

REPORT

Top British AI talent choose companies willing to invest in them



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Introduction

2022 was one of the strongest years on record for the UK tech industry. There was a 50% increase in tech job vacancies compared to 2020, £29.4 billion raised by homegrown startups (double the figure in Germany, and almost three times that of France), and a commitment from the government to increase R&D investment to £20 billion by 2024-25.

While the UK tech sector anticipated this growth to continue in full force, the turbulent economic climate changed the trajectory for many companies towards the end of the year and into 2023. Venture capital investment into UK businesses fell by 30% in the final quarter of 2022, and thousands of bright and talented people continue to be affected by mass layoffs at companies large and small.

However, it is not all doom and gloom. Although the wider economic climate means that businesses are streamlining their operations and doubling down on capital efficiency, the demand for artificial intelligence (AI) talent, including machine learning (ML) and data engineering professionals, continues to grow at an unprecedented rate.

According to a recent Statista report, 82% of organisations have a demand for AI skills, yet only 12% think the supply of these skills is at an adequate level. As the need for AI knowledge and expertise continues to expand out of IT departments and ripple into other verticals, the demand and competition for this talent pool will only increase. So, what do businesses need to

consider to attract the best British AI talent? We commissioned a survey of 200 UK-based AI professionals to find out.

The illuminating findings seem to refute the widespread narrative that employees are constantly looking for better opportunities. Instead, the research suggests that people seek stability and progression in the uncertain economic climate and are willing to invest significant “personal capital” in the form of time, energy, and labour for the right company.

At BenchSci, we believe in ‘success beyond success,’ meaning that as an employer, we strive to achieve not only financial success but also to build a company with a culture of which we’re proud. We’ve found that, as we’ve grown to over 400 team members across the globe, fostering a healthy and inspiring culture is a main factor for drawing in talent.

In this report, we expand upon the findings of third-party research and our own anecdotal insights to provide potential explanations for the trends we see emerging within the different demographics. We also offer recommendations on what businesses looking to hire and retain the best AI talent should prioritise to succeed in the competitive job market.

As AI continues to transform the world around us, both in terms of how we work and what kind of work we do, I hope you find this a useful read with a fresh and informative take on what AI job-seekers are looking for today.

The survey examined the attitudes and preferences of ML and data engineers across ten key areas when looking at employment opportunities:

- 01 Stability
- 02 Work environment
- 03 Work arrangements
- 04 Diversity
- 05 Impact
- 06 Mission
- 07 Organisational benefits
- 08 Flexibility
- 09 Progression
- 10 Remuneration



Vanessa Ribreau

VANESSA RIBREAU,
CHIEF PEOPLE OFFICER, BENCHSCI

Methodology

BenchSci commissioned research of 200 AI/ML experts and data engineers based in the UK who identified their job as being in one of the following areas: design/research and development, DevOps, engineering, IT, data, or quality control.

The research was conducted in partnership with the global technology market research experts at Vanson Bourne.

