snipebridge

2025-26

AEC Salary Guide

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Contents

Executive Summary

2025–26 AEC Salary Guide - Key Findings & Strategic Actions

The 2025–26 Salary Guide reveals a profession at a turning point. While profitability remains strong across the AEC industry, salary satisfaction has dropped 20% year-over-year, and 66% of professionals are actively or *passively exploring new roles*. The industry's retention crisis is no longer emerging, it is fully underway.

Top 5 Salary Insights

1. Raises drive satisfaction - Employees who received raises report 83% satisfaction vs. 65% for those who did not and show 2.3× higher dissatisfaction without one.
2. Mid-career compression is the #1 flight risk - Professionals with 5 to 10 years of experience see only 13.8% salary growth during a period when responsibilities double. This is the most aggressively recruited cohort.
3. Design technology roles' compensation outpaces traditional design - BIM, digital design, and data-driven roles show the fastest salary acceleration as AI adoption reaches mainstream use.
4. Regional disparities are widening - Pacific + Northeast markets command the highest pay, but inflation-adjusted wages are falling behind cost-of-living.
5. Entry-level salary compression threatens future pipelines - AEC firms are losing early-career talent to technology and consulting, which offer significantly higher starting salaries.

Top 5 Total Rewards Insights

1. PTO + Hybrid Flexibility = New Non-Negotiables - 42% of employees' top-requested benefits relate to time off or flexibility.
2. Retirement savings matter more than ever - Mid-sized firms (101–500 employees) lead the market with the strongest 401(k) match competitiveness.
3. Bonuses peak sharply at senior levels - Bonus payouts increase 5.2× from early career to 20+ years experience.
4. Benefits satisfaction doesn't guarantee retention - Even among professionals satisfied with benefits, 55% are exploring other opportunities.
5. *Onsite-only* firms face severe talent disadvantages - Firms with rigid onsite policies struggle to attract and retain mid-career and senior professionals.

Top 5 Retention Risks

- Compensation misalignment
- Lack of career advancement visibility
- Limited flexibility
- Unclear skill development investment
- Cultural stagnation

Strategic Imperatives for AEC Firms in 2025–26

1. Adopt proactive, market-based compensation reviews.
2. Define transparent, measurable career pathways.
3. Modernize total rewards with clear emphasis on flexibility & PTO.
4. Invest aggressively in digital and AI upskilling across teams.
5. Integrate compensation, benefits, culture & advancement into one cohesive value proposition.

The firms that adapt quickly will retain talent, strengthen delivery, and emerge from the current downturn with a deeper, more loyal bench.

Introduction

The 2025–26 Snipebridge Salary Guide arrives at a critical inflection point for the Architecture, Engineering, and Construction (AEC) industry. After two years of post-pandemic stabilization and increased job mobility, the talent landscape has shifted again, this time toward heightened wage pressure, declining salary satisfaction, and an intensifying retention crisis.

In 2024, firms focused on talent attraction, flexible work, and navigating a competitive labor market. In 2025, the priority has transformed: retention now represents the single greatest threat to operational continuity and project delivery.

Salary satisfaction has dropped 20 percentage points year-over-year, even as technical and leadership salaries have increased. Economic pressures, inflation-adjusted wage stagnation, and limited bonus growth in key career bands are driving widespread dissatisfaction. Meanwhile, the rapid acceleration of AI, digital workflows, and BIM adoption has redrawn compensation expectations for design technology roles, widening the gap between traditional and emerging competencies.

Benefits once considered differentiators (hybrid work, meaningful PTO, competitive retirement contributions) are now baseline expectations. Firms lacking clarity in career progression or transparency in compensation strategy face disproportionate turnover, particularly among mid-career professionals poised for leadership.

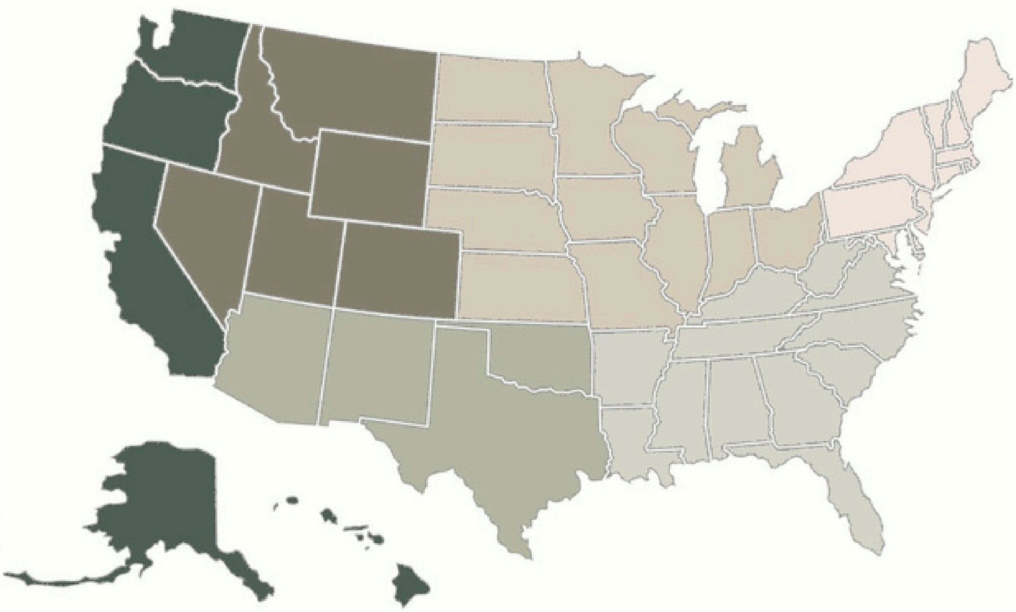
This guide provides the industry with fresh salary benchmarks, regional analyses, and evidence-based recommendations to build competitive, equitable, and future-ready talent strategies. The message is clear: in 2025–26, firms that invest in proactive compensation, transparent pathways, and digital upskilling will retain the talent the industry cannot afford to lose.

Survey Participants

Survey Methodology

The 2025-26 Salary Guide is built upon a diverse cross-section of the AEC industry. This data spans all major U.S. regions, covers the full experience spectrum from entry-level to senior leadership, and includes firms ranging from intimate boutique studios to global enterprises. This broad demographic composition, which notably features a near-equal gender split and expanding ethnic diversity, strengthens the data's reliability.

The insights that follow reflect the multifaceted realities of today's AEC workforce, equipping firms with the benchmarks needed to build competitive, equitable talent strategies.



Participants by Region

Midwest	18%
Southeast	16%
Southwest	10%
Northeast	26%
Pacific	24%
West	6%

Demographics

Gender

45% Female | Male 52%

Ethnicity

White
65%

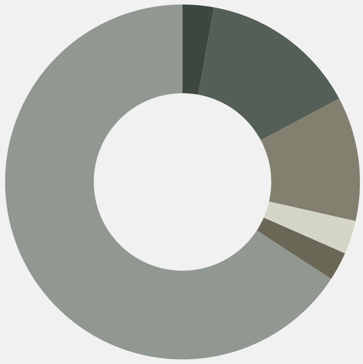
Asian
14%

Hispanic+Latino
11%

Middle Eastern
3%

African American
2.6%

Other
2.8%



Years of Experience

0-5 years
33%

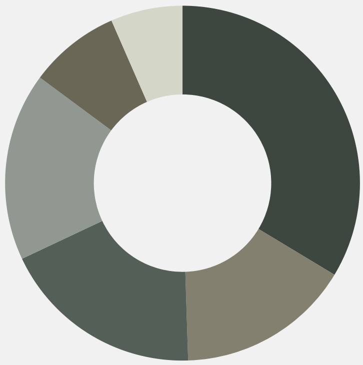
5-8 years
16%

8-10 years
19%

10-15 years
17%

15-20 years
8%

20+ years
7%



Education

Bachelors	45%
Masters	53%
Other	1.6%

Disciplines

- Architecture
- Interior Design
- Engineering
- Construction
- Landscape Architecture

Survey Results

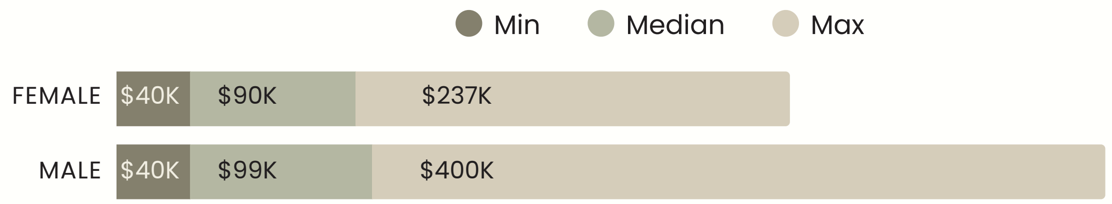
Compensation - All Disciplines

This section provides an overview of compensation across all roles and levels represented in the 2025 Snipebridge Salary Survey. It offers a comprehensive snapshot of current salary benchmarks in the industry, capturing variations by discipline and seniority. Beyond base pay, this section presents professionals' satisfaction levels with their current compensation packages, offering insight into how employee perceptions align with experience, job responsibilities, and prevailing base salary benchmarks.

