value of an opportunity, not simply the headline package.

The businesses attracting the strongest leadership talent are those presenting compensation as part of a credible long-term story - one grounded in clarity, transparency and alignment.

James Goodrich, CEO

Four years of data allows us to say something we couldn't before: the fundamentals haven't changed, but the sophistication has. Leaders are more informed, boards are asking sharper questions, and the gap between those who understand how compensation works and those who don't is becoming more consequential.

Leaders are smarter about equity. The conversation has shifted from "do I have options?" to "what is this actually worth, and when?" That raises the bar for businesses — vague or poorly structured long-term incentives no longer suffice with the strongest candidates. Instrument type, vesting terms, dilution assumptions, and realistic exit timelines all matter. A headline equity number without that context is not a compelling offer; increasingly, it's a red flag.

The retention data is striking in its consistency. Salary is not the reason people leave. The median for those actively planning to exit is identical to those who plan to stay. What differs is equity: leaders with meaningful long-term incentives are materially less likely to be looking. The 13.7 percentage point LTIP gap between stayers and leavers is the clearest signal in the entire dataset. Boards that respond to flight risk with a salary increase are solving the wrong problem - and the data has now said so for four consecutive years.

The negotiation confidence finding deserves more attention than it typically gets. These are leaders managing multi-million-pound budgets, making high-stakes decisions daily, and negotiating complex vendor and transformation programmes, yet barely half feel confident negotiating their own compensation. That gap is costing them, and it's costing their employers too. Leaders who avoid the conversation don't suddenly become aligned once they're in the role. Misaligned expectations at the point of hire rarely improve over time; they tend to surface later, at a much higher cost.

Finally, the AI accountability data reflects what we're seeing in every search brief: AI strategy is now a baseline expectation at CTO level, not a specialism. Nearly 84% of CTOs in this dataset carry it as a direct accountability. Candidates who cannot speak credibly to it are being screened out. Businesses that haven't clearly defined where AI strategy sits within their leadership structure are introducing unnecessary friction into their searches - and risk attracting leaders whose remit doesn't match what the role actually requires.

Henry Draper, Managing Partner

Salary Negotiation >

Role & Funding >

Equity & LTIP >

Benefits >

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Work Models >

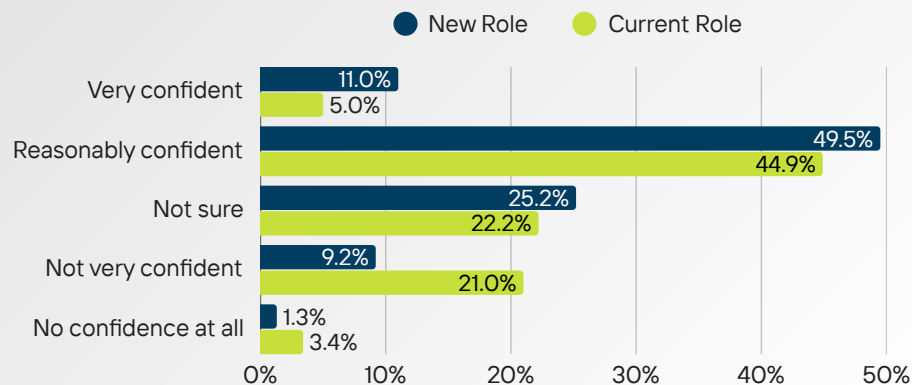
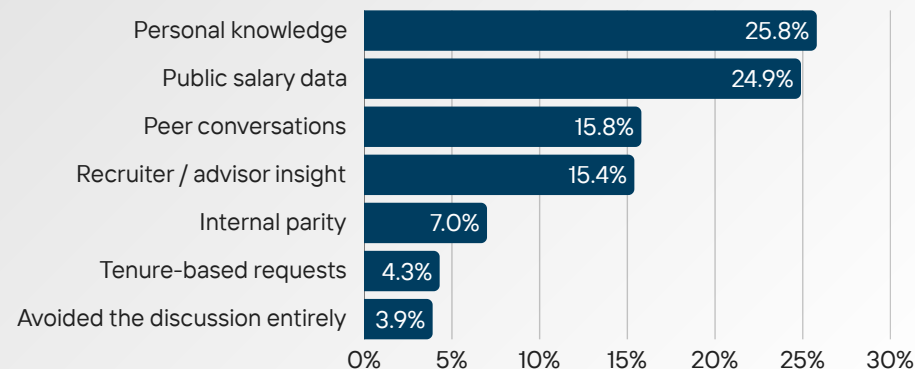
CTO Remit >

Finding 1:

Salary Negotiation Remains a Significant Gap — Only ~50% of Technology Leaders Feel Confident Negotiating Their Pay

One of the most striking findings of 2026 is that barely half of technology leaders feel confident negotiating their own compensation.

When asked about confidence in a new role, 61% rated themselves as very or reasonably confident. But that figure drops to just 50% when the same leaders consider negotiating within their current role. The gap suggests that many technology leaders feel more empowered by the market dynamics of a job move than by the internal dynamics of their existing employer.

Salary Negotiation Confidence: New Role vs. Current Role**What technology leaders rely on when negotiating:**

A notable 3.9% actively avoided the salary conversation altogether. A remarkable figure for a cohort of senior executives.

"Only about 50% of technology leaders that responded to the survey felt confident in negotiating their own salaries... I found that fascinating."

Henry Draper emphasised the importance of leading with data rather than emotion, and notes that public salary data often lacks the contextual nuance of stage, scale, strategy, and geography. His advice: seek expert guidance and understand the two distinct negotiation environments, internal (retention and alignment) and external (market value and selection).

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Finding 1:

Albany Insight

Henry Draper
Managing Partner, Albany



Avoidance of compensation conversations is rarely about satisfaction. It is typically about uncertainty. Leaders who lack clarity on how to frame their value often defer the discussion entirely, which can lead to longer-term misalignment as roles evolve faster than compensation.

One of the most interesting dynamics is that these same leaders are negotiating multi-million-pound budgets, vendor contracts, and transformation programmes, yet often lack confidence when it comes to negotiating their own compensation.

In practice, this usually comes down to a lack of structure. The strongest negotiations are grounded in four factors: scope, impact, market, and risk. When leaders can clearly articulate how those have changed, the conversation becomes objective rather than emotional.



Salary Negotiation >

Role & Funding >

Equity & LTIP >

Benefits >

Retention & Culture >

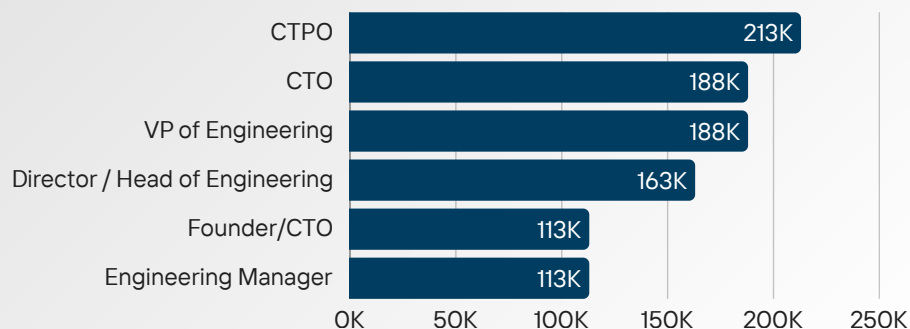
Work Models >

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Finding 2:

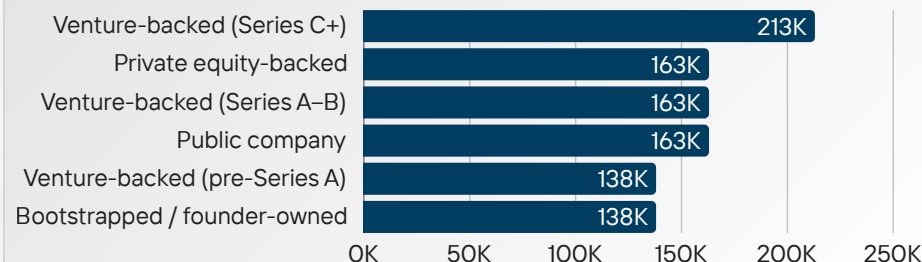
Compensation by Role and Funding Stage — Where You Work Matters Almost as Much as What You Do

In terms of role, median salaries across roles show a clear hierarchy, with CTPOs commanding the highest median at £213K and Founder/CTOs and Engineering Managers at the lower end at £113K. CTOs and VPs of Engineering both sit at a median of £188K.

Median salary across roles

Salary by Funding Stage

Later-stage venture-backed companies (Series C+) pay the highest median at £213K. PE-backed, Series A-B, and public companies cluster around £163K, while pre-Series A and bootstrapped organisations sit at £138K.

Salary by funding stage

Albany Insight

The relationship between title and compensation is often misunderstood. While titles suggest hierarchy, they are not the primary driver of pay. Funding stage, business maturity, and organisational structure are far more influential.

In many cases, what is labelled as a CTO role in one organisation is functionally equivalent to a VP of Engineering role in another. The consistency in compensation between those titles reflects that reality. In practice, they are often the same job with different labels.

Public salary data can over-simplify senior technology roles because it tends to benchmark by job title alone. In practice, title is only one variable. Funding stage, revenue, team size, internal grading, reporting line and scarcity of skillset can all materially change what a "CTO", "VP Engineering" or "CTPO" role is worth in market terms.

Real-world example: In one recent search, a business benchmarked a CTPO role against its internal executive grading structure and concluded the compensation package was competitive. The challenge was that the internal framework significantly undervalued the external market scarcity of the combination of scaling, commercial and technical leadership experience required for the role. The result was a material disconnect between the company's expectations and candidate expectations from the wider market.

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Role Meets Funding Stage

As Albany illustrate above, title alone is an incomplete guide to compensation. When role and funding stage are viewed together, a more nuanced picture emerges. One in which the same job title can command a meaningfully different package depending on where the employer sits on the funding spectrum.

Four dominant patterns emerge:

- **CTOs are the most portable role.** Across every funding stage with a robust sample, CTO medians sit within a relatively tight band. The exception to this being later-stage venture, where Series C+ CTOs command a clear premium over their counterparts elsewhere. For most funding stages, the CTO title buys a similar base package; the real variance lies in the bonus and equity architecture that sits alongside it.
- **Later-stage venture rewards scale leadership.** Series C+ is consistently the strongest-paying environment for CTOs, VPs of Engineering, and Directors. The premium is most visible at VP and Director levels, where the operational complexity of scaling through Series C–D requires experienced operators who command a corresponding uplift.
- **PE pays strongly at the top of the house.** Where CTO data is robust, PE-backed companies deliver the highest median reflecting the deliberate PE preference for a single, accountable digital-leadership role covering both technology and product. PE also pays the second-highest medians for CTOs and VPs, reinforcing its position as a cash-strong environment for senior hires.
- **Founder CTOs sit structurally below the market.** Where the sample allows a clear view, pre-Series A and bootstrapped, Founder CTOs take the lowest medians in the matrix. This is not a pay disadvantage in the conventional sense but a deliberate cash-for-ownership trade.