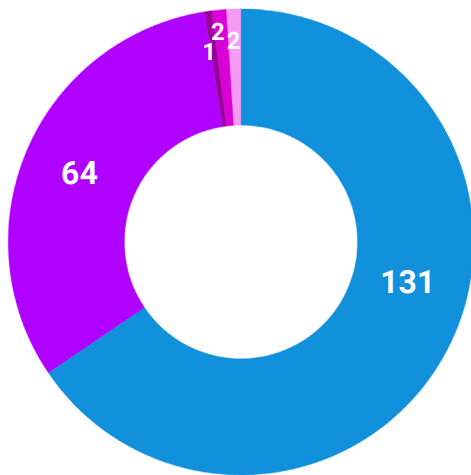


Summary

ABOUT THE RESPONDENTS

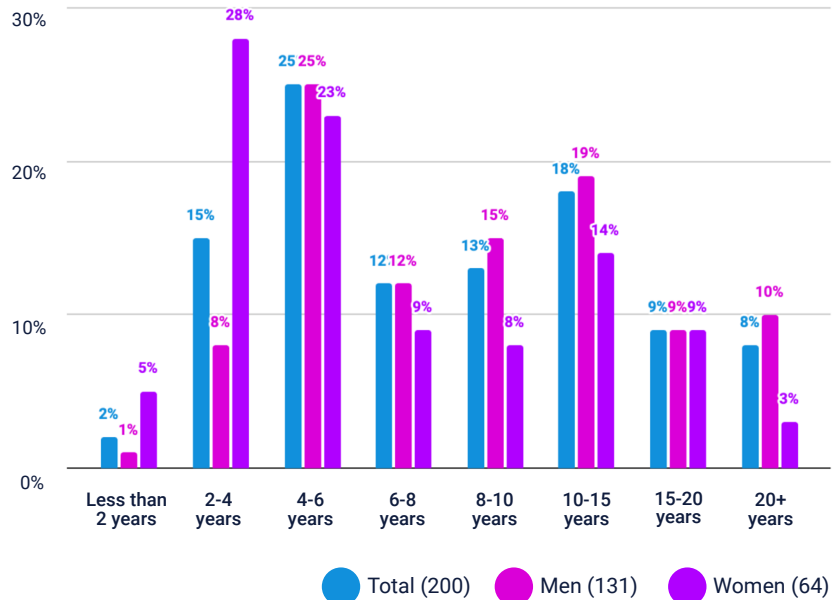
65.5% of the respondents identified as cis men, 32% as cis women, and 2.5% as non-binary. The largest respondent age group was 35-44 years old (34%), followed by 18-24 (22%) and 25-34 (22%), respectively. When segmenting by both gender and age, the largest group of cis men respondents was aged between 35-44 (41.98%), while the largest cis women group was between 18-24 years old (46.89%).

RESPONDENTS BY GENDER



- Man (cis)
- Man (trans)
- Woman (cis)
- Woman (trans)
- Agender

RESPONDENTS BY YEARS OF PROFESSIONAL EXPERIENCE



- Total (200)
- Men (131)
- Women (64)

SUMMARY

THE TOP FIVE PRIORITIES

Our respondents were asked to rate ten categories by order of importance for evaluating prospective employers. To determine the top five priorities overall, we looked at how often each category ranked among respondents' top three. Our findings indicate that the top five priorities of AI talent in the UK are flexibility (37%), progression (32%), remuneration (32%), stability (30%), and being challenged (29%). Working arrangements tied for fifth place at 29%.

This report dives deeper into those five priorities, adding insight into potential influences of these choices and sharing actionable takeaways for employers.

TOP PRIORITIES WHEN CHOOSING AN EMPLOYER



*Chart note: Combination of responses ranked first, second, and third

Being a **mission-driven company** is regarded as "table stakes"

Some of the headline findings include the following:

Amid industry volatility, talent is pragmatic. They tend to prioritise a company's profitability over its valuation and salary and pay raise potential over offers of stock options. They may, however, be underestimating other markers of long-term company health.

Cultural inclusivity is paramount to attracting and retaining employees with an intersectional approach to mental health and wider wellbeing.

The **normalisation of hybrid working** is creating both opportunities and challenges for companies seeking to address women talent's development priorities.

Being a mission-driven company is regarded as "table stakes" now rather than a differentiating factor that attracts talent, as employees prioritise opportunities for personal development and career progression.

One of the key themes from the research that we come back to throughout this report is that ML and data engineers are taking a long-term view of their careers. The data suggests they are willing to invest "personal capital" in both themselves and the company for a strong return on their investment in the form of personal development and career progression. According to these findings, employers should treat enabling the growth of employees' "business of me" as a key driver of recruitment and retention.



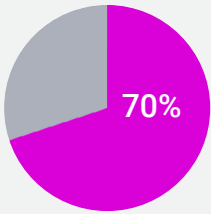
The clear case for flexibility

The pandemic completely changed how businesses operate, with hundreds of thousands of people suddenly having to adapt their professional and personal lives to the “new normal” of working from home. **Recent research** found that 78% of those who worked from home during the pandemic believe doing so allowed for a better work/life balance, while 47% reported improved well-being.