Job Title	Base Salary			Satisfied	Not Satisfied
	Minimum	Average	Maximum		
Architect Level I	$ 60,000.00	$ 79,104.00	$ 103,000.00	57%	43%
Architect Level II	$ 40,000.00	$ 84,750.00	$ 120,000.00	70%	30%
Architect Level III	$ 65,000.00	$ 91,625.00	$ 134,000.00	64%	36%
Architectural Designer I	$ 47,840.00	$ 70,000.00	$ 120,600.00	94%	6%
Architectural Designer II	$ 40,000.00	$ 77,000.00	$ 174,720.00	78%	21%
Architectural Designer III	$ 52,000.00	$ 85,000.00	$ 149,760.00	38%	62%
Associate	$ 44,000.00	$ 90,500.00	$ 166,000.00	80%	20%
Associate Principal	$ 97,500.00	$ 132,500.00	$ 175,000.00	86%	14%
BIM Manager	$62,000.00	$125,000.00	$178,500.00	87%	13%
BIM Specialist	$68,000.00	$98,000.00	$150,000.00	84%	15%
Construction Admin	$70,000.00	$110,000.00	$225,000.00	-	-
Construction PM	$114,000.00	$165,000.00	$200,000.00	100%	0%
Director	$110,000.00	$158,481.00	$220,000.00	100%	0%
Draftsperson	$48,000.00	$61,500.00	$87,360.00	-	-
Engineer*	$62,000.00	$119,000.00	$400,000.00	80%	20%
Graphic Designer	$40,000.00	$67,000.00	$72,000.00	-	-
Human Resources	$70,000.00	$89,000.00	$108,000.00	100%	0%
Interior Architect	$60,000.00	$94,000.00	$120,000.00	-	-
Interior Designer I	$58,000.00	$70,000.00	$88,000.00	67%	33%
Interior Designer II	$58,000.00	$71,900.00	$103,000.00	75%	25%
Interior Designer III	$75,000.00	$90,000.00	$125,000.00	33%	67%

Job Title	Base Salary			Satisfied	Not Satisfied
	Minimum	Average	Maximum		
Job Captain	$55,000.00	$81,750.00	$170,000.00	62%	38%
Junior Architect	$37,440.00	$65,000.00	$89,000.00	67%	33%
Junior Designer	$41,000.00	$67,000.00	$90,000.00	100%	0%
Junior Interior Designer	$57,000.00	$65,000.00	$75,000.00	-	-
Landscape Architect I	$57,000.00	$68,000.00	$91,520.00	61%	39%
Landscape Architect II	$60,000.00	$83,000.00	$115,481.00	80%	21%
Landscape Architect III	$65,000.00	$87,250.00	$105,000.00	100%	0%
Marketing Coordinator	$61,800.00	$82,000.00	$87,000.00	100%	0%
Marketing Director	$73,000.00	$110,000.00	$165,000.00	-	-
Marketing Manager	$70,000.00	$100,000.00	$102,000.00	33%	67%
Partner	$110,000.00	$180,000.00	$646,000.00	-	-
Planner II	$65,000.00	$97,000.00	$130,000.00	100%	0%
Principal	$70,000.00	$150,000.00	$330,000.00	70%	30%
Project Architect	$54,000.00	$95,000.00	$230,000.00	87%	13%
Project Coordinator	$72,000.00	$79,996.00	$114,400.00	80%	20%
Project Manager	$52,000.00	$102,810.00	$200,000.00	86%	14%
Proposal Manager	$130,000.00	$139,000.00	$148,000.00	100%	0%
Proposal Specialist	$72,000.00	$90,000.00	$108,000.00	50%	50%
Senior Associate	$82,000.00	$110,000.00	$181,000.00	88%	12%
Senior Architect	$77,000.00	$118,500.00	$237,000.00	78%	22%
Senior Planner	$95,000.00	$125,000.00	$155,000.00	100%	0%
Sr. Architectural Designer	$70,000.00	$120,000.00	$228,000.00	83%	17%
Sr. Interior Designer	$63,000.00	$98,000.00	$150,000.00	50%	50%
Sr. Landscape Architect	$59,000.00	$110,000.00	$192,000.00	97%	3%
Sr. Project Manager	$125,000.00	$137,000.00	$160,000.00	86%	14%

Salary by Gender



* (-) Data suppressed due to insufficient sample size

* Note: The range for 'Engineer' reflects a diverse dataset covering multiple engineering disciplines & levels

Compensation by Experience

Compensation patterns across AEC disciplines reveal how specialization shapes earning potential and exposes critical pressure points where firms lose talent to competitors.

Engineering commands the highest median salaries at every career stage, with early-career professionals earning $125,000 compared to $70,000 in architecture, a 79% premium. Design technology professionals are rapidly closing the gap, fueled by accelerating reliance on digital workflows and BIM. Traditional design disciplines show steady but gradual progression, with architectural professionals rising from $70,000 to $137,000 over a full career.

The most critical finding lies between 5-10 years of experience. Architecture professionals see only 13.8% median growth from 5-8 years ($83,000) to 8-10 years ($94,502), during a period when project responsibilities typically double. Professionals transition from supporting teams to leading them, yet compensation growth fails to match expanding scope. When combined with limited bonus growth in this period ($5,284 to $7,731), emerging leaders recognize their value exceeds their compensation. This creates the industry's highest flight risk zone.

Interior design and landscape architecture reveal stagnation beyond 15 years. Interior design remains flat from 15-20+ years, while landscape architecture grows just 2.3%. Architecture shows 19% growth in the same period. This suggests fewer principal-track opportunities in these disciplines, with professionals hitting compensation ceilings tied to billable project work rather than accessing pathways that value strategic contributions.

Across all disciplines, compensation accelerates most sharply after 10 years, with the largest jump (58%) occurring from 10-15 years to 15-20 years, marking the inflection point where professionals become firm builders, not just project deliverers.

The data underscores a fundamental shift: while foundational design roles maintain stable trajectories, technical and digitally-driven specializations command premium compensation and faster growth. Firms must address mid-career compression with targeted retention strategies, or accept that competitors will systematically recruit emerging leaders during their most vulnerable career phase.

ARCHITECTURE			
Years of Experience	25th percentile	Median	75th percentile
0-5	$65,000.00	$70,000.00	$78,000.00
5-8	$75,000.00	$83,000.00	$90,000.00
8-10	$84,000.00	$94,502.00	$106,250.00
10-15	$98,750.00	$110,000.00	$125,000.00
15-20	$103,000.00	$115,000.00	$135,000.00
20+	$110,000.00	$137,000.00	$172,500.00

INTERIOR DESIGN			
Years of Experience	25th percentile	Median	75th percentile
0-5	$60,750.00	$65,000.00	$72,500.00
5-8	$70,500.00	$79,000.00	$104,000.00
8-10	$90,000.00	$98,000.00	$105,000.00
10-15	$99,500.00	$107,000.00	$120,000.00
15-20	$104,000.00	$125,000.00	$132,500.00
20+	$95,000.00	$125,000.00	$150,000.00

LANDSCAPE ARCHITECTURE			
Years of Experience	25th percentile	Median	75th percentile
0-5	$64,500.00	$69,900.00	$76,000.00
5-8	$75,000.00	$84,750.00	$100,000.00
8-10	$85,000.00	$92,000.00	$100,310.00
10-15	$89,175.00	$105,000.00	$110,000.00
15-20	$112,000.00	$128,000.00	$146,000.00
20+	$121,875.00	$130,900.00	$155,000.00

ENGINEERING			
Years of Experience	25th percentile	Median	75th percentile
0-5	$116,000.00	$125,000.00	$130,000.00
5-8	$97,500.00	$108,000.00	$111,500.00
8-10	$78,000.00	$118,000.00	$125,000.00
10-15	-	-	-
15-20	$120,000.00	$139,000.00	$156,500.00
20+	$155,000.00	$210,000.00	$220,000.00

* (-) Data suppressed due to insufficient sample size

CONSTRUCTION			
Years of Experience	**25th percentile**	**Median**	**75th percentile**
0-5	$70,000.00	$74,507.00	$83,502.00
5-8	$96,250.00	$102,500.00	$108,750.00
8-10	$96,250.00	$108,000.00	$112,000.00
10-15	$105,000.00	$146,000.00	$176,500.00
15-20	$130,000.00	$135,000.00	$148,000.00
20+	$125,000.00	$145,500.00	$150,000.00

The data reveals a clear mandate for improvement in the mid-career compensation band. Firms should audit compensation for professionals with 7-10 years of experience, where salary growth fails to match expanding leadership responsibilities. This group represents your future leaders and principals, losing them creates leadership gaps that can take years to rebuild. Accelerate review cycles specifically for professionals transitioning into project leadership roles, rather than waiting for annual review periods.

