

# 2026

## AI Talent Field Manual



**Dice**<sup>®</sup>

# Executive Summary

**51% of all tech jobs require AI skills**, but your clients can't fill these roles through keyword matching or generic job boards. They need recruiters who can evaluate AI expertise—who can distinguish between someone who took an online course and someone who's deployed production ML systems. Who understand that "AI engineer" means something completely different in healthcare versus fintech.

You've spent years building technical depth and curated networks. These capabilities are now relevant for most tech placements, not just specialized roles.

Your challenge is scale. Your expertise needs access to talent pools beyond your existing networks. Firms winning right now pair their specialized knowledge with platforms that connect them directly to tech professionals with specialized AI and tech skills.

This ebook shows how sourcing and recruiting firms capitalize on the AI talent surge by amplifying their expertise and building relationships based on trust.



## Report Methodology

To present the insights in this report, Dice used job posting data provided by Dice's partner, Lightcast, which has a database of more than 1 billion current and historical job postings worldwide. Dice pulled data on November 11, 2025 and analyzed tech job postings in the U.S. using Lightcast's skills category taxonomy specific to "Artificial Intelligence and Machine Learning (AI/ML)" and "Natural Language Processing (NLP)". The AI/ML subcategory contains 301 skills (up from 120 in 2024) and the NLP subcategory contains 65 skills (up from 44 in 2024). The information in this report is a snapshot of tech job posting data as of November 11, 2025 and backward revisions to prior month's data may occur from the sources used in this report.

## The Market Just Shifted in Your Favor

Three years ago, AI roles were niche positions. Today, they're the majority of tech hiring.

Every industry (healthcare, finance, retail, manufacturing) is racing to build AI capabilities. The demand is massive and accelerating.

A pharmaceutical company building drug discovery tools doesn't need someone who took a machine learning course. They need expertise in computational biology, molecular data, and FDA validation requirements.

A manufacturing company implementing predictive maintenance needs someone who understands sensor data, industrial operations, and edge computing.

These roles require recruiters who can evaluate technical depth beyond buzzwords, navigate AI subdisciplines (computer vision vs. NLP vs. MLOps), and assess fit between specialized talent and company context.

This is what you do. According to Dice's research, there's a significant trust gap in AI hiring—employers struggle to verify skills, candidates are skeptical of company claims. Both sides need trusted intermediaries who can cut through the noise.

Your technical knowledge and curated networks are competitive advantages that volume recruiters can't replicate. Can you scale to meet demand?

Let's explore how a firm like yours can do that.

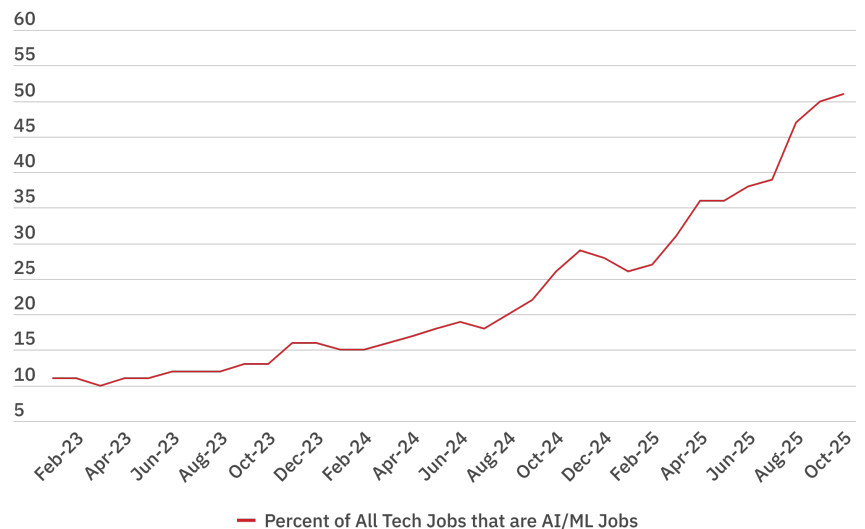
# Chapter 1: Why Expert-Led Agencies Win in the AI Market

This shift happened really fast, too. In May 2025, AI skills appeared in 36% of tech jobs. Five months later, it's the majority. The jump from 36% to 51% in five months means companies are in full implementation mode and panicking.

This rapid shift gives you the opportunity to become indispensable to clients who need AI talent but don't know how to evaluate it.

**As of October 2025, 51% of all tech jobs require AI skills.**

What Percent of Tech Jobs are AI/ML?