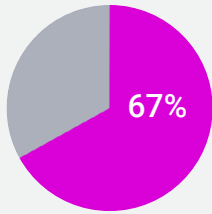
This data chimes with widespread conversations amongst friends and colleagues alike about how the pandemic encouraged many people to reassess their priorities. With the direct link that has been found between working from home and positive mental health outcomes, this is perhaps to be expected.

When asked specifically about flexible working, 70% of respondents cited the ability to work flexible hours as one of their top three factors in terms of importance when considering a new employer, followed by 67% citing a “work from anywhere” policy. According to the **ONS**, more than 80% of employees who had to work from home during the pandemic said they planned to adopt a hybrid working pattern. This sentiment was reflected in our research, which found that hybrid working with an equal balance of office-based and remote work was the most popular working model, preferred by 55% of respondents.

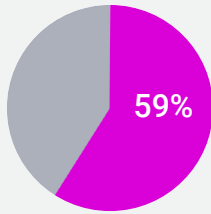
WORK-LIFE FLEXIBILITY



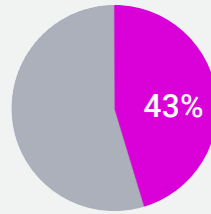
Ability to work flexible hours



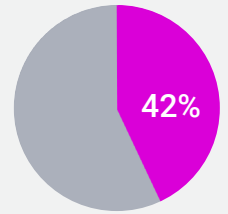
A work from anywhere policy



Budget for gift giving & employee recognition



Unlimited vacation days



Bringing your child/pet to work

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VANESSA RIBREAU
CHIEF PEOPLE OFFICER, BENCHSCI



THE CLEAR CASE FOR FLEXIBILITY

Unlimited holiday also ranked fairly highly among respondents, with 43% listing it in their top three flexibility priorities. This is notable considering the mixed reviews and outcomes the policy has generated from organisations in both the UK and the US in recent years. While it may make sense in the US, where there is no statutory minimum annual leave, the demand from UK-based employees could point to another emerging trend. As employees became accustomed to doing their work outside the standard “9-5” during the pandemic, the preference for unlimited holiday suggests a need for more flexibility during the working day.

To this end, BenchSci introduced a new time-off policy called “Flex-Time” specifically for non-holiday requests. In other words, the time for “everything else,” be it a family emergency or a car breakdown. There is no cap on these requests, and it ensures our team uses vacation time for actual vacations. A Flex-Time policy could be something for other employers to consider to meet the flexible working needs of their employees.

KEY TAKEAWAY:

Despite some of the world’s most well-known companies trying to return to the pre-pandemic status quo by getting people back to the office full-time, the data is loud and clear: flexible working is here to stay. It is non-negotiable for the current and incoming workforce. Business leaders should be thinking about how to empower their employees and optimise their preferred working practices to attract and retain the best talent.



Enabling employees to fulfil their potential

Broadly speaking, most employees strive for progression in their roles, incentivised by the financial and reputational rewards that come with it. However, progression looks different for different people. For some, progression can mean moving into more strategic advisory roles and taking on more people management and operational responsibilities. However, when it comes to engineering roles, our findings indicate a direct correlation between the addition of such responsibilities and reduced job satisfaction leading to increased attrition.

When asked what was most important to them regarding progression at an organisation, 62% of respondents listed “self-defined career pathways”—a concept that gives employees more autonomy to shape their own career paths—among their top three considerations. This echoes our hypothesis that engineers strongly prefer to retain the technical and practical aspects of their job roles rather than moving into more traditional “management” roles. It’s worth noting that men and women respondents ranked this among their top three priorities at 62% and 59%, respectively.