For interior design and landscape architecture, where career progression can feel opaque, establish and communicate clear principal-track pathways with associated compensation milestones.

Finally, high-demand roles such as Associate and Senior Designer require quarterly market benchmarking, not annual, competitors are actively recruiting these professionals, and waiting 12 months to respond to market movement guarantees you'll be competing reactively rather than strategically.

Compensation by Region - All Disciplines

Regional salary patterns across the United States reveal significant geographic disparities that extend beyond simple cost-of-living calculations. The following tables examine compensation across the six major regions that survey respondents came from.

Understanding regional compensation variations is critical to addressing the industry's retention crisis. With 66% of AEC professionals actively or passively exploring new opportunities, firms operating across multiple markets must recognize that retention risk varies dramatically by geography. A professional earning at the regional 50th percentile may be satisfied and stable in the Midwest but simultaneously underpaid and vulnerable to poaching in the Pacific region. Without regional context, firms implement one-size-fits-all compensation strategies that systematically underinvest in high-cost markets while potentially overpaying in others, neither of which solves the underlying retention challenge.

Regional benchmarks also illuminate why seemingly competitive national compensation packages fail to retain talent in specific markets. When cost of living outpaces salary growth, even above-median earners experience diminishing real wages, driving dissatisfaction and job searching behavior.

Perhaps most critically for retention strategy, regional data exposes where your firm is most vulnerable to competitive pressure. Markets showing rapid median salary growth signal intensifying talent competition and elevated poaching risk. Conversely, regions with stagnant wage growth may indicate opportunity to retain talent through competitive positioning, as local competitors face the same cost constraints.

In an era where professionals can compare opportunities across regions through remote and hybrid work, understanding these geographic dynamics isn't just about fair pay, it's about preventing the turnover that costs 50-150% of salary to replace and disrupts the project delivery that drives firm profitability.

MIDWEST			
Years of Experience	**25th percentile**	**Median**	**75th percentile**
0-5	$41,000.00	$65,304.19	$140,000.00
5-8	$54,000.00	$78,226.77	$120,000.00
8-10	$64,000.00	$89,399.23	$149,760.00
10-15	$75,000.00	$108,206.56	$186,000.00
15-20+	$84,000.00	$122,098.14	$210,000.00

NORTHEAST			
Years of Experience	**25th percentile**	**Median**	**75th percentile**
0-5	$41,600.00	$72,155.53	$125,000.00
5-8	$51,000.00	$86,422.34	$165,000.00
8-10	$71,000.00	$102,511.61	$160,000.00
10-15	$70,000.00	$118,200.00	$175,000.00
15-20+	$72,000.00	$131,141.54	$330,000.00

SOUTHEAST			
Years of Experience	**25th percentile**	**Median**	**75th percentile**
0-5	$45,000.00	$67,609.79	$120,000.00
5-8	$52,000.00	$84,821.92	$130,000.00
8-10	$62,000.00	$93,827.50	$123,350.00
10-15	$75,000.00	$111,025.11	$200,000.00
15-20+	$75,000.00	$133,889.47	$256,000.00

SOUTHWEST			
Years of Experience	**25th percentile**	**Median**	**75th percentile**
0-5	$37,440.00	$68,750.84	$110,000.00
5-8	$55,000.00	$82,923.90	$115,481.00
8-10	$60,000.00	$94,945.71	$135,000.00
10-15	$72,000.00	$112,053.85	$185,000.00
15-20+	$95,000.00	$131,578.60	$200,000.00

WEST			
Years of Experience	25th percentile	Median	75th percentile
0-5	$55,000.00	$70,900.00	$103,000.00
5-8	$58,000.00	$80,687.00	$101,500.00
8-10	$60,000.00	$87,835.13	$103,000.00
10-15	$72,000.00	$117,980.00	$228,000.00
15-20+	$85,000.00	$126,867.37	$200,000.00

PACIFIC			
Years of Experience	25th percentile	Median	75th percentile
0-5	$44,000.00	$76,969.56	$174,720.00
5-8	$40,000.00	$89,820.66	$180,000.00
8-10	$55,000.00	$104,494.47	$230,000.00
10-15	$60,000.00	$115,674.65	$200,000.00
15-20+	$70,000.00	$146,195.64	$275,000.00

Compensation by Key Locations - All Disciplines

Location-based compensation patterns reflect the complex interplay of market demand, cost of living, and local economic conditions across the nation's primary AEC hubs. This analysis examines salary benchmarks across all disciplines in California, New York, Texas, and Illinois, markets that collectively represent large concentrations of AEC talent in the United States.

While California and New York consistently show higher nominal salaries, particularly at senior levels, these figures must be evaluated against substantially higher housing costs and cost of living. Texas and Illinois present a different value proposition: lower nominal compensation paired with significantly greater purchasing power, making these markets increasingly attractive for both talent migration and firm expansion strategies.

The data reveals notable salary compression in early-career bands across all markets. This compression creates recruitment challenges for firms competing against industries with stronger entry-level compensation, particularly technology and consulting sectors that actively recruit the same talent pool.

Understanding these regional dynamics is essential for firms operating across multiple markets or competing for talent nationally. In an era of expanded remote and hybrid work, geographic salary differentials are no longer purely local considerations, they directly inform talent attraction strategy, retention risk assessment, and the total value proposition firms can offer regardless of office location.

CALIFORNIA			
Years of Experience	25th percentile	Median	75th percentile
0-5	$44,000.00	$76,795.24	$174,720.00
5-8	$67,000.00	$92,595.43	$135,200.00
8-10	$75,000.00	$111,211.36	$230,000.00
10-15	$84,000.00	$122,253.66	$200,000.00
15-20+	$110,000.00	$158,948.72	$275,000.00

NEW YORK			
Years of Experience	25th percentile	Median	75th percentile
0-5	$50,000.00	$76,516.14	$125,000.00
5-8	$60,000.00	$90,213.04	$165,000.00
8-10	$83,000.00	$105,531.60	$160,000.00
10-15	$90,000.00	$120,272.73	$175,000.00
15-20+	$75,000.00	$129,904.76	$225,000.00

TEXAS			
Years of Experience	25th percentile	Median	75th percentile
0-5	$41,600.00	$70,024.44	$110,000.00
5-8	$65,000.00	$82,859.24	$115,481.00
8-10	$60,000.00	$95,110.71	$135,000.00
10-15	$72,000.00	$112,928.57	$185,000.00
15-20+	$95,000.00	$138,642.86	$200,000.00

ILLINOIS			
Years of Experience	25th percentile	Median	75th percentile
0-5	$41,000.00	$65,585.80	$83,000.00
5-8	$60,444.00	$78,880.31	$100,000.00
8-10	$71,000.00	$101,110.00	$149,760.00
10-15	$80,000.00	$115,941.67	$186,000.00
15-20+	$94,000.00	$128,384.62	$210,000.00

Salary Satisfaction

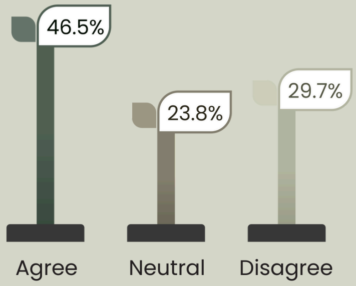
Compensation satisfaction has eroded significantly, signaling a potential retention crisis. While 47% of respondents report satisfaction with their current salary, 29% express dissatisfaction, and 24% remain neutral, a notable decline from 67% satisfaction in 2024. This *20% drop reflects* widening gaps in pay equity, market competitiveness, and role-compensation alignment. Issues that, if left unaddressed, could trigger widespread disengagement and turnover.