The broader message: a candidate evaluating two offers at the same title should read the funding stage before reading the salary figure. The underlying compensation architecture (base, bonus, and equity) shifts meaningfully with the employer's stage and ownership model.

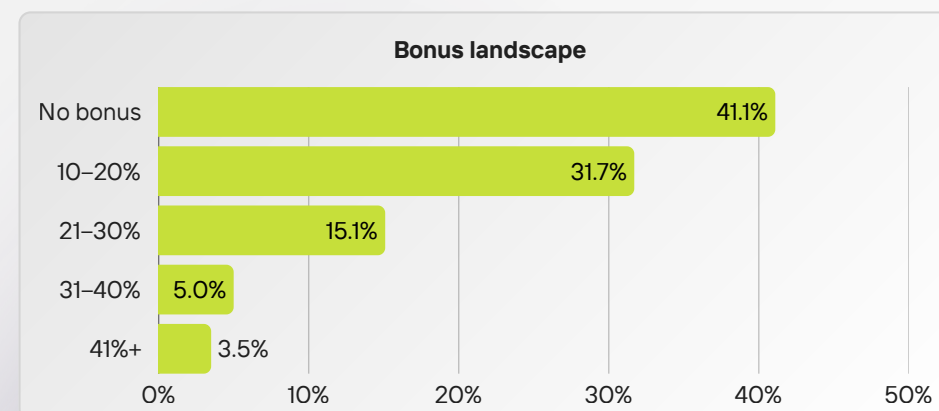
Albany Insight

The underlying driver is risk and scale. Earlier-stage businesses are more constrained on cash and therefore rely more heavily on equity to attract talent. Later-stage and private equity-backed businesses offer higher base salaries and more predictable incentives, but with less upside.

It's a classic risk-reward equation: earlier stage offers higher potential but greater uncertainty, while later stage offers more certainty but less transformational upside

Bonus Landscape

41.1% of respondents have no bonus at all. Among those with a bonus, the 10–20% range is most common (31.7%), followed by 21–30% (15.1%). Only a small minority exceed 30%.



Bonus prevalence varies meaningfully by funding stage. Public companies and PE-backed employers are consistently the most likely to offer a bonus across senior roles, a structural feature of their compensation model. Venture-backed companies, particularly at earlier stages, and bootstrapped organisations rely more heavily on base salary and equity in place of contracted short-term incentive. The reliability of bonus payout (the crucial proportion of contracted bonus actually received!) is a separate dynamic explored in the PE Compensation Paradox deep dive.

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Finding 3:

Equity and Long-Term Incentives — For Every Funding Stage, A Different Playbook

71.1% of respondents have some form of long-term incentive plan (LTIP), leaving 28.9% with none. Across the full sample, the most common instruments are equity (26.6%), options (24.3%), virtual share options (8.8%), and RSUs (5.7%). But that headline hides a more important reality: LTIP structure, prevalence, and risk profile differ fundamentally by funding stage, to the point where “having LTIP” means something very different depending on the funding backdrop of the business.

LTIP prevalence and dominant structures by funding stage are summarised below.

Funding stage	LTIP prevalence	Dominant instrument	Dominant value expression
Venture-backed (Series A–B)	91.3%	Options (50%)	Number of shares / % of company
Bootstrapped / founder-owned	68.0%	Equity (33.3%)	% of company
Public company	60.3%	RSUs (33.3%)	Number of shares
Private equity-backed	60.0%	Equity (34.5%) / None (40%)	Number of shares

Despite similar headline LTIP rates across public, PE, and bootstrapped cohorts (60–68%), the underlying instruments, risk, and payout dynamics are very different.



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Venture-backed (Series A–B): The Options Economy

VC-backed companies run the most equity-rich compensation model in the dataset: 91.3% of Series A–B respondents have an LTIP, the highest of any funding stage. Options are the primary vehicle (50%), with additional use of direct equity and virtual share options. Value is overwhelmingly expressed as a number of shares or percentage of company (82.0% combined), reflecting cap-table awareness and a focus on potential dilution and future exit.

Here, options are designed to align leadership with a future liquidity event. Typically later-stage funding, secondary sale, or IPO. So the upside sits in future growth rather than current strike value. Only 44.0% of this cohort receive any bonus, and payout reliability is mixed, underscoring that VC compensation is intentionally skewed to long-term upside over short-term certainty.

Bootstrapped / Founder-Owned: The True Ownership Model

Bootstrapped companies show a distinct pattern. Many respondents are founders or early owner-operators, and direct equity - not options - is the dominant instrument. LTIP prevalence is 68.0%, with equity the most common form (33.3%), and a relatively large minority (32.0%) reporting no LTIP at all.

Value is primarily expressed as percentage of company (58.0%), the highest of any funding stage and a clear signal of genuine ownership rather than purely financial modelling. The absence of institutional options schemes and the reluctance of some founders to dilute explains both the concentration of equity for those who do have it, and the lack of LTIP for others.

Public Companies: The RSU-and-Bonus Trade

Public-company respondents sit at the opposite end of the spectrum from VC. Their story is about the maturity and predictability of value realisation. LTIP prevalence is 60.3%, with RSUs the default instrument (33.3%) and options a minority feature (11.1%). RSUs deliver shares on a vesting schedule without going “underwater”, so the equity component is more certain and more liquid.

Short-term incentives are where public companies stand out: 77.8% receive a bonus. The highest of any funding stage. 49.0% of bonus recipients achieve at least 90% of target, with 22.4% exceeding target. Leaders in public companies therefore trade away the “home run” potential of early-stage options in exchange for a highly predictable mix of salary, dependable bonus, and RSUs.

Private Equity-Backed: The Structural Outlier

The PE-backed cohort has similar headline LTIP prevalence (60%) but is structurally the most complex. It has the highest rate of “no LTIP at all” at 40.0%, suggesting that many portfolio-company leaders sit below Incentive Plan thresholds. Where LTIP is offered, equity is the most common instrument (34.5%), supplemented by options, virtual shares, and deal-specific mechanisms such as exit bonuses and Incentive Plans.

PE-backed firms are also bonus-heavy but bonus-unreliable: 69% receive a bonus (second only to public companies), yet 21.4% of bonus recipients report payouts below 25% of target, the weakest reliability in the dataset. On paper, PE packages can look generous. High base, high bonus opportunity, targeted incentive plans. In practice they are more volatile than the RSU-and-bonus model of public companies and narrower in equity reach than VC’s options economy.

Salary Negotiation



Role & Funding



Equity & LTIP



Benefits



Retention & Culture



Work Models



CTO Remit



What the Value Data Tells Us

The key message for leaders is that a headline “yes, we offer LTIP” is almost meaningless without understanding the underlying instrument, expression, and probability of payout. A Series A option grant, a bootstrapped equity stake, a public-company RSU award, and a PE incentive plan are not different flavours of the same thing. They are fundamentally different contracts with different risk, time horizons, and outcomes.

Implications for Leaders and Employers

For technology leaders considering offers, the critical questions differ by funding stage.

- In a VC-backed Series A–B, focus on strike price, dilution, and the realistic path and timing to liquidity.
- In a bootstrapped environment, interrogate percentage of company, legal structure of the grant, and the founder’s true exit intent.
- In a public company, weigh vesting cadence, trading/blackout constraints, and the balance between RSUs and a relatively dependable bonus.
- In a PE-backed role, centre the conversation on incentive plan eligibility, exit timeline, and how realistic the performance hurdles are, given the track record of bonus and plan payouts.

As Henry Draper puts it, “Base salary pays for lifestyle — equity and long-term incentives can change your life,” and the best CTOs negotiate ownership, not just cash. In a post-COVID market where certainty briefly took priority, the community is now returning to LTIP, but with a far more forensic approach to modelling how, and whether, those incentives will ever convert into realised value.

Albany Insight

Long-term incentive plans are one of the most powerful tools a business has to attract, retain, and align senior talent. But they are also widely misunderstood. Not all equity is equal. The difference between options, true equity, and incentive plans is significant. Not just in structure, but in how and whether value is ever realised.

One of the most surprising findings is the proportion of leaders without any long-term incentive at all. In an environment where alignment and retention are critical, that represents a missed opportunity for many businesses.

The shift from percentage-based equity to share-based allocation also reflects a more mature understanding of value. A percentage of one company is not directly comparable to the same percentage in another.

The most effective conversations we see are where equity is treated as a strategic component of the package, not just a financial one. It shapes behaviour as much as it shapes reward. A headline equity number is meaningless without context. Instrument type, vesting terms, dilution, and exit probability all determine whether that equity has real value.

“Candidates should ask for scenario modelling on equity value: low, mid and high exit outcomes; current valuation; strike price; dilution assumptions; vesting; leaver provisions; and expected liquidity timeline. Without those inputs, it is impossible to compare one LTIP offer meaningfully against another.”

Matt Pizzey, Director

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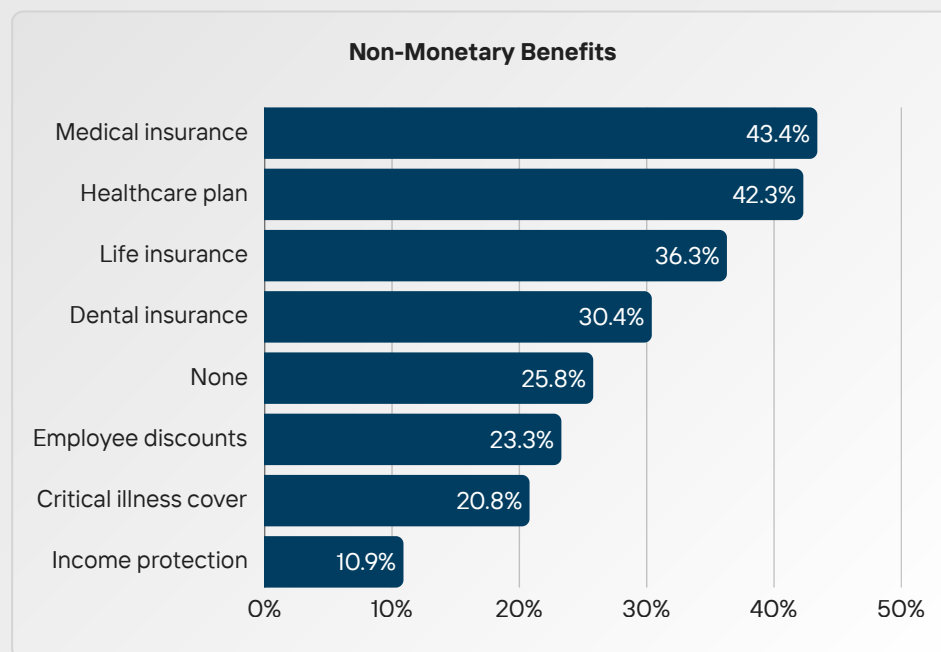
Work Models >

CTO Remit >

Finding 4:

Benefits and the Non-Monetary Picture

The benefits landscape remains consistent with prior years. Medical insurance (43.4%) and healthcare plans (42.3%) are the most commonly reported benefits, followed by life insurance (36.3%) and dental (30.4%).