“ *As BenchSci continues to grow rapidly, we wanted to ensure that we had a clear career pathway for our Engineering teams. To that end, we invited team members to help define the required technical and strategic engineering competencies at every level for both the individual contributor and managerial tracks. This created a shared rubric accessible to everyone, which we also used for performance reviews. By agreeing to a standard proficiency for skills at each level, it became easier for each team member to set clear career goals and for people managers to provide coaching on how to level up without forcing a one-size-fits-all approach.*

PORYA RAJABI
SENIOR DIRECTOR OF ENGINEERING, WEB APPLICATIONS



WANTS FOR CAREER PROGRESSION



*Chart note: Combination of responses ranked first, second, and third

ENABLING EMPLOYEES TO FULFILL THEIR POTENTIAL

Learning and development opportunities also featured in respondents' top three priorities at a rate of 60%. This finding is particularly interesting when we measure it against the preference for flexible working, which 70% of respondents highlighted as one of their most important priorities. These findings strongly suggest that business leaders must look carefully at how development needs can be met in the new "work from anywhere at any time" environment.

The challenge of delivering the tools and opportunities employees need to advance their careers while also embracing flexibility appears especially acute when examining some significant differences between the preferences of men and women respondents. For example, respondents who identified as women showed greater interest than respondents who identified as men in shadowing colleagues as part of their career progression plans. While women respondents skewed younger than the men, isolating respondents

aged 18-34 highlighted a clear gender split. These early- and mid-career professionals might all be expected to want access to senior colleagues, but in fact, only 47% of men aged 18-34 cited shadowing as a top-three priority versus 68% of women in the same age group. These nuances are important to consider as there are some clear differences in what support different team members require to help them progress.

This perhaps influenced the attitudes of this age group towards fully-remote working – while 63% of respondents identifying as men aged 18-34 said they would be willing to accept fully-remote working, just 25% of their counterparts would do so. It is worth noting that working arrangements—whether the role is remote, hybrid, or in-office—tied with "being challenged" for fifth place in prioritisation by AI talent when selecting an employer. This demonstrates that while AI talent is embracing remote and hybrid work they are considering heavily the impact these arrangements have on their career progression.



KEY TAKEAWAY:

Cookie-cutter progression programmes do not work for engineers. As a group, they are motivated by problem-solving and relish opportunities to sharpen their skills; this is where employers need to focus their energy and resources. While some initiatives may already be in place and work effectively in person, employers must find ways to deliver high-quality learning and development opportunities that provide the value that technical employees seek in a hybrid environment. Working with your team to create defined pathways they can use, like a "choose-your-own" career plan, is an endeavour worth investing in.