The data reveals a clear compensation-retention linkage. Among the 71% of professionals who received raises in the past 12 months, 83% report being satisfied with their compensation. Conversely, only 65% of those without raises express satisfaction, and this group shows 2.3x higher dissatisfaction rates (32% versus 14%), a statistically significant retention red flag.

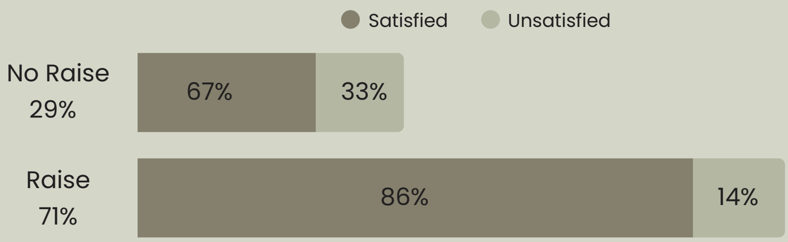
Firms should implement annual compensation reviews tied to market benchmarking data. Establish transparent salary bands aligned with current market rates and conduct proactive adjustments before employees seek external opportunities. At minimum, analyze total compensation annually, comparing base salary, bonuses, and benefits against regional and role-specific benchmarks.

Organizations positioning compensation at the 50th–75th percentile of market rates while communicating their compensation philosophy clearly will substantially reduce turnover. Reactive strategies that wait for employees to demand raises consistently result in turnover costs far exceeding proactive adjustment investments.

Total Salary Satisfaction



Salary Satisfaction With Raises



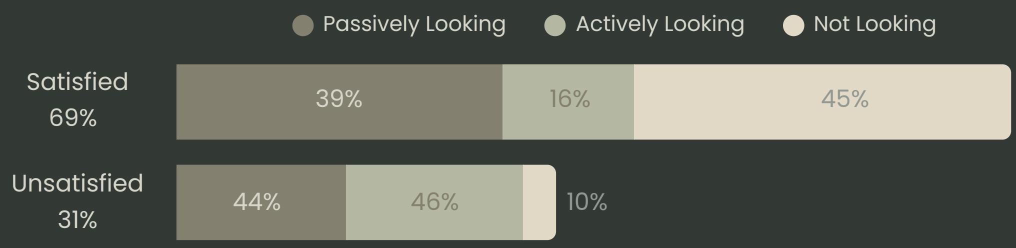
Benefit and Total Compensation Analysis

Total compensation extends well beyond base salary. Benefits packages, PTO, retirement contributions, and performance bonuses, function as critical retention levers and competitive differentiators. Yet the data reveals a paradox: competitive benefits are necessary but insufficient for retention. Among the 69% satisfied with their current benefits, 55% are exploring opportunities (39% passively, 16% actively). Benefits dissatisfaction creates acute flight risk: 90% of dissatisfied employees are either actively seeking new roles (46%) or passively open to change (44%). Only 10% of benefits-dissatisfied employees are staying put, compared to 45% of satisfied employees.

The Strategic Implication: Benefits satisfaction prevents turnover but doesn't guarantee retention. Even employees pleased with their packages will leave for better compensation, clearer career pathways, or stronger firm culture. Organizations failing to meet baseline benefits expectations face disproportionate turnover risk, while those exceeding market standards gain marginal retention advantages but only when paired with competitive pay and visible growth opportunities.

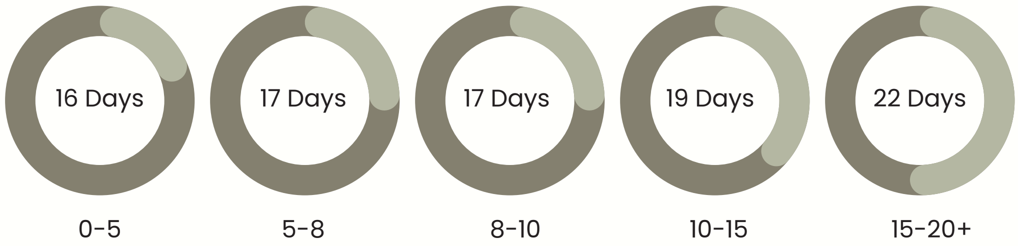
The following analysis examines how benefits offerings vary by firm size and experience level, revealing market patterns that inform strategic total rewards positioning. Firms must benchmark competitively while simultaneously addressing the compensation and career advancement factors that drive the other 55% of satisfied employees to explore alternatives.

Benefit Satisfaction vs Seeking New Opportunities



Benefits: Paid Time Off (PTO)

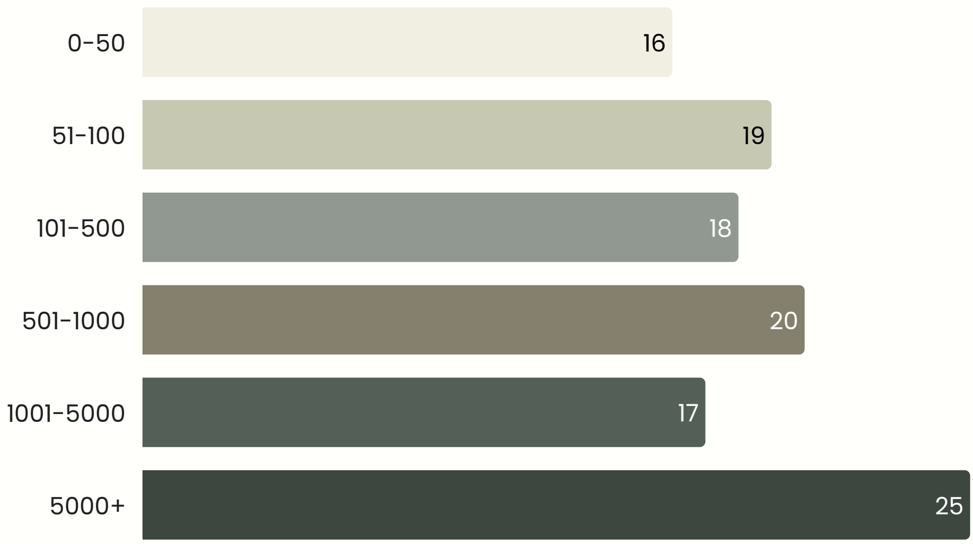
Average PTO by Years of experience



PTO functions as both a retention tool and wellness investment. Adequate time off reduces burnout, improves productivity, and signals organizational commitment to work-life integration, increasingly critical for younger generations prioritizing flexibility.

PTO allocations demonstrate a clear correlation with both firm scale and employee tenure. Across firm size, offerings range from 16 days at smaller organizations (0-50 employees) to 25 days at enterprises with 5,000+ employees, a 56% differential reflecting resource capacity. By experience level, PTO grows from 15 days for early-career professionals to 22+ days for those with 15-20 years of tenure.

Average PTO by Firm Size



Benefits: Retirement Savings

Retirement savings have become a non-negotiable component of total compensation, particularly as workforce demographics shift and economic uncertainty persists. The current AEC workforce spans multiple generations, from Gen Z entering the profession to Baby Boomers nearing retirement, each facing distinct but equally urgent retirement savings challenges.

Millennials and Gen Z professionals carry unprecedented student loan burdens while confronting diminished Social Security prospects. For these cohorts, employer-sponsored retirement matching represents one of the few reliable wealth-building mechanisms available, making it a decisive factor in employer selection and retention decisions.

Mid-sized firms (101-500 employees) lead in retirement matching competitiveness, with 48% offering 3-5% matches and 20% providing 5-10% contributions. Smaller firms (0-50 employees) cluster at lower match rates, with 59% offering 0-3%, while larger organizations show greater variability. This positions mid-market firms strategically in retirement benefits, a key consideration for professionals prioritizing long-term financial security.