25.8% of respondents report receiving no non-monetary benefits beyond their salary, bonus, and equity. This is a marginal improvement on the 27% recorded in 2023, but it still means that roughly one in four senior technology leaders receives no healthcare, insurance, or other benefits from their employer. For a population that includes CTOs at PE-backed and publicly listed companies, this is a notable gap.

Albany Insight

Benefits tend to be a reflection of organisational maturity rather than generosity and structured benefits packages often signal operational discipline and scale. Benefits are often treated as secondary, but for senior candidates they can materially affect total value. Larger organisations can use scale to offer more comprehensive pensions, enhanced parental leave, EV schemes, healthcare, insurance and tax-efficient benefits. Smaller scale-ups may offer higher salary or upside, but often cannot replicate the same benefits infrastructure. Candidates should calculate the full package value before comparing offers.

Real world example: Two current candidates moving from large listed or PE-backed software businesses into smaller scale-ups had strong salary/bonus uplifts, but sacrificed value in additional advantages: pension, car/EV schemes, enhanced parental leave, tax-efficient benefits. This illustrates how benefits can materially change total package value, especially for senior candidates.

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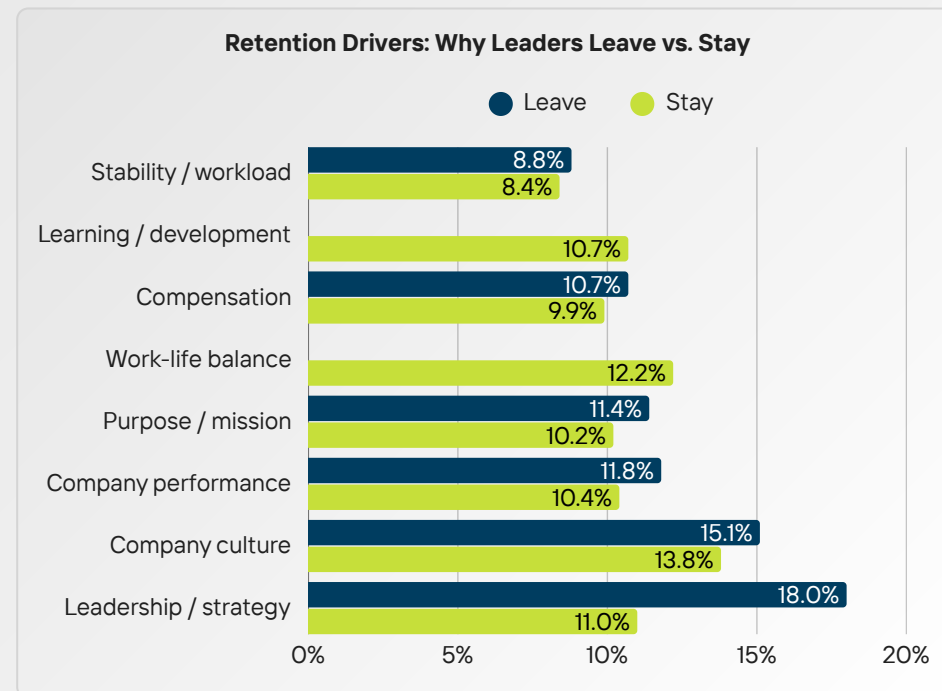
CTO Remit >

Finding 5:

Retention and the Persistence of Cultural and Leadership Drivers

38% of respondents are considering leaving their current role in the next six months. This is a slight improvement on the 41% recorded in both 2024 and 2025, but it remains a remarkably high figure for senior technology leadership.

The drivers behind attrition have been remarkably consistent across all four years of the survey. The top reasons to leave are not about money, they are about leadership, culture, and purpose:



The symmetry here is striking. Culture and leadership appear as both the #1 reason to leave and a top reason to stay. The difference is whether leaders trust their CEO and board, believe in the mission, and feel the culture is healthy. Compensation ranks 6th among reasons to leave and 7th among reasons to stay, consistently secondary to cultural and leadership factors.

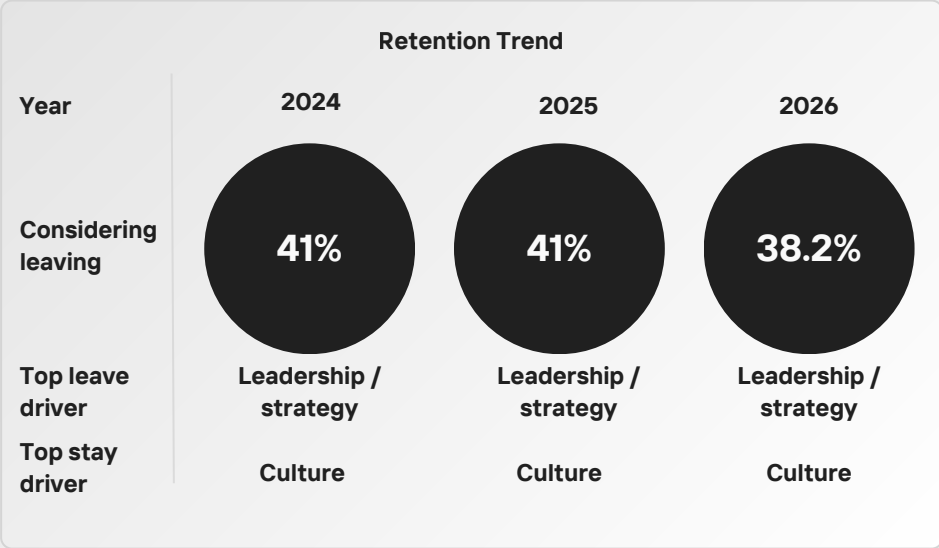
Henry Draper confirms this pattern: "Culture, leadership, and trust have been common themes throughout the compensation surveys that we've run over the years." He observes that what the network is seeking is "a relationship with a business leader, a CEO, a founder that is healthy and high trust... a mission that they really buy into." His advice to CTOs evaluating opportunities: "This is a two-way interview. You are also interviewing this business."

As Henry summarises: It isn't about greed, it's about alignment. If you carry risk, you should share reward.

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- Role & Funding
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Three-Year Retention Trend

The story has not changed in three years: leadership quality and cultural alignment are the primary drivers of retention, and they consistently outweigh compensation in importance.



Albany Insight

The most striking insight is the disconnect between what leaders feel and what organisations assume. Nearly 40% of respondents are considering leaving, yet many CEOs would not expect that level of underlying movement within their teams.

The drivers are clear: leadership, culture, and belief in the journey. Compensation plays a role in attraction, but it is not the reason people stay.

No level of compensation can indemnify against a lack of belief in leadership. Once trust in the CEO or the direction of the business is eroded, the decision to leave becomes inevitable — it's just a matter of timing.

Retention is fundamentally a leadership challenge, not a compensation problem. Organisations that focus solely on pay are addressing symptoms, not causes.

Salary Negotiation >

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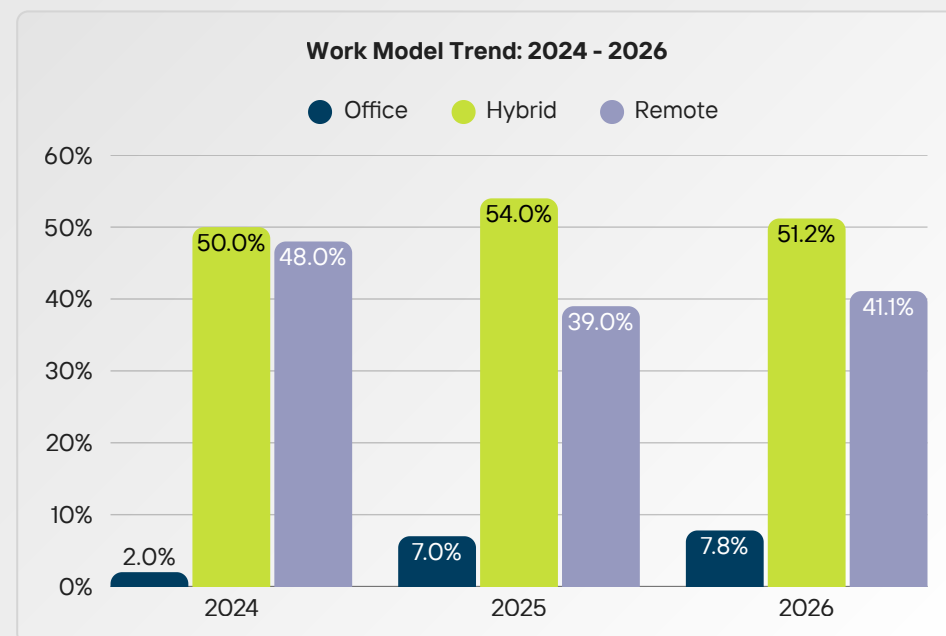
Work Models >

CTO Remit >

Finding 6:

The Dominance of Flexible Work Models Stabilises

The work model distribution in 2026 shows a market that has largely settled. The dramatic shifts of 2020–2023 have given way to a new equilibrium.



The office is creeping back, from 2% in 2024 to nearly 8% in 2026, but it remains a minority model. Hybrid has plateaued around 50–54%, and remote, after a dip in 2025, has stabilised above 40%.

Henry Draper notes that "hybrid-remote has become the new norm" and that it is not significantly impacting earnings, because "it's become something that the community

has come to really value." However, he flags that financial services is leaning towards 4–5 office days, and that "anything over three days a week in an office does restrict the talent pool to that immediate geography." For London-based roles, this restriction triggers a London weighting that pushes up compensation.