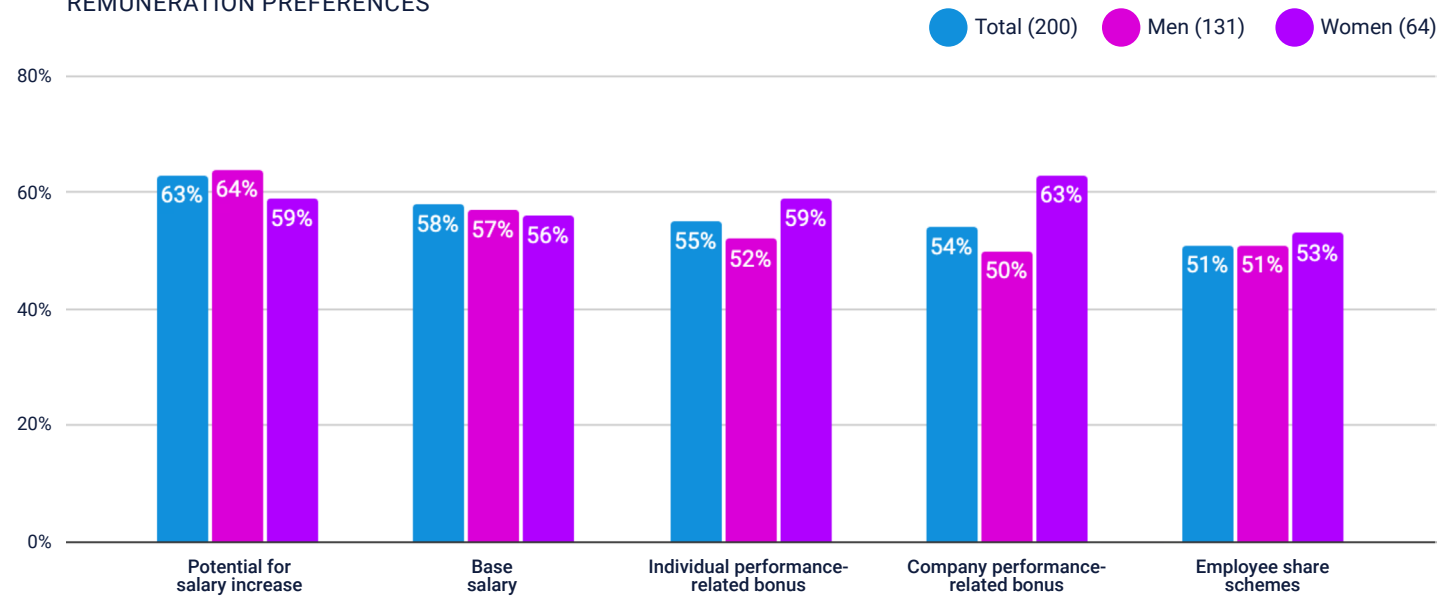
The state of play on remuneration

A **study** of 2,000 UK adults commissioned by professional services firm PwC found that 86% of people are concerned about day-to-day living costs, with 54% revealing that they are very concerned. This comes as the UK battles spiralling energy prices and the highest inflation rates since the 1980s. Although recent reports suggest that recession in the UK might not be as imminent or as deep as previously feared, the **cautious optimism** starting to show amongst business leaders is yet to be widely adopted.

Against this backdrop, the fact that 58% of respondents in our survey ranked base salary as a key factor when looking at prospective employers is perhaps unsurprising. However, we should recognise that this came second in importance to the potential for a salary increase, which took the top spot at 63%.



REMUNERATION PREFERENCES



*Chart note: Combination of responses ranked first, second, and third

These findings support our hypothesis that employees are doubling down on the “business of me” and prioritising a longer-term view of their career over “the best I can get right now.” This is also reflected in the notably slight 1% difference

among respondents when asked about the importance of individual performance-related bonuses versus company performance-related bonuses, which ranked as the fourth and fifth top priorities at 55% and 54%, respectively.

THE STATE OF PLAY ON REMUNERATION

However, it is worth noting that 63% of women-identifying respondents ranked company-related bonuses as important compared to only 50% of men-identifying respondents. When we looked at what respondents aged 18-34 valued the most, young men-identifying respondents ranked employee share schemes (62%) the most often in their top three priorities, even over base salary and salary potential, while women-identifying respondents preferred company-related bonuses the most (68%). These unique preferences are something that teams should keep in mind to attract a diverse set of employees.

“ *At the company level, organizations must be scrupulous in holding ongoing compensation inspections with consideration to gender for employees in similar duties, experience, tenure, and performance. We must also normalize conversations of bias and discrimination in the workplace when it comes to compensation, and help leaders understand macro systems of oppression that may exist inside and outside of the workplace and how they affect compensation decisions.* ”

CHRISTOPHER GUEST
DIRECTOR OF DIVERSITY, EQUITY,
AND INCLUSION

KEY TAKEAWAY:

While many tech companies are still competing with each other for the best talent by offering higher and more alluring pay packages, engineers are not necessarily “all about the money.” A fair base salary should be the starting point, but there is a clear appetite for the financial gains to be made along the way, from bonuses to employee share schemes. Thinking creatively about this will not only pique the interest of the best talent but will also incentivise them over the long term.