Contribution to 401k by Firm size						
Employer Contribution	**0-50**	**51-100**	**101-500**	**501-1000**	**1001-5000**	**5000+**
0 to 3%	58.99%	40.32%	45.30%	28.00%	35.85%	42.11%
3 to 5%	34.83%	45.16%	36.75%	48.00%	52.83%	42.11%
5 to 10%	4.49%	11.29%	12.82%	20.00%	7.55%	7.89%
10%+	1.69%	3.23%	5.13%	4.00%	3.77%	7.89%

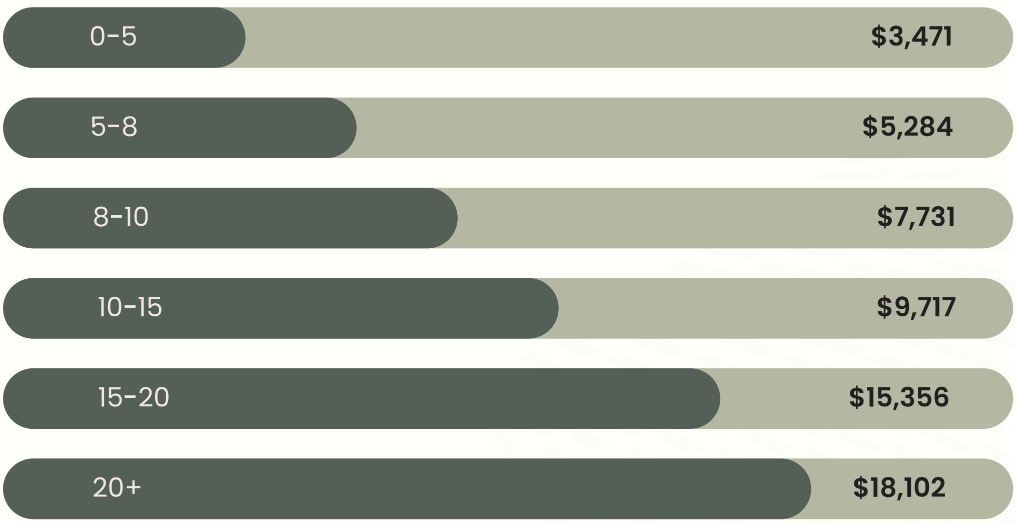
Benefits: Performance Bonus

Annual bonus compensation scales sharply with experience and responsibility. Early-career professionals average $3,472, while those with 20+ years earn $18,102, a 5.2x difference that underscores the rising value of senior talent to firm profitability and client retention.

The largest bonus jump occurs from 10-15 years to 15-20 years, a 58% leap, aligning with advancement into principal-track and firm leadership roles. However, limited bonus growth from $5,284 to $7,731 in the pivotal 5-10 year experience range, despite rapidly rising responsibilities, creates a clear pressure point for mid-career retention, risking disengagement among emerging project leaders.

Firms should analyze annual bonus distributions against these experience-based benchmarks. Those paying below the 50th percentile, particularly in the critical 8-15 year range, face heightened retention risk. Transparent bonus formulas, weighting individual performance (40-50%), project results (20-30%), and firm performance (20-30%), help reinforce the link between measurable contributions and rewards and prevent bonuses from defaulting to entitlement.

Annual Bonus by Years of Experience

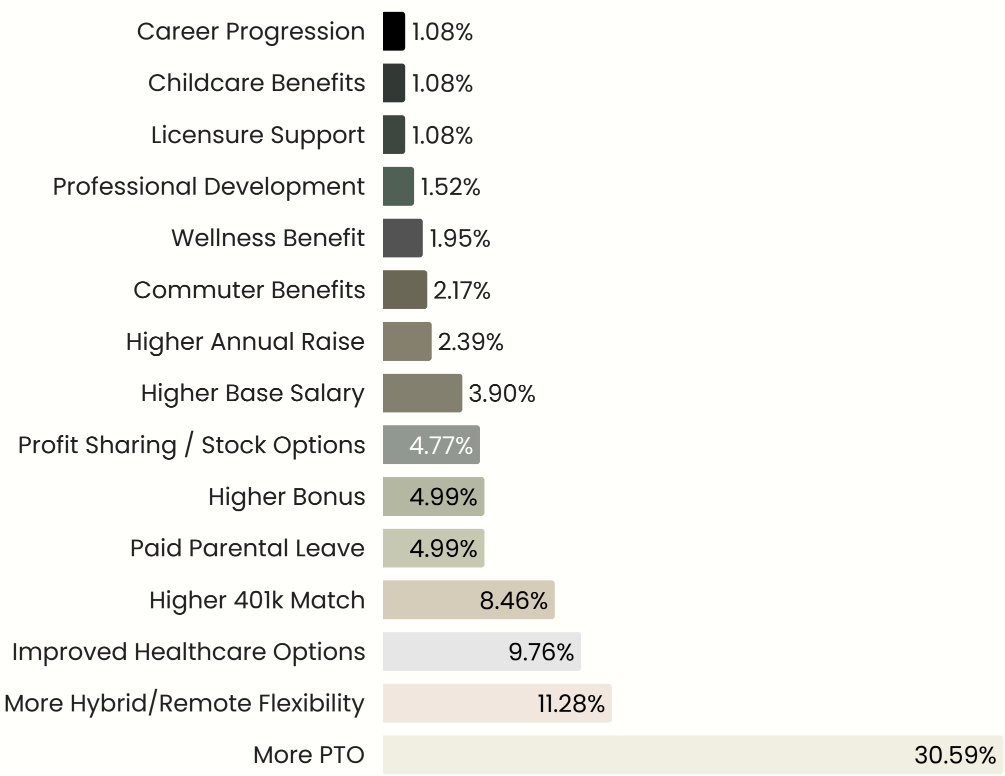


Top-Ranked Benefits

When asked which single benefit they would most like to see added or improved within their current total compensation package, respondents expressed a clear consensus. "More PTO" overwhelmingly led as the top priority, cited by 31% of respondents. The next highest were, expanded hybrid or remote flexibility (11%), improved healthcare options (10%), and increases to 401(k) match rates (8%).

These results underscore a shift in expectations: time off and workplace flexibility now account for over 40% of all desired benefits, signaling that these are no longer merely perks but essential standards in the eyes of the current workforce. Financial security forms the second tier of priorities, with approximately 5% of employees seeking enhancements such as higher bonuses, paid parental leave, and profit sharing or stock options, clear evidence that employees value long-term wealth and family support as part of a competitive package.

Growth and enrichment benefits, such as professional development (2%), wellness programs (2%), mentorship (1%), and childcare assistance (1%), held smaller but meaningful shares. Collectively, these findings reinforce that today's total rewards strategies must extend beyond salary and traditional benefits, prioritizing flexibility, health, and economic security to meet the evolving needs of the AEC workforce..



Workplace Flexibility Trends

Workplace flexibility has transitioned from perk to baseline expectation. Firms operating fully onsite face limited geographic talent pools, higher compensation demands, and elevated turnover risk among professionals who value work-life integration.

The AEC industry has largely embraced flexible and hybrid work as a standard. Survey data reveals 71.78% of firms now offer hybrid or fully remote arrangements, with only 28.22% maintaining fully onsite requirements. The most prevalent model is 2 days remote weekly (23.65%), followed by 1 day remote (19.29%), balancing collaborative project needs with flexibility.

Firm size significantly influences flexibility offerings. Smaller firms (0-50 employees) show the highest onsite requirements at 38%, creating competitive disadvantage as professionals increasingly view flexibility as non-negotiable. As firm size increases, onsite-only policies drop dramatically: 9% (101-500 employees), 18% (5,000+ employees), indicating larger organizations recognize flexibility as essential for talent retention.

Firms maintaining rigid onsite policies should implement minimum 1-2 days remote weekly to remain competitive. Calculate the cost of inflexibility, losing even one mid-career hire annually to competitors offering hybrid work generates recruiting costs (50-150% of salary) far exceeding any perceived remote productivity loss. Flexibility now functions as a quantifiable total compensation component, with professionals accepting 5% lower salaries for meaningful remote/hybrid options.

Hybrid Work Model by Firm Size

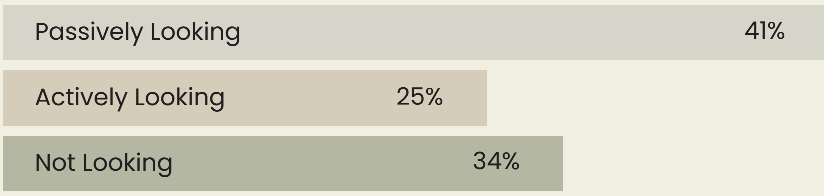
Firm Size	1/day	2/day	3/day	Fully Onsite	Fully Remote
0 - 50	16%	21%	11%	38%	14%
51 - 100	18%	32%	16%	29%	5%
101 - 500	18%	26%	21%	18%	16%
501 - 1000	32%	4%	8%	36%	20%
1001 - 5000	19%	25%	25%	17%	15%
5000+	18%	26%	21%	18%	16%

Retention: The Industry's Hidden Crisis

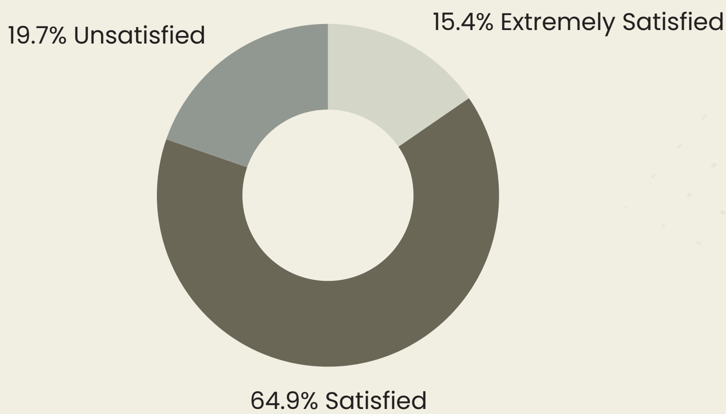
Job satisfaction is high with 64.9% of respondents reporting being satisfied or extremely satisfied with their roles. Yet satisfaction is a lagging indicator masking an urgent retention crisis: 66% of the AEC workforce is actively job hunting (25%) or passively exploring opportunities (41%). Only 34% are not seeking new positions.