The pattern extends beyond London, but not consistently. Higher salaries tend to cluster in major, office-centric tech hubs where cost of living and talent competition are both high, reinforcing a geographic premium similar to London's. This effect is most visible in markets like the US, Canada, and Australia. In contrast, parts of continental Europe show weaker premiums, suggesting that large tech centres alone are not enough to drive higher pay. Instead, compensation appears to reflect a combination of office expectations, local costs, and market density.

Albany Insight

Flexibility has become a core part of the hiring equation. Constraints on work model, particularly at senior levels, have a direct impact on the size and quality of the available talent pool.

Real world example: One client initially insisted on hiring for a fully office-based senior leadership role. After several months of limited traction and repeated candidate drop-off during the process, the business ultimately broadened the working model requirements in order to access a materially stronger talent pool.

However, "remote" does not always mean the same thing. A UK-based remote role, a European remote role and a globally distributed role can carry very different employment, benefits and tax implications. Candidates should understand whether they are employed directly, through a local entity, or via an Employer of Record, because this can affect equity administration, parental leave, benefits, pension and legal protections.

Salary Negotiation >

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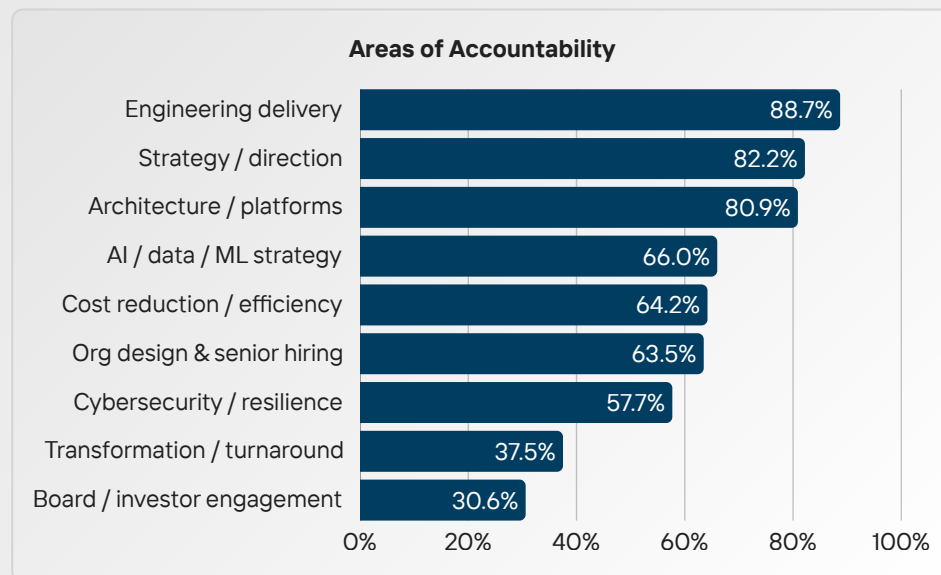
Work Models >

CTO Remit >

Finding 7:

AI, Data and ML Strategy Now Part of the CTO's Core Remit

A new question in the 2026 survey asked respondents about their areas of accountability. The results confirm what many have observed anecdotally: AI, data, and ML strategy has become a core part of the CTO's remit, cited by 66.0% of respondents).



The traditional pillars of engineering delivery, strategy, and architecture remain at the top. But the emergence of AI/data/ML as a majority accountability (ahead of cost reduction and cybersecurity) marks a significant shift. Today's CTO is expected to be a strategic leader across engineering, AI, security, and organisational design. A far broader remit than the "head of engineering" framing of a decade ago.

Albany Insight

There is no longer a distinction between 'technology leadership' and 'AI strategy.' Every CTO is now expected to understand how AI can create, defend, or disrupt value within their business.

Where AI was once a specialist function, it is now embedded in every leadership conversation.

James Goodrich, CEO

Deep Dives: What the Data Reveals

The headline findings above tell the broad story. But cross-tabulating the 2026 dataset, slicing retention by equity, leave drivers by seniority, compensation by gender, and work model by burnout, reveals a richer, more actionable picture.



Retention Insurance

Retention Playbook

Gender Disadvantage

PE Paradox

Remote Retention

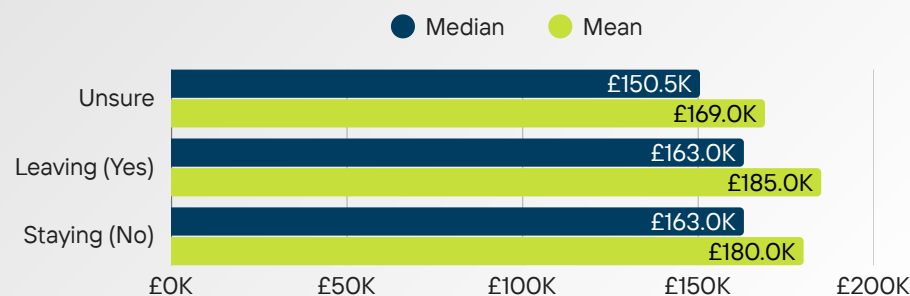
Deep Dive 1

Equity as Retention Insurance

If there is one finding that should change how boards and CEOs think about technology leadership retention, it is this: LTIP is the single strongest retention lever in the dataset. Salary is not.

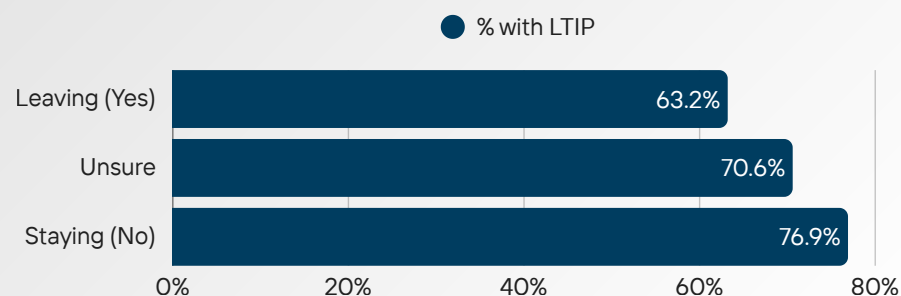
The median salary for those considering leaving and those planning to stay is identical at £163K. The mean tells a similar story. Leavers actually report a marginally higher mean (£185.2K) than stayers (£180.0K). By any measure, base salary does not differentiate between flight-risk and committed leaders. Those who are underpaid tend not to be actively planning departure, they are more likely to fall into the "unsure" category (median £150.5K, mean £169.3K), suggesting a passive disengagement rather than active job-seeking.

Salary Alone Doesn't Drive Attrition - Identical Medians for Stayers and Leavers



Where the data diverges sharply is on equity. Among those not considering leaving, 76.9% hold some form of LTIP (133 of 173). Among those actively planning to leave, only 63.2% do (115 of 182). The "unsure" group sits between them at 70.6% (72 of 102). That 13.7 percentage point LTIP gap between stayers and leavers is the clearest retention signal in the entire survey.

Equity Is the Strongest Retention Lever - 13.7pp Gap Between Stayers and Leavers



This is not a new signal. The 2024 survey found that respondents who wanted to stay were almost 2x more likely to hold equity than those planning to leave. The 2026 data strengthens and quantifies the multi-year case. Equity is not a nice-to-have. It is retention insurance.

The mechanism is straightforward. VC-backed companies, where LTIP prevalence exceeds 90% across all stages (pre-Series A: 90.0%, Series A-B: 92.1%, Series C+: 91.5%), effectively bind their technology leaders to the equity timeline. Companies without meaningful equity (particularly PE-backed firms at 60% LTIP prevalence and public companies at 60.3%) face materially higher flight risk among their senior technical leadership.

The practical implication for boards: if your CTO or VP of Engineering does not have a meaningful LTIP, the data strongly suggests they are more likely to leave, and a salary increase alone will not change that.

Deep Dive 1

Albany Insight

It's called a long-term incentive plan for a reason. It is fundamentally a retention tool. Vesting structures and exit mechanics are designed to keep leaders aligned to the business over time.

Businesses that fail to offer meaningful long-term incentives are at a structural disadvantage when it comes to retention. If you want leaders committed to the journey, they need to share in the outcome.

However, the ultimate retention power of LTIP depends on whether the incentive still feels achievable. In some PE and later-stage environments, leaders who joined on attractive exit assumptions may now find their incentives effectively underwater due to valuation resets, delayed exits or changed market conditions. In those cases, cash compensation can become more important again, not because LTIP is irrelevant, but because belief in the LTIP outcome has weakened.



Retention Insurance >

Retention Playbook >

Gender Disadvantage >

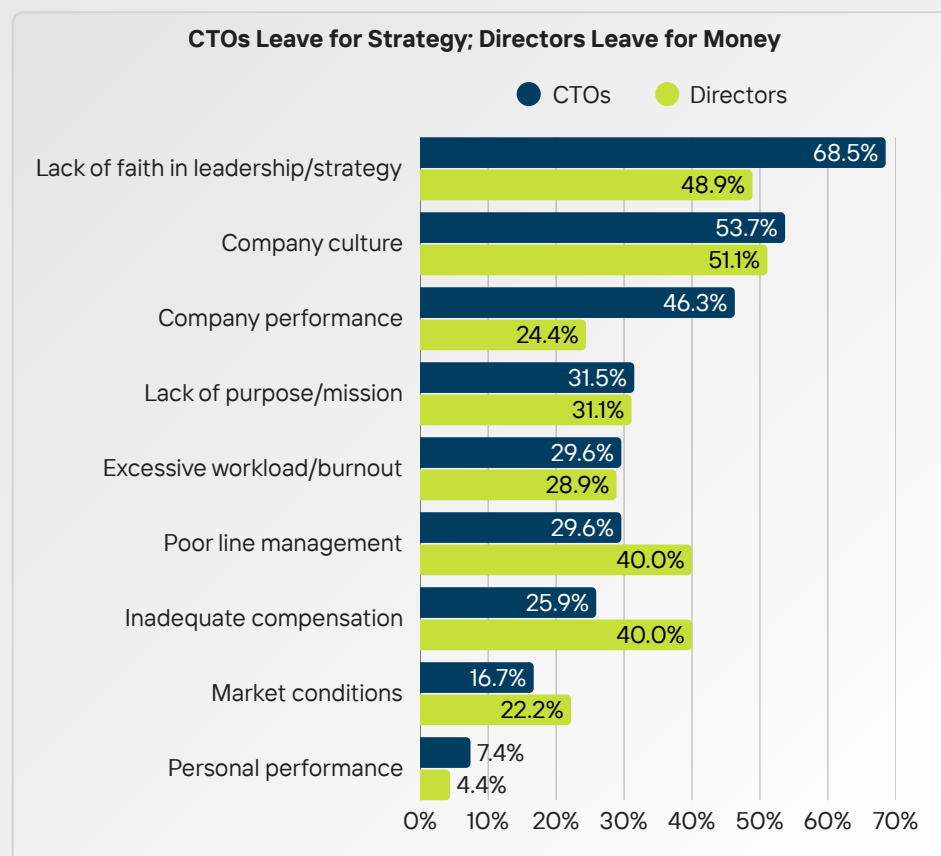
PE Paradox >

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Deep Dive 2

The Seniority-Specific Retention Playbook

Finding 4 established that leadership and culture are the dominant attrition drivers across survey respondents. But when we segment leave reasons by seniority (comparing CTOs (n=54 leavers) with Directors and Heads of Engineering (n=45 leavers)) two different retention playbooks emerge.