Slow and steady wins the race

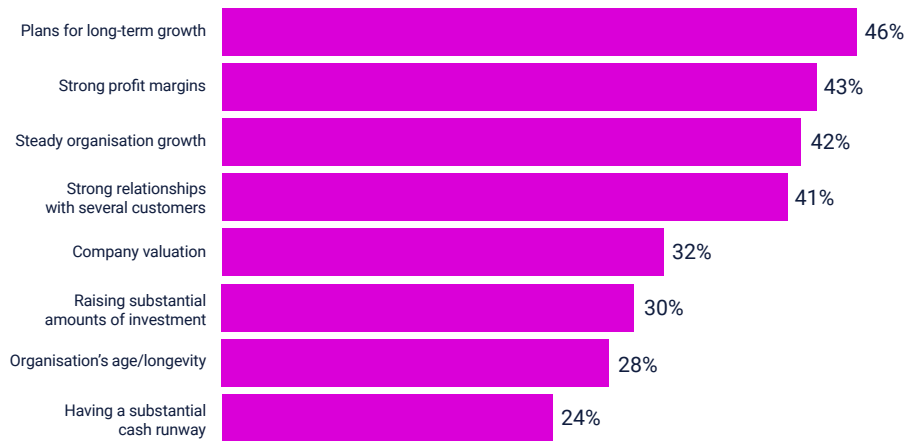
More than 700,000 startups were founded in the UK between **March 2021 and March 2022**. With job-seekers facing more choice than ever, along with competitive salaries and alluring perks, it's perhaps understandable that the **average tech employee stays in their role for no more than three years**. This is a dramatic shift from the tenure of Baby Boomers, who were generally expected to remain in the same role for a decade or more.

However, there are indications that tech roles may be starting to trend back toward longer tenures. When asked about the most important factors related to an organisation's stability

when evaluating job opportunities, 46% and 43% of respondents cited plans for long-term growth and strong profit margins, respectively, among their top three priorities. This is perhaps a sign of the times, with recent research revealing that **75% of venture-backed companies never return cash to investors**, which results in other severe repercussions, from mass layoffs to companies closing shop. The fact that 41% of respondents ranked strong relationships with several customers as important is also notable, particularly as the inability to secure such partnerships was one reason cited for high-profile homegrown battery manufacturer Britishvolt **entering into administration earlier this year**.

The average tech employee stays in their role for no more than **3 years**

PREFERENCES FOR STABILITY



*Chart note: Combination of responses ranked first, second, and third

Though many tech executives measure their success by the amount of equity funding raised or their company valuation, both of these factors were ranked lower by our respondents, with only 30% and 32% ranking them in their top three, respectively. This could be related to an increasing cynicism in the market about investment directly correlating to steady, long-term business success.

“ *Today’s talent often think of their careers as a business and their job as an investment in their professional development. They want to understand company performance the way any stakeholder does, and have a sense of the company’s stability in order to protect their investment of time and effort. One way that we provide transparency around our stability at BenchSci is by sharing the same monthly reports that our investors and board members receive with our entire team. We host monthly all-hands meetings where our team can ask questions about the report, and our CEO regularly updates the company on how we’re forecasting for market conditions. Having these conversations is mutually beneficial: team members can really understand what is going on at the company, be motivated to work towards our goals, and plan out how they want to further develop their careers while they’re here.* ”

JANE ROBERTS
SENIOR DIRECTOR, TALENT MANAGEMENT

KEY TAKEAWAY:

The research, together with our own experience and what we’re seeing across the wider tech ecosystem, makes it clear that transparency is key. Employees understand that we are in a tricky economic climate and that this may affect company valuations and fundraising efforts. What matters to them is knowing that the company they are joining has a robust plan in place to navigate challenging times and has a clear view on its 3-, 5-, and 10-year trajectory. It’s essential to keep employees in the loop and include them on the journey through both good times and bad.