This reveals the report's most critical finding: satisfaction does not predict retention. Among highly satisfied employees, nearly half remain open to leaving. Even professionals content with their current roles will move for better compensation, clearer career pathways, or stronger cultural alignment. The traditional retention assumption, that satisfied employees stay, has collapsed.

Seeking New Opportunities



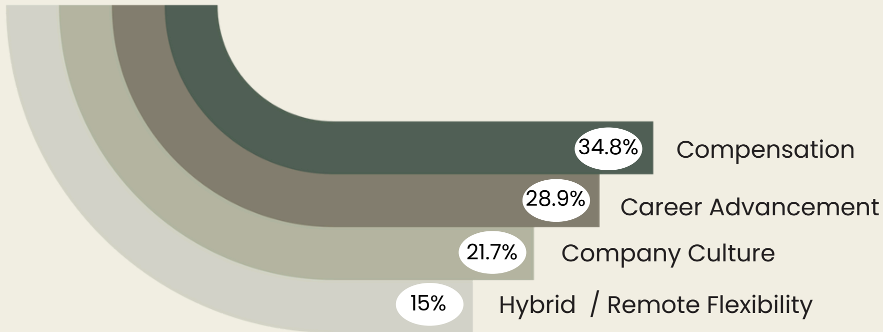
Job Satisfaction



The data exposes a troubling pattern: firms can execute on individual retention levers, competitive benefits, reasonable pay, adequate flexibility, yet still lose talent because these elements aren't integrated into a cohesive value proposition. Benefits-satisfied employees explore opportunities at high rates (55%). Well-paid professionals leave for career growth. Flexible work doesn't compensate for unclear advancement paths.

Top Drivers of Job Changes

1. Compensation (35%) - Perceived misalignment with market value has replaced absolute pay as the primary trigger.
2. Career Advancement (29%) - Ambiguity in promotion pathways, unclear criteria, and stalled progression push mid-career talent out.
3. Firm Culture (22%) - Lack of transparency, recognition, or leadership engagement erodes loyalty.
4. Hybrid/Remote Flexibility (15%) - Onsite-only policies eliminate firms from consideration before a candidate even applies.



Firms treating retention as a single-variable problem, "we pay well" or "we offer flexibility" will continue losing talent to competitors who recognize that today's professionals evaluate total value propositions, not individual benefits. Retention is no longer about preventing dissatisfaction, it's about creating compelling reasons to stay when recruiters call.

The firms that retain talent in 2025–26 are those who combine competitive compensation with clear advancement, visible investment in skills, and flexible work environments.

The Talent Landscape

Current Market Availability

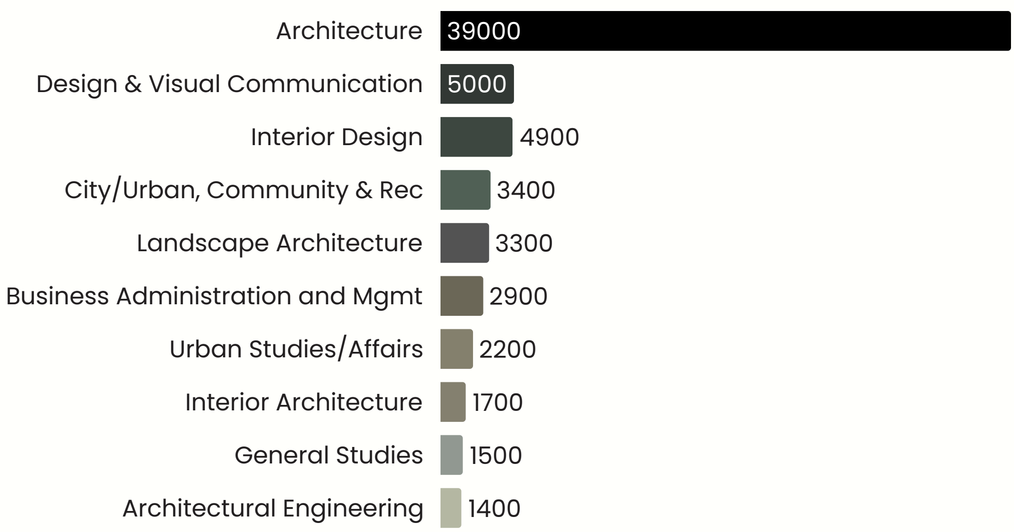
The retention crisis exists against a backdrop of constrained talent supply. Analysis of active job-seeking behavior across the AEC industry reveals both the scale of workforce mobility and the specific experience bands where competition for talent is most intense.

Architecture & Design

Currently, 100k+ architecture and design professionals are actively seeking new opportunities across the United States. The geographic concentration mirrors compensation patterns identified earlier: the Pacific region, Northeast corridor, and Texas markets show the highest active candidate volumes, reflecting both market size and the salary/cost-of-living tensions driving professionals to explore alternatives.

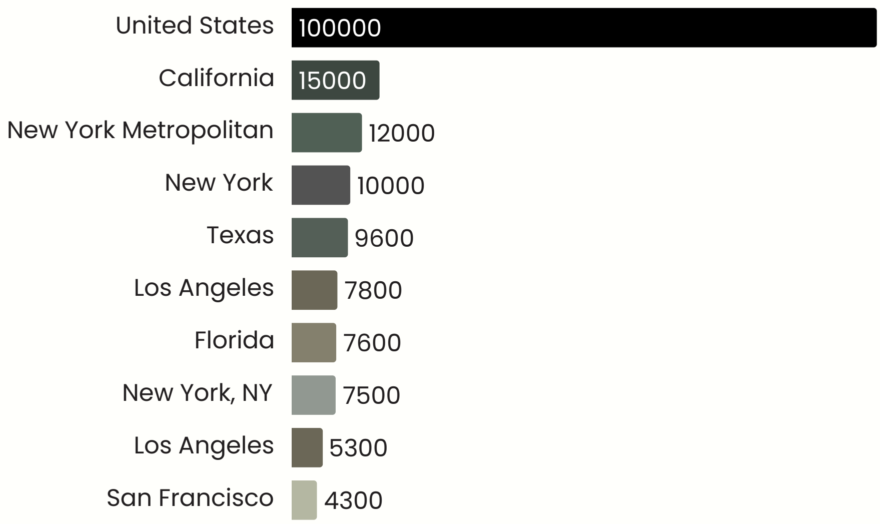
Experience distribution among active candidates exposes the mid-career retention crisis in stark terms: 56% of actively job-seeking design professionals have 5-15 years of experience, precisely the cohort this report identified as experiencing salary compression and limited bonus growth. These are not entry-level professionals testing the market; they are project leaders, emerging principals, and client-facing talent that firms cannot afford to lose.