CTOs leave because they have lost faith in the business. The number one reason, cited by 68.5% of CTO leavers, is "lack of faith in leadership/strategy". For a CTO, that means they no longer believe in the CEO, the board, or the direction of the company. Company culture (53.7%) and company performance (46.3%) complete the top three. Compensation ranks 7th at just 25.9% (fewer than one in four departing CTOs cite pay as a driver).

Directors leave for a broader, more actionable set of reasons. For Directors and Heads of Engineering, the top drivers are more evenly distributed. Company culture leads at 51.1%, with lack of faith in leadership close behind at 48.9%. But critically, inadequate compensation jumps to 3rd at 40%, tied with poor line management (also 40%). For Directors, pay and management quality are retention levers in a way they simply are not for CTOs.

Employers retain CTOs through strategic alignment and board-level trust; but they retain Directors through pay, management quality, and culture. A board investing in CTO retention should focus on transparency, strategic clarity, and genuine partnership at the executive level. A CTO investing in Director retention should focus on fair compensation, effective line management, and shielding their team from organisational dysfunction.

The burnout signal cuts across both groups. Excessive workload/burnout is a top-three driver for both CTOs (29.6%) and Directors (28.9%). Across the entire respondent base, 10.1% of all 477 respondents cite burnout. But among declared leavers, the figure rises to 26.4%. The CTO role accounts for the most burnout mentions (16 of 48 total), which is disproportionate given 148 CTOs in the sample. Burnout is not merely a wellbeing concern, it is a direct contributor to attrition, and it concentrates at the most senior and most costly-to-replace level.

Albany Insight

The difference between CTO and Director-level retention reflects the nature of the role. At Director level, compensation and management quality remain highly actionable levers, whereas CTO retention is more closely tied to strategic alignment and trust.

Retention Insurance >

Retention Playbook >

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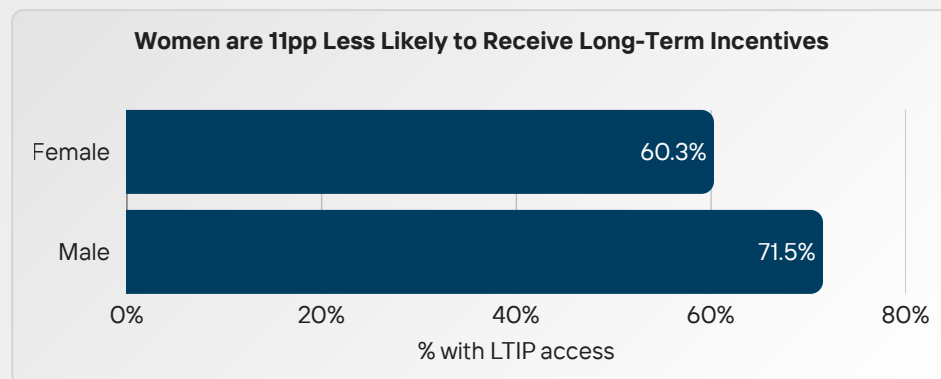
Deep Dive 3

Gender — The Compounding Disadvantage

The gender story in this dataset is not a simple pay gap. It is a set of three structural disadvantages that compound over the course of a career.

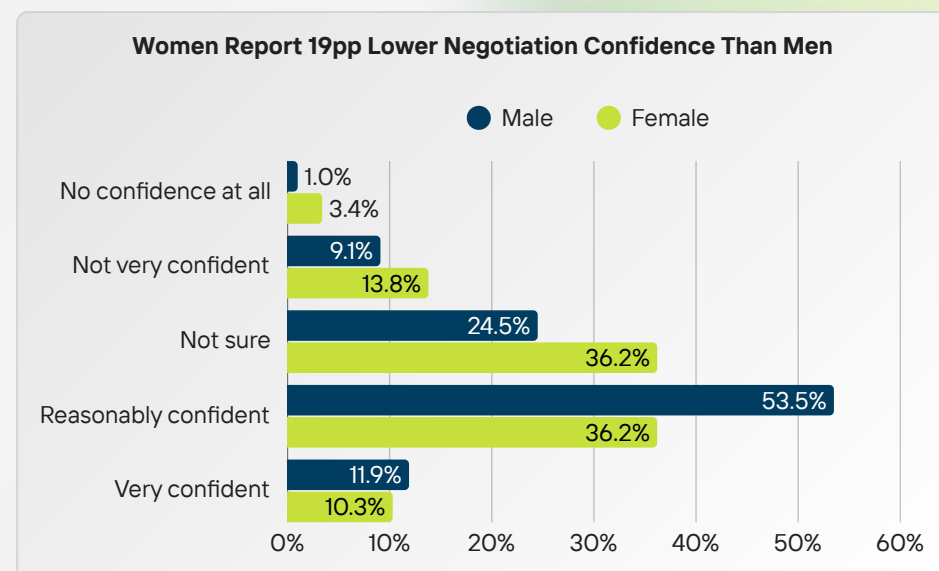
Important caveat on sample size: The female sample is small (n=60 vs 411 men). Women in this dataset actually report a higher median salary (£175.5K vs £163K for men) and a higher mean (£188.6K vs £178.3K). This likely reflects seniority and geography skew within the female respondent group, not a sector-wide female premium. The story below is therefore not about who earns more today, it is about the structural mechanisms that erode women's long-term compensation.

1. The LTIP access gap. Men receive long-term incentives at a rate of 71.5% (283 of 396). Women receive them at 60.3% (35 of 58): an 11.2 percentage point gap. Men are approximately 18% more likely to hold LTIP than women. Given that equity is the strongest retention lever in the dataset (see Deep Dive 1), and that Henry Draper describes LTIP as the component that "can change your life", this gap has consequences that extend well beyond any single year's pay packet.



This mirrors findings from the 2023 survey, which found that women and non-binary respondents were paid 7% more in base salary but received 66% less in equity value. Three years later, the LTIP access gap persists; confirming this as a structural pattern, not a one-year anomaly.

2. The negotiation confidence gap. For new-role negotiations, 65.4% of men report high confidence (very or reasonably confident), compared with 46.6% of women. A gap of approximately 19 percentage points. For in-role negotiations, the gap narrows but persists: 53.5% of men vs 41.4% of women report high confidence, a gap of approximately 12 percentage points. The low-confidence end is even more stark: 36.2% of women report low in-role negotiation confidence, compared with 23.5% of men.



Retention Insurance

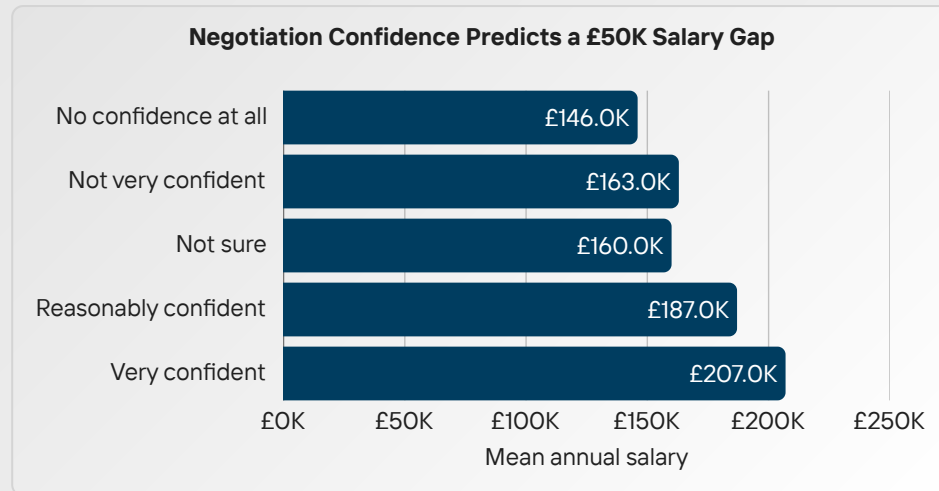
Retention Playbook

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3. The confidence-to-earnings link. Negotiation confidence is not merely a feeling. It correlates directly with compensation. Across the entire dataset:



4. The "avoided discussion" cohort. A striking 3.6% of respondents reported that their only approach to salary discussion was to avoid it entirely. Women are significantly over-represented among these avoiders: 29% of pure avoiders are female (5 of 17), compared with 13% of all respondents. Avoiders have a lower median salary (£138K vs £163K overall) and strikingly low negotiation confidence (58.8% report low in-role confidence, more than double the survey average). The pattern is clear: avoidance, low confidence, and lower compensation cluster together, and women are disproportionately affected.

Henry Draper emphasises that "leading with data rather than emotion" is the key to effective negotiation, and that "the way you handle these conversations sends a signal on how you see yourself." The confidence gap data suggests that a meaningful portion of the technology leadership community (and women disproportionately) may not be having these conversations at all.

Albany Insight

The data highlights structural differences in how compensation evolves over time. Disparities in long-term incentives and negotiation confidence can compound over a career. Addressing this requires a focus not just on pay, but on access to opportunity and clarity in how value is communicated.