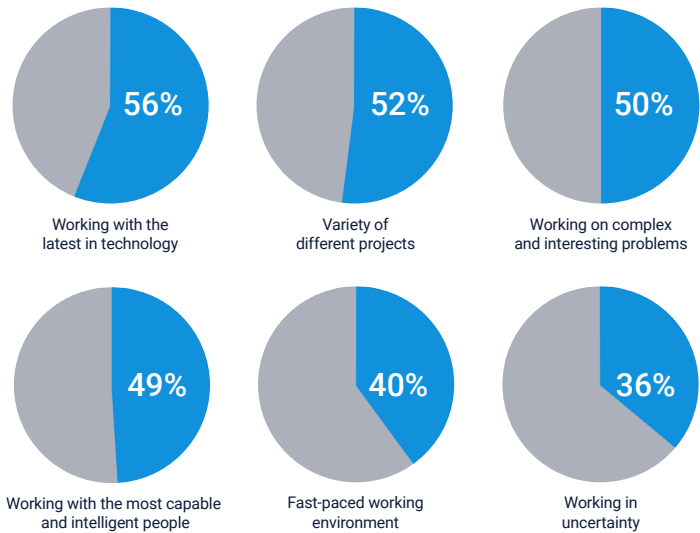
Creating the right sort of challenges

The right level of challenge at work has been proven by the data and anecdotally to keep employees motivated, engaged, and intellectually stimulated, which is certainly true of technical talent. Our experience has shown that tech-inclined employees are often natural problem-solvers with sharp analytical, reasoning, and creative thinking skills. However, the “challenges” offered by tech companies are often promoted as social impact, mission-focused work, or the opportunity to handle multiple workstreams in an agile environment.

In contrast, when asked how they want to be challenged in their role, our respondents ranked working in a fast-paced environment on the low end, with only 40% putting it in their top three preferences. Working in uncertainty fared even worse at 36%. Interestingly, only half of respondents (52%) said that understanding the impact of their role and how it connects to the mission was important to them. This seems to suggest that being a mission-driven company is widely regarded as “table stakes” nowadays rather than a differentiating factor that attracts or helps to retain talent.

Assessing the most common responses given by technical employees shows that having opportunities to work with the latest technology is a main concern, with 56% placing it in their top three priorities and one-fifth ranking it as number one. Closely following was the desire to work on a variety of projects (52%) and on complex and interesting problems (50%). These findings rank fairly consistently across the different levels of seniority, from C-level to analysts, which seems to suggest that technical employees across the board value challenges that relate to the practical aspects of their job. These three preferences in particular contribute to an individual’s ability to gain new skills and knowledge within a workplace and remain competitive in the marketplace, again demonstrating a preference for investing directly in their development.

TOP CONSIDERATIONS FOR BEING CHALLENGED



*Chart note: Combination of responses ranked first, second, and third

“ **As an engineer, upskilling is the most definite path forward in a career. There are constantly changing trends in code and technology. Staying on top of these changes make you not only a good engineer but also a strong future manager or technical lead. It is common for each company to set things up in a way that is unique, so a breadth of knowledge and the ability to be flexible will serve you well. Seeing that there is the opportunity to use the latest and greatest tech stack at an employer is a definite draw.** ”

ELIZABETH HANSON
DIRECTOR OF ENGINEERING, DATA DELIVERY

KEY TAKEAWAY:

The research shows that technical employees find fulfilment and satisfaction from challenges that improve their day-to-day work. That could mean working with the latest technology, intelligent people, or both. Employers must ensure they meet these requests to enable their staff to do their best work and fulfil their potential. Knowledge-sharing and creating a culture of continuous learning are key pieces of the puzzle. For example, BenchSci has a “Tech Club” where engineers can present on any tech-related topics, from Git to Django testing practices, to how to code on our platform. Groups like this help ensure people have access to the information, tools, and people they need to do their best work.



Where do we go from here?

This research provides food for thought as we look ahead to the rest of 2023. Some of the findings reflect our own experiences with hiring engineers and others are helping us refresh and shape our policies. Although mass layoffs continue to shake the tech industry and the economic headwinds are unlikely to disappear completely, it appears the demand for technical talent will remain strong. In fact, we expect it to intensify.

As more venture builders and incubators double down on their search for tech talent to form startup founding teams and “non-tech” sectors bolstering their innovation capabilities by hiring the best technical minds, businesses looking to attract, nurture, and retain tech talent are going to have to up their game.

We’ve known for some time that surface-level perks such as pizza, beer, and foosball tables are not enough. Technical talent in today’s market want stability, flexibility, and learning opportunities in the workplace. They want autonomy to develop their career, clarity and support from leadership without unrealistic high-risk plans, and working arrangements that bring out their best at work and home.

The most in-demand technical talent is not out of reach; they are ready to invest the time, effort, and energy in themselves and their employers. However, they are also clear about what they need from employers so they can bring their best selves to work. The businesses that can deliver on the insights and recommendations in this paper within the new hybrid world stand to reap significant financial and reputational rewards.

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