Talent Pool by Field of Study

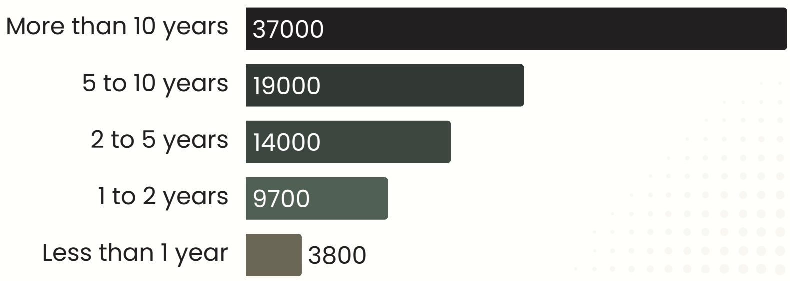


*All talent landscape data obtained through a third party system

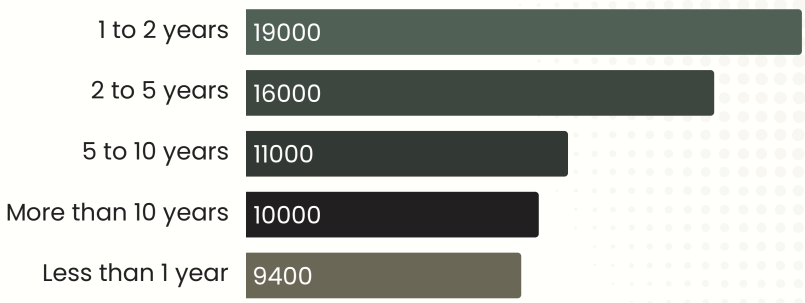
Top Active Talent by Location



Talent Pool by Experience



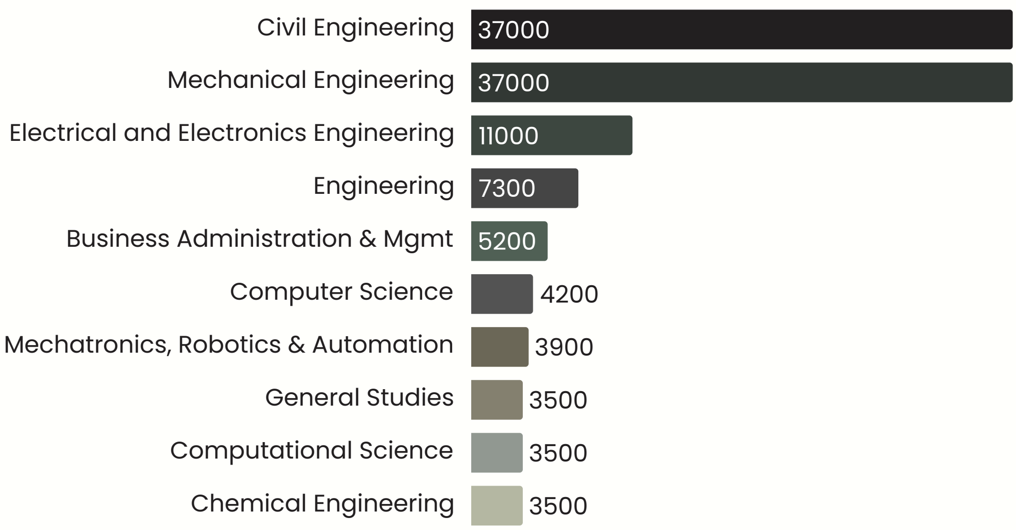
Talent Pool by Years in Current Role



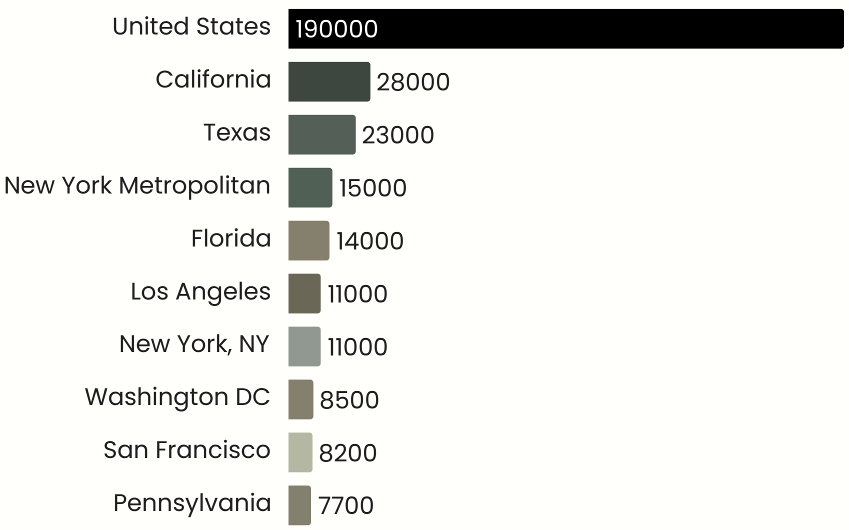
Engineering

Engineering shows 190K+ active candidates concentrated in California, Texas, and New York. Experience distribution skews earlier-career (62% with 0-8 years) compared to architecture's mid-career concentration, reflecting engineering's higher starting salaries and aggressive competition from technology and consulting sectors. Firms face retention pressure primarily in the 0-8 year band, where non-AEC industries offer 20-30% salary premiums for comparable technical skills.