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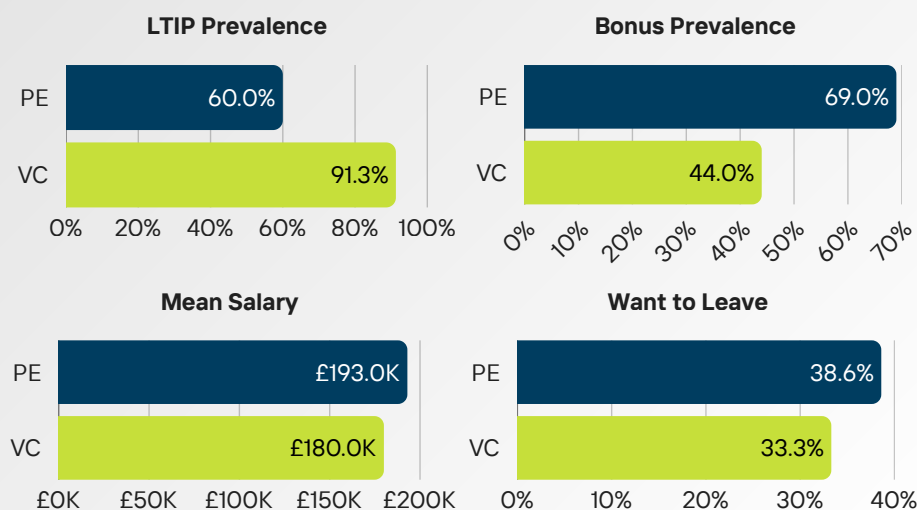
Deep Dive 4

The PE Compensation Paradox

Private equity-backed and venture-backed companies offer two fundamentally different compensation architectures for technology leaders and the PE model contains a paradox that leaders should understand before accepting a package.

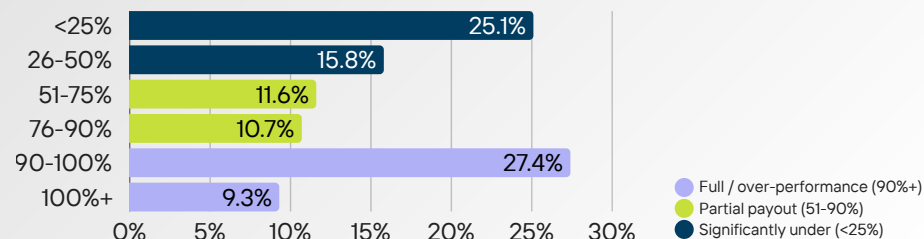
PE-backed companies pay a higher mean salary (£193K vs £180K) and are far more likely to offer a bonus (69% vs 44%). On the surface, this looks like the more generous package. But VC-backed companies dominate on LTIP prevalence (91.3% vs 60.0%), and the equity type differs fundamentally: VC equity is overwhelmingly real options and shares, while PE equity is more likely to be phantom equity or virtual share options: instruments that simulate ownership without conferring it.

VC Equity Culture vs. PE Bonus Culture - Two Distinct Models



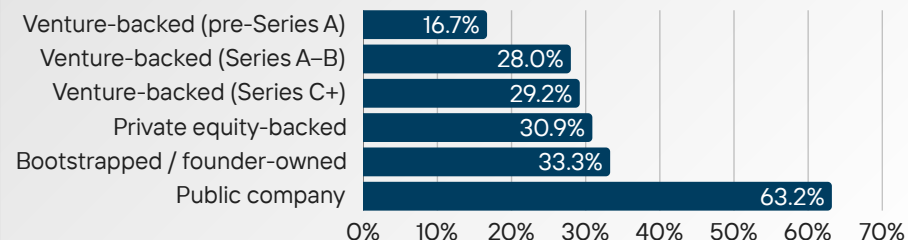
The bonus reliability problem. PE-backed companies may promise bonuses more often, but they deliver them less reliably. Across the dataset, only 36.7% of respondents with a contracted bonus received 90% or more of the contracted amount (79 of 215). The most common outcome is a payout of <25% — reported by 54 respondents. Among PE-backed employees specifically, only 30.9% received 90%+ of their contracted bonus.

Only 37% Received Their Full Contracted Bonus



Public companies stand out as the only segment where a majority (63.2%) receive their full contracted bonus reflecting more structured, metrics-based systems. For PE-backed companies, the gap between contracted bonus and actual payout is a material consideration when evaluating total compensation.

Funding Stage - 90%+ Payout



The PE office culture. The data also reveals a distinct PE workplace culture. Of the 37 full-time office workers in the survey, 40% work at PE-backed companies (15 of 37). PE mandates office presence more than any other funding stage, consistent with portfolio management practices that favour in-person oversight. The UK accounts for 46% of full-time office workers, with CTOs making up 17 of 37. These office-based roles earn a lower median (£138K) than their remote or hybrid counterparts.

Retention Insurance >

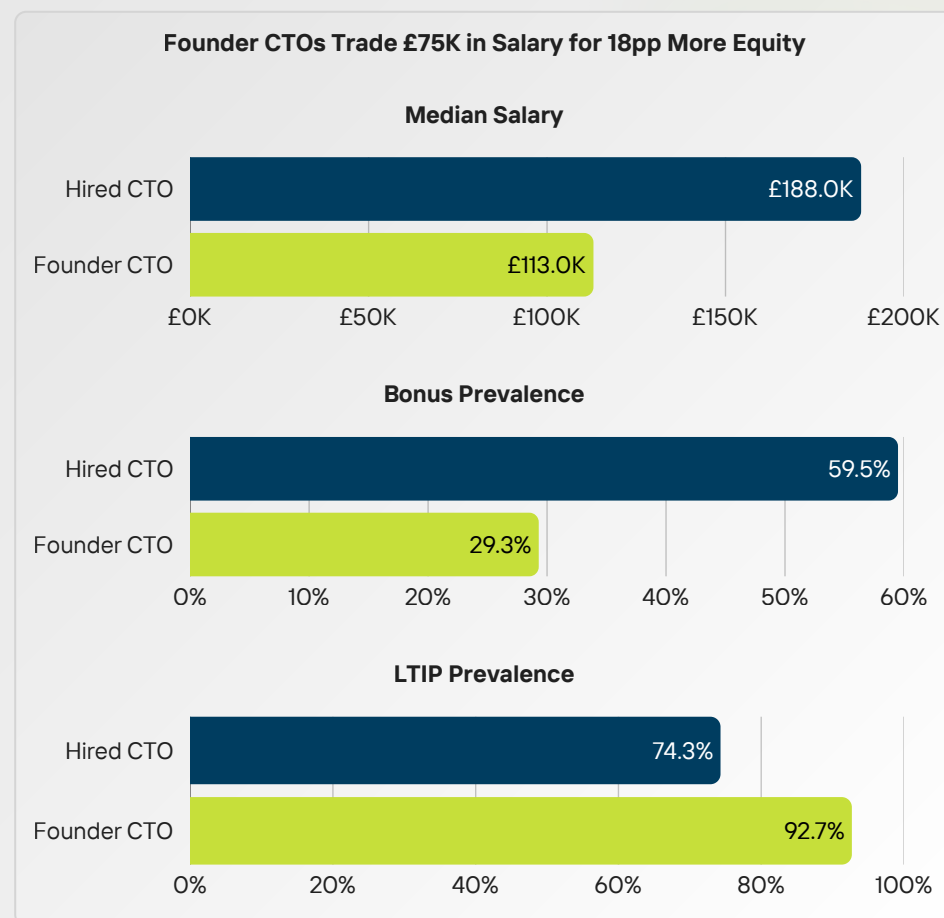
Retention Playbook >

Gender Disadvantage >

PE Paradox >

Remote Retention >

Founder CTO vs Hired CTO: the deliberate trade-off. The dataset also captures a sharp distinction between Founder CTOs and hired CTOs that illuminates a fundamentally different compensation philosophy:



Founder CTOs earn a median of £113K, a 66% discount to hired CTOs at £188K. They are half as likely to have a bonus (29.3% vs 59.5%). But they compensate through equity: 92.7% hold LTIP, compared with 74.3% of hired CTOs. This is the classic founder trade-off: lower cash, higher ownership. The mean salary gap (£147.3K vs £188.0K) is smaller than the median gap, suggesting some founder CTOs pay themselves more competitively once revenue allows.

Albany Insight

Private equity and venture-backed businesses operate fundamentally different compensation models. Venture is open-ended and high-risk, with upside tied to uncertain future events. Private equity is structured, time-bound, and focused on delivering a defined outcome.

The trade-off is clear: venture offers higher theoretical upside, while private equity offers more predictable, often more achievable returns.

One of the most common misunderstandings is around bonus and incentive reliability. Target figures often look attractive, but historical payout is what ultimately matters when assessing real value.

PE candidates should clarify whether compensation is being discussed as base salary or OTE. In some PE processes, the headline cash figure may include target bonus, which can shift the real guaranteed salary materially. Candidates should ask early whether bonus is company-performance linked, personal-performance linked, discretionary, or formulaic, and what historical payout has actually looked like.

In PE, the most meaningful equity often requires buy-in. Candidates should understand how much capital they are expected to invest, whether any loan support is available, and whether the expected exit value justifies the personal financial risk.

Retention Insurance

Retention Playbook

Gender Disadvantage

PE Paradox

Remote Retention

Deep Dive 5

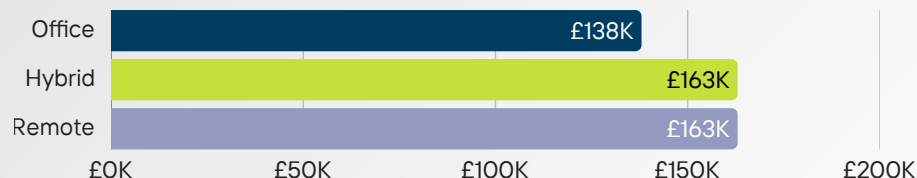
Remote Work's Retention Challenge

Remote workers in the 2026 dataset present a paradox: they earn the same or more than their peers, but they are the hardest to retain and report the highest burnout rates. The salary data is clear. Remote and hybrid workers both report a median of £163K. Identical to each other and to the overall survey median. Full-time office workers earn less, with a median of £138K and a mean of £167.3K (vs £183.3K for remote and £178.4K for hybrid). The frequently cited "office premium" (the idea that returning to the office commands higher pay) does not appear in this data.

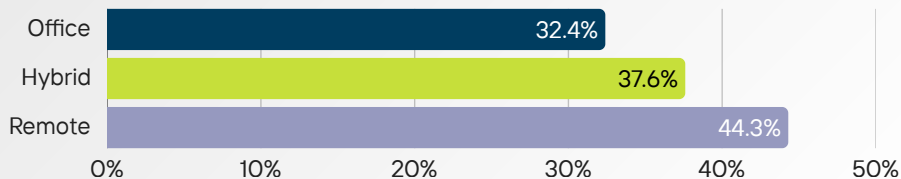
But the retention picture flips the script. 44.3% of remote workers are considering leaving, compared with 37.6% of hybrid and just 32.4% of office workers. Conversely, 51.4% of office workers want to stay, compared with just 33.3% of remote workers.

Remote Workers: Highest Earners, Highest Flight Risk

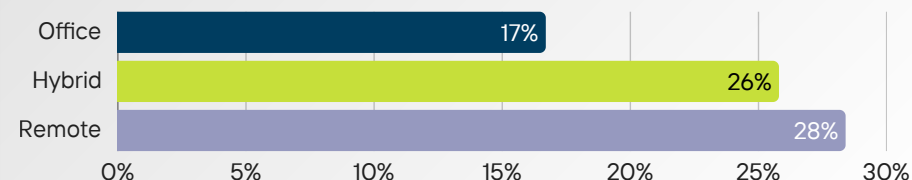
Median Salary



Want to Leave



Burnout Rate



Burnout data reveals a clear trend: 28.4% of remote and 25.8% of hybrid leavers cite exhaustion, versus only 16.7% of office workers. While remote/hybrid groups each had 23 burnout mentions, office workers had just two. This suggests blurred boundaries and isolation increase risks for distributed leaders.

The 37 office-based respondents are a stable, unique cohort: 40% are PE-dominated, 46% are UK-heavy, and many are CTOs. Despite a lower median salary of £138K, their stability suggests they prioritise in-person collaboration or industry proximity over higher pay.

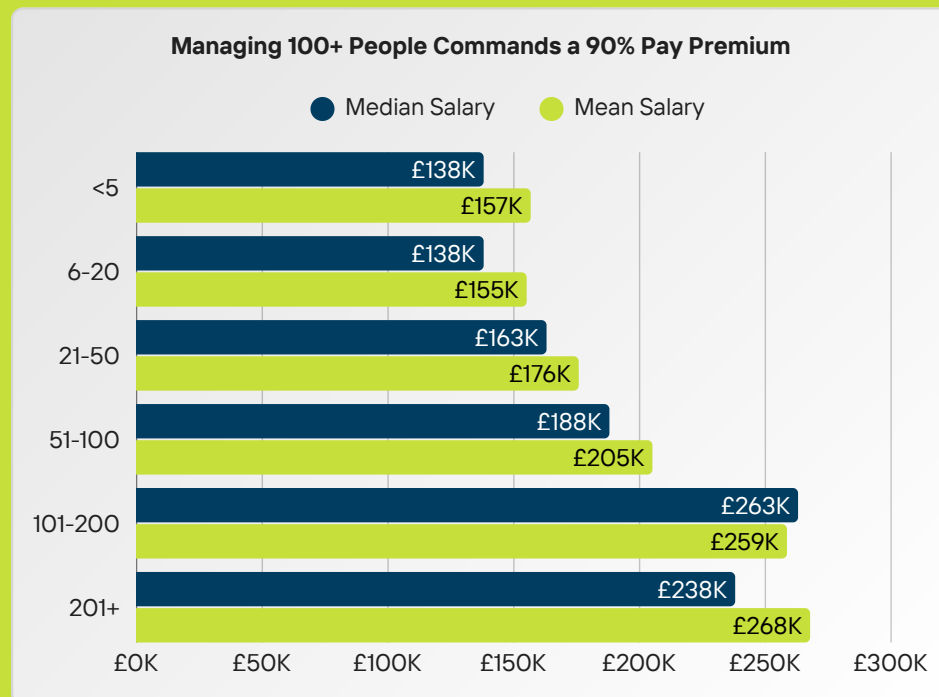
Henry Draper notes that mandates for 4–5 office days (common in financial services) restrict talent to local pools. Though office-first models grew from 2% to 7.8% (2024–2026), they remain a minority. For employers, remote models offer high compensation but face a 44.3% flight risk, requiring deeper investment in engagement to retain senior tech talent.

Real world example: One candidate Albany placed into a fully remote role 18 months earlier left because the company, despite being £100m+ revenue and PE-backed, lacked a UK entity and could not properly resolve the equity promised through its employment setup. This illustrates that further to the increased risks discussed above, remote/global hiring may also create legal, benefits and equity-administration risk.

Four Years of Data: How Has Compensation Evolved 2023-2026?

Team Size: The Salary Staircase

One of the clearest structural predictors of compensation is the size of the team a technology leader manages. The 2026 data reveals a pronounced staircase effect:



Managing 101–200 people commands a median salary of £263K (a 90% premium over managing fewer than 5 (£138K)). The steepest single step is from 51–100 to 101–200, where the median jumps by 40% (£188K to £263K). This inflection point (roughly the boundary between managing a department and managing an engineering organisation) represents the most significant compensation step-change in the dataset.

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The slight dip in median at 201+ (£238K vs £263K for 101–200) likely reflects the small sample size (n=13) in the largest band, or the possibility that the very largest organisations have more standardised pay bands that cap individual variation. The mean at 201+ (£267.8K) remains the highest, suggesting a wider spread at the top.

For technology leaders navigating their career trajectory, the data is unambiguous: headcount responsibility is a stronger predictor of compensation than role title alone. A VP of Engineering managing 100+ people is likely to out-earn a CTO managing 20.

Albany Insight

The consistency across four years of data is striking. While markets evolve, the core drivers of compensation, retention, and leadership alignment remain unchanged. What is changing is how those factors are weighted — with increasing emphasis on flexibility, equity understanding, and long-term value creation.

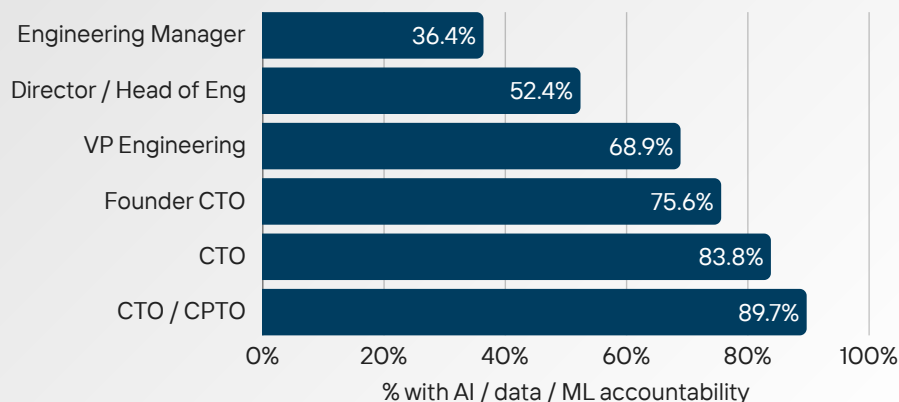
Historically, team size has been a useful proxy for organisational complexity. That may become less reliable as AI, automation and leaner operating models change how technology organisations scale. Revenue, ARR, market complexity and transformation scope may become stronger indicators of leadership complexity than headcount alone.

Four Years of Data: How Has Compensation Evolved 2023-2026?

AI Accountability: A C-Suite Default

The 2026 survey introduced a question on areas of accountability, and the AI/data/ML dimension reveals a sharp seniority gradient that illuminates how AI strategy is distributed across the technology leadership hierarchy:

AI Strategy is a C-Suite Default - Drops Sharply Below VP Level



AI strategy is a C-suite default in 2026: nearly 9 in 10 CTPOs (89.7%) and more than 8 in 10 CTOs (83.8%) hold this accountability. Even Founder CTOs, who typically operate with broader but less specialised remits, report AI accountability at 75.6%. The drop below VP level is sharp: just 52.4% of Directors and 36.4% of Engineering Managers carry AI accountability. This suggests that while AI strategy has become a standard executive expectation, it rarely delegates below the VP tier in most organisations.

The pattern confirms a structural shift: AI is no longer a specialist function reporting into the CTO. It is part of what being a CTO means. For leaders at Director level and below who aspire to C-suite roles, building demonstrable AI strategy capability is increasingly a prerequisite, not a differentiator.

Henry Draper on Salary Negotiation

The confidence gap is real. Only around 50% of CTOs feel confident negotiating their compensation. At CTO Craft Con in London this year, Henry Draper built a practical talk around this finding, aimed at giving technology leaders "something actionable."

Two distinct negotiation environments:

- Internal (current employer): The conversation is about retention and alignment. Your leverage comes from your track record and contribution to enterprise value.
- External (prospective employer): The conversation is about market value and selection. Your leverage comes from competition and scarcity.

“It's different psychology. Your leverage is different, and the rules are very different.”

The most common mistake: leading with emotion.

Henry observes that CTOs often let personal financial pressures drive the conversation, rather than presenting structured data and seeking alignment. "Leading with emotion rather than presenting a more structured conversation in a calm way, presenting data, and seeking alignment."

Negotiate the full package, not just base salary.

- Base salary
- Bonus (and the metrics behind it)
- Equity and long-term incentive (value, vesting, structure)
- Benefits
- Scope of role
- Flexible working

"Base salary pays for lifestyle — Equity and long-term incentives can change your life." Public data lacks nuance. Compensation benchmarks depend on a combination of stage, scale, strategy, geography, and talent scarcity. Generic public data cannot capture this. "Speak to a business like ours that constructs packages in various different contexts." Culture, leadership, and trust are non-negotiable. The survey consistently shows these as the top drivers of attrition and Henry underlines this: "This is a two-way interview. You are also interviewing this business. Do your due diligence."

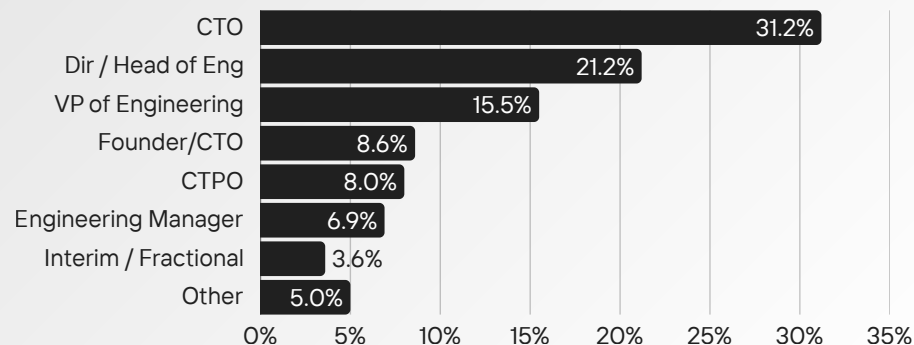
The closing message: "It isn't about greed, it's about alignment. If you carry risk, you should share reward. And ultimately, the way you handle these conversations sends a message. It sends a signal on how you see yourself, but also how you expect to be seen. So negotiate like the executives you already are."

Who we surveyed

The 2026 survey captured responses from 477 technology leaders across 30+ countries.