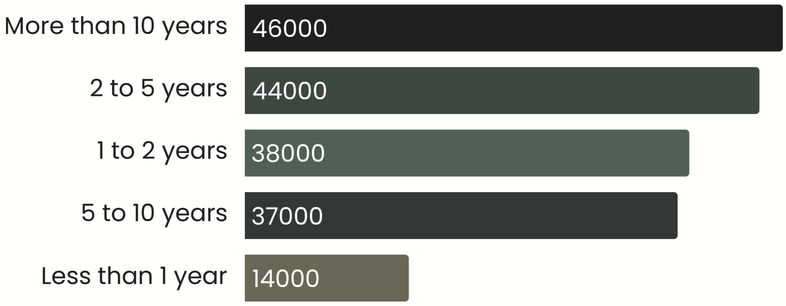
Talent Pool by Field of Study



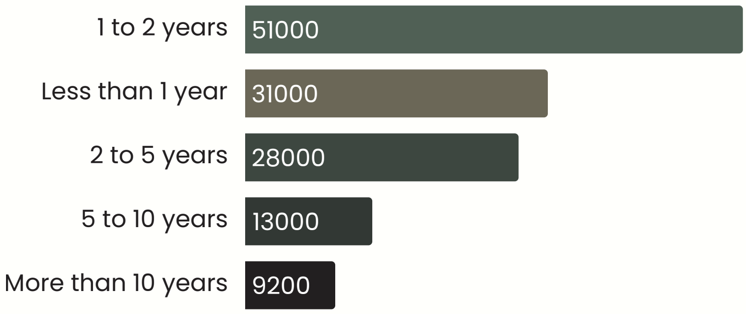
Top Active Talent by Location



Talent Pool by Experience



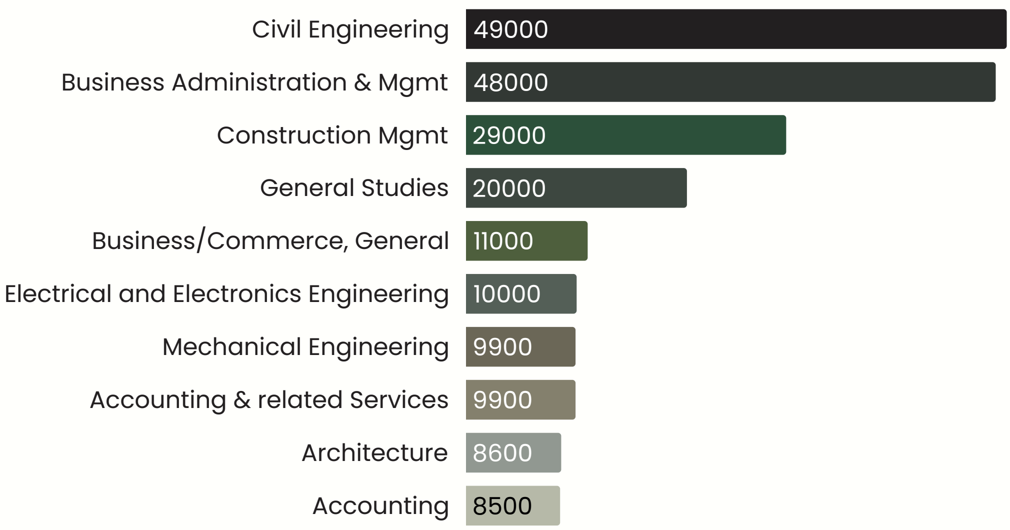
Talent Pool by Years in Current Role



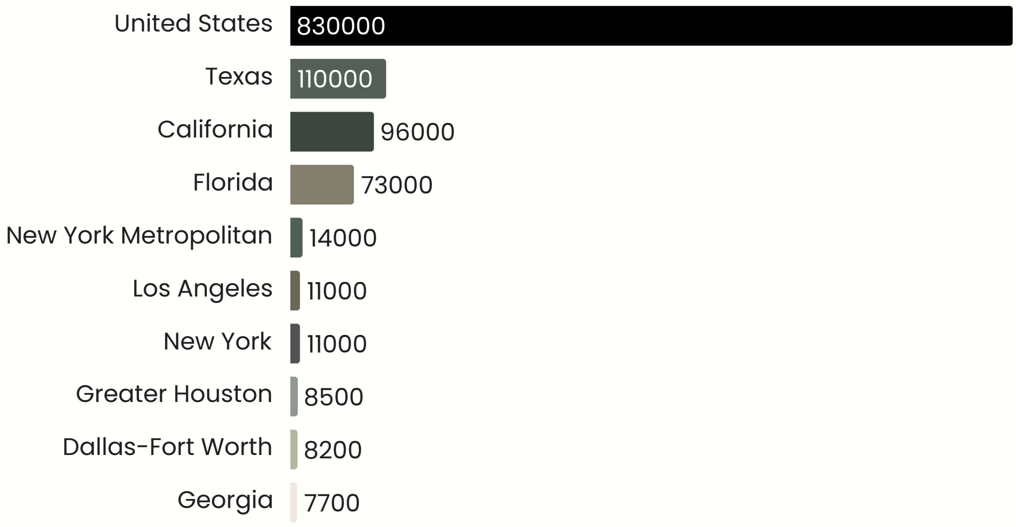
Construction

Construction represents the industry's deepest talent pool: 830K+ active professionals, 4.2× larger than architecture and engineering combined, concentrated in Texas, California, and Florida. Experience distribution skews senior, directly correlating with compensation plateauing after 15 years while architecture climbs 19%. Stagnant pay drives experienced construction professionals toward owner's representative and development roles where their expertise commands higher compensation.

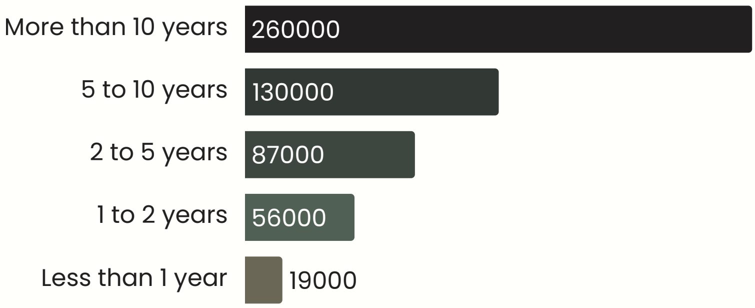
Talent Pool by Field of Study



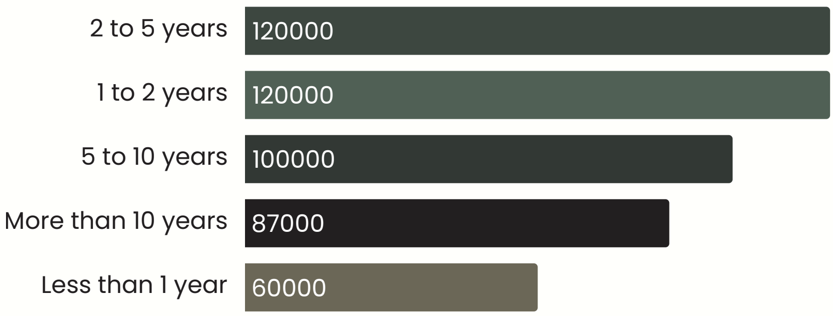
Top Active Talent by Location



Talent Pool by Experience



Talent Pool by Years in Current Role



The competitive reality is clear: geographic boundaries have dissolved through remote work, allowing firms to recruit nationally. Mid-career professionals (5-15 years), the cohort showing salary compression, are most mobile. With 1.12M actively seeking roles (12% of total workforce), firms face genuine scarcity, making retention more critical than ever.

Conclusion

The AEC industry enters 2026 in a paradoxical position: architecture billings have declined 31 of the last 34 months, yet 74% of firm leaders report good profitability. Backlogs average 6.5 months and projects are being delivered. But salary satisfaction has collapsed 20 percentage points year-over-year, and two-thirds of the workforce is exploring other opportunities. This is not a compensation problem, it is a value proposition failure.

Key Realities Facing AEC Firms

- Labor shortages remain the #1 concern, with 89% of firms unable to hire fast enough.
- Salary satisfaction dropped 20% YoY, despite wage increases in several disciplines.
- AI adoption is accelerating, yet training investment lags, frustrating digitally minded talent.
- Design technology salaries are rising, reshaping market expectations.
- PTO and flexibility have become baseline expectations, not perks.

Waiting for market conditions to improve will cost firms their competitive edge. The firms that win the next decade will be those who:

- Make market-based compensation reviews a proactive annual mandate
- Create transparent, equitable, and measurable advancement pathways
- Modernize total rewards with flexibility, PTO, and retirement strength
- Invest in continuous upskilling and digital competency
- Integrate culture, compensation, and growth into a unified value proposition

With 66% of employees exploring opportunities (per the survey) and 1.12M professionals actively in-market, the cost of losing talent extends beyond replacement expenses, firms must now compete for scarce alternatives in an increasingly expensive market.

This reinforces the core recommendation: *"Proactive retention, continuous employee engagement to know the pulse, and strategic talent pipelines cost substantially less than reactive recruitment from a constrained market"*

The question is not whether you can afford to invest in competitive talent acquisition and retention strategies. The question is whether you can afford not to.

Recommendations

Compensation Must Be Proactive, Not Reactive

A proactive $5K–$10K raise costs less than two months of vacancy for a mid-career role and relying on employees to ask for raises guarantees attrition. What to do:

- Conduct annual market-based compensation reviews with midyear adjustments
- Aim for 50th–75th percentile for critical roles
- Allocate 3–5% of annual payroll for market corrections
- Correct mid-career compression, especially at 7–10 years experience

Build Transparent, Measurable Career Pathways

Career advancement drives 29% of all job changes. Professionals leave not because they lack opportunity but because they cannot see it. What to do:

- Publish clear level definitions (I → II → III → Senior → Associate → Principal)
- Tie advancement to measurable project outcomes & skills
- Provide timelines and expected competency milestones
- Create dual tracks (management vs technical expertise)

Modernize Total Rewards to Reflect Actual Priorities

55% of employees satisfied with benefits are still exploring opportunities since benefits are not aligned with employee priorities. What to do:

- Provide 16–22 days PTO depending on tenure and 1–2 days hybrid work option weekly
- Benchmark 401(k) match by firm size (3–5% minimum recommended)
- Improve healthcare options and parental leave
- Create transparent bonus formulas tied to performance

Prevent Mid-Career Talent Flight

The 5–10 year experience range is your highest-risk cohort. Responsibilities double but salaries do not. What to do:

- Audit compensation for employees at 7–10 years
- Accelerate salary reviews during transitions into leadership
- Benchmark against 75th percentile for project-critical roles
- Implement retention allowances or milestone bonuses

Invest in Digital & AI Upskilling Across the Workforce

95% of firms use BIM, and more than half now deploy AI, but training remains the #1 barrier to adoption. What to do:

- Provide ongoing training in BIM, visualization, automation, and AI tools
- Create internal learning pathways with incentives
- Highlight upskilling as part of promotion criteria

ABOUT SNIPEBRIDGE

SNIPEBRIDGE is the talent engine behind the AEC industry's highest-performing teams. We partner with top architecture, engineering, construction, and design firms to find, attract, and secure the exceptional talent that drives growth, innovation, and project delivery.

We specialize in connecting design-driven organizations and technically sophisticated teams with exceptional practitioners - individuals whose craft, precision, leadership, and technical fluency elevate the work and shape the future of the built environment.

Our Embedded Recruiting model is transforming how AEC firms hire. Instead of traditional transactional recruiting, we embed deeply within your organization, acting as your strategic talent arm, understanding the nuances of your design philosophy, your technical rigor, your delivery approach, and the qualities that distinguish high performance in your practice.

With one of the strongest passive-talent networks across architecture, interiors, engineering, landscape architecture, planning, and construction management, we provide access to talent that rarely surfaces in traditional searches or online applications. These are the thoughtful designers, gifted technical problem-solvers, project leaders, construction innovators, and multidisciplinary thinkers who create meaningful impact from day one.

Our approach is rooted in data, modern sourcing strategy, and a deep understanding of AEC roles, workflows, and business objectives. We value alignment over volume, quality over speed, yet deliver both efficiency and extraordinary candidates through a modern and innovative recruiting process.

Whether your firm shapes iconic landmarks, engineers complex systems, or builds the structures that define our cities, we understand the distinct talent DNA required to deliver excellence.

At Snipebridge, Customer Success isn’t a department, it’s our obsession. We are relentless about delivering results, elevating your talent strategy, and helping your firm win the race for AEC talent.

snipebridge

Talent Drives Success