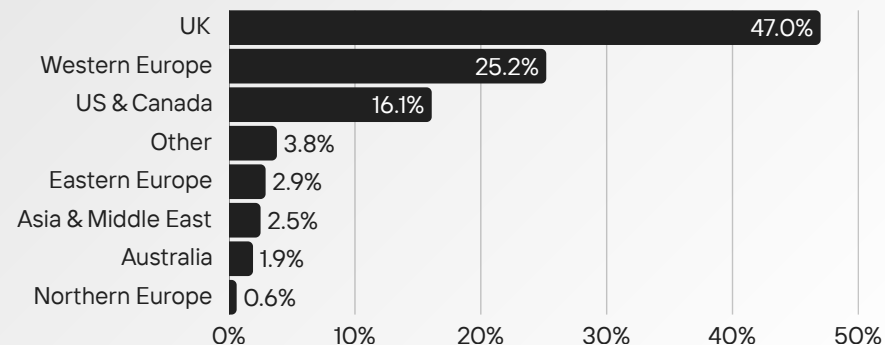
Role Distribution

The respondent base is anchored by CTOs (31.2%, n=149), followed by Directors and Heads of Engineering (21.2%, n=101) and VPs of Engineering (15.5%, n=74). Founder/CTOs (8.6%), CTOs (8.0%), and Engineering Managers (6.9%) round out the core segments. A growing cohort of Interim and Fractional CTOs (3.6%).



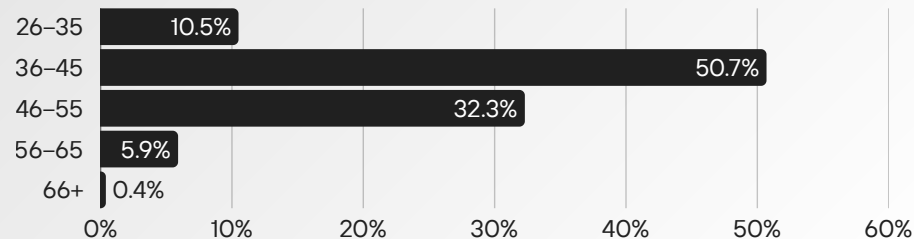
Location by Region

The UK remains the single largest geography at 47.0% (n=224), followed by Western Europe at 25.2% (n=120) and the US & Canada at 16.1% (n=77). Smaller cohorts from Eastern Europe, Asia & the Middle East, and Australia contribute the remaining responses. The top individual countries are the United Kingdom, Germany (12.8%), the United States (9.6%), and Canada (6.5%).



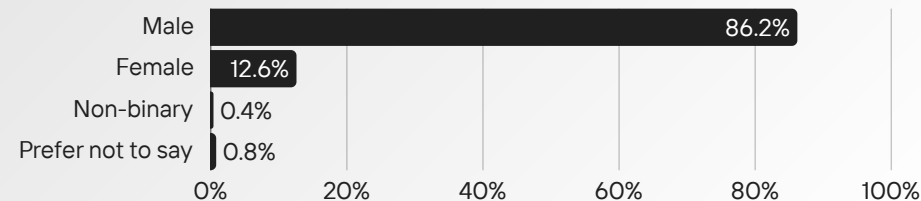
Age Distribution

The overwhelming majority of respondents fall within the 36–55 age range (83.0%), reflecting the seniority of the roles surveyed:



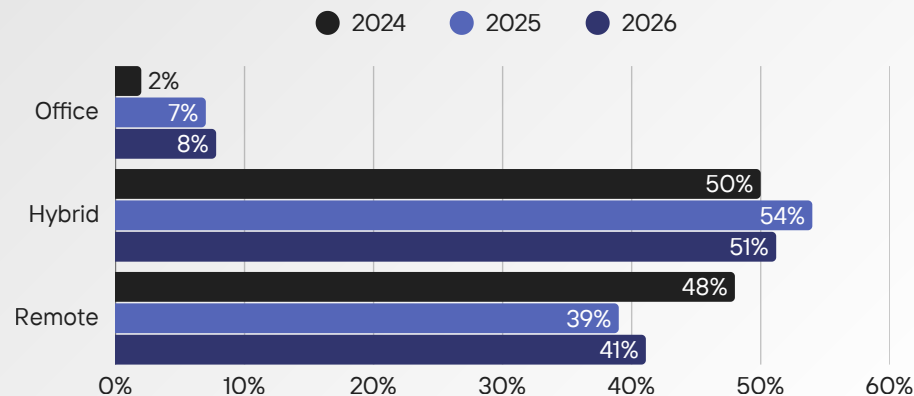
Gender

Gender representation among respondents:

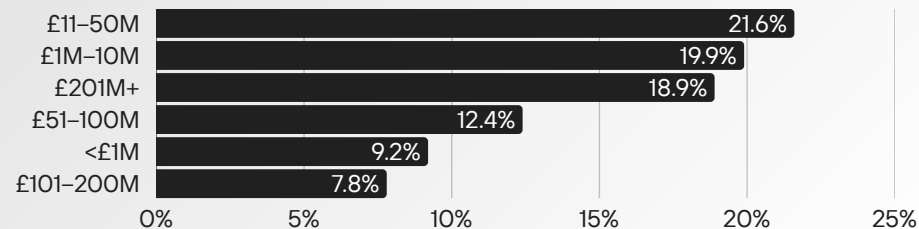


Work Model

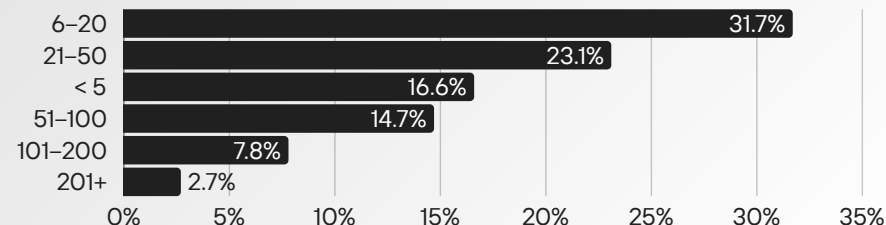
The distribution of work models has stabilised after the post-pandemic shifts of 2020–2024. Hybrid remains the dominant model at 51.2%, with remote at 41.1% and full-time office at just 7.8%.



Revenue Breakdown

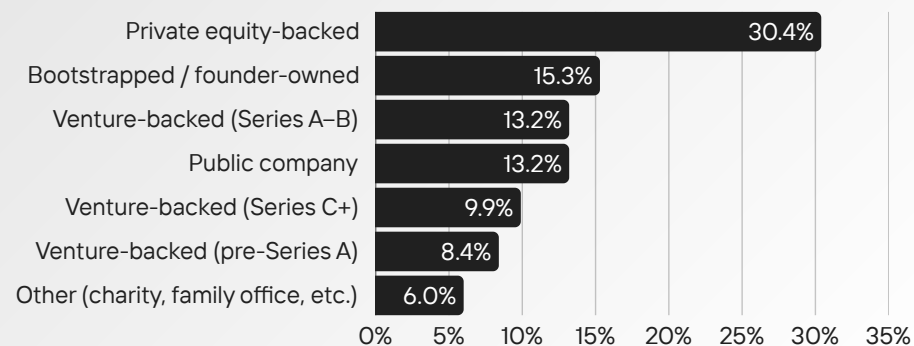


Team Size Managed



Employer Funding Stage

Private equity-backed companies represent the single largest employer segment (30.4%, n=145), followed by bootstrapped/founder-owned (15.3%), venture-backed Series A–B and public companies (both 13.2%), venture-backed Series C+ (9.9%), and pre-Series A (8.4%).



Methodology

Survey Design and Collection

- 477 participants completed the survey in early 2026.
- Respondents were drawn primarily from the CTO Craft community.
- The survey captured data across compensation (salary bands, bonus, equity/LTIP), demographics (role, location, gender, age), employer profile (funding stage, revenue, team size), work model, benefits, areas of accountability, retention intent, and salary negotiation confidence.

Data Cleaning and Analysis

- Outlier removal: IQR (interquartile range) and Z-score methods applied, consistent with the 2025 methodology.
- Central tendency: Median used throughout (not mean), due to the non-normal distribution of compensation data. This approach is more robust to outliers and the influence of extreme values.
- Salary midpoints: Respondents selected salary bands rather than reporting exact figures. Midpoints were used for quantitative analysis (e.g., <100K → 75K, 101–125K → 113K, 126–150K → 138K, etc.).

Geographic and Currency Considerations

- Respondents span 30+ countries across the UK, Western Europe, US & Canada, Eastern Europe, Asia, and Australia.
- Geographic segments: UK (47.0%), Western Europe (25.2%), US & Canada (16.1%), and smaller cohorts elsewhere

Role Standardisation

Role titles were standardised into consistent categories (CTO, VP of Engineering, Director/Head of Engineering, CTPO, Founder/CTO, Engineering Manager, Interim/Fractional CTO, etc.) to enable meaningful comparison.

Limitations

- Sample bias: Respondents are drawn from the CTO Craft community and Albany's professional network, which skews towards the UK, investor-backed technology companies, and individuals engaged in peer communities. The data is representative of this population, not of all technology leaders globally.
- Sub-segment sizes: Some cross-tabulations (e.g., salary by role by region) produce sub-groups too small ($n < 20$) for robust statistical analysis.
- Self-reported data: All compensation data is self-reported and subject to the usual caveats of survey methodology.
- Band-based salaries: The use of salary bands (rather than exact figures) introduces rounding and grouping effects in median calculations.
- Role titles are self-reported and should be interpreted with caution: a "CTO" in one organisation may be equivalent in scope to a VP Engineering or Director of Engineering in another, depending on company size, reporting line, funding stage and remit.

About Us



CTO Craft is one of the world's largest communities for senior technology leaders, with 18,000+ members since its founding in 2017. Through mentoring programmes, coaching, events, and an active peer network, CTO Craft supports technology leaders at every stage — from first-time CTOs to seasoned executives navigating board-level challenges.

The annual compensation survey is one of the community's flagship contributions to the technology leadership ecosystem.

Find out more and join the CTO Craft Community today 



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Compensation Survey Report 2026

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We would like to extend a heartfelt thank you to everyone who took the time to complete the survey. Your valuable insights and honest feedback make this report possible and help us continue to support and empower the tech leadership community.

This report wouldn't be what it is without your contributions, and we truly appreciate your willingness to share your experiences. By participating, you've played an essential role in helping us better understand the evolving landscape of tech leadership compensation.

A special thanks to our partners at Albany for their continued support and collaboration.



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