## What this means for you:

### Your specialized knowledge is key

Not just niche roles. When half of all tech jobs require AI skills, firms that can evaluate AI expertise win.

### Generalist recruiters can't compete

They're posting generic "AI developer" searches while you understand the difference between someone who needs to build transformer models versus someone who needs to implement RAG for customer support.

### Speed creates urgency

Companies that fell behind competitors are scrambling. They'll pay premiums to firms that can deliver quality candidates fast.

# The Three Tiers of AI Talent

Not all AI roles are created equal. Understanding these tiers is how you demonstrate expertise and avoid wasting time on mismatched searches.

## AI Builders: The Technical Backbone

The first group of AI roles are filled by the people who can build AI systems, typically carrying job titles such as "machine learning engineer," "AI researcher," "data scientist," etc. These experts could be focused on model development, or they possess specialized skills around training and deploying AI models. These professionals likely have advanced degrees in computer science, mathematics, or related fields, and their work involves the mathematical and computational challenges of making AI systems function.

The talent pool here is relatively small and highly concentrated. AI Builders typically came up through academic research programs or have spent time at major tech companies working on AI infrastructure. They speak in terms of algorithms, training datasets, and model architectures. When they evaluate opportunities, they're often going to weigh factors like research freedom and the technical complexity of the problems they'll be solving.

What's interesting about hiring experts from this segment is how it resembles academic hiring. Publications, conference presentations, and open-source contributions may matter more than traditional software development portfolios. Compensation packages frequently include conference budgets and continuing education allowances. These AI Builders may even have expectations around intellectual property rights that would be unusual in other technical roles.

**Why it matters:** When a client says "AI expert," they often mean Builder, but they may actually need an Orchestrator or Enhanced Professional. Your job is knowing the difference.

Key job titles: Machine Learning Engineer, AI Research Scientist, Deep Learning Engineer, Computer Vision Engineer, NLP Research Scientist, Data Scientist (ML Focus)

## AI Orchestrators: The Business-Technical Bridge


Our AI Orchestrators group consists of people who understand the tech behind AI, but focus on the implementation and business integration of an existing model. In other words, they deploy, govern, and scale AI to meet the needs of a business. Jobs within this category include prompt engineers, AI product managers, implementation specialists, and the various "AI strategist" positions that have emerged over the past two years.

Many of these AI Orchestrators come from traditional tech or business roles but are working to angle their career into the AI space. They're the people who can evaluate when an AI solution makes sense for a business problem, manage the integration of AI tools into customer facing products, and communicate between AI Builders and other stakeholders.

Organizations need people who can think strategically about AI applications while understanding enough about the tech to make realistic implementation decisions. With all that is changing in AI, you can see why this doesn't map neatly into traditional career paths.

Compensation in this segment varies widely depending on industry and company size, but these roles often command premiums because they're critical to successful AI adoption. Companies have learned that having great AI technology without someone who can orchestrate it results in failed implementations.

This tier exploded in the past year. Implementation skills like Agentic AI (+26,200% growth year over year) are where the real growth is happening.

 **Why it matters:** Your database likely has dozens of candidates who fit here but aren't labeled as "AI talent." Auditing your existing network for AI tool proficiency opens up massive pipeline.

Key job titles: AI Product Manager, Prompt Engineer, AI Implementation Specialist, ML Operations Engineer, AI Integration Manager, LLM Application Developer


## AI-Enhanced Professionals: The Business Accelerators

Hiring AI-enhanced Professionals to fill traditional roles is just breaking the surface, but it is looking more and more like the future every day. This group represents traditional tech professionals who've integrated AI into their workflow to improve their own quality and efficiency. Software developers using GitHub Copilot, data analysts leveraging automated insights, QA engineers with AI-powered testing suites all fall into this category; they might seem like "vibe coders," but they have the provable technical experience to leverage AI into a usable product.

This category is where most of the actual hiring volume exists, though it's often not recognized as "AI hiring" in the traditional sense. These professionals typically don't have experience building AI systems, or the ability to implement models directly into products, but they've developed marketable fluency with AI tools by using it in their day-to-day tasks.

Some clients might not be sure they need "AI-enhanced professionals" quite yet, and you can demonstrate expertise by helping them get here. When they say "AI software engineer," they mean "developer who can work with our AI tools." Getting this distinction right will open your candidate search up to some of the most innovative, adaptable talent out there.

This tier represents the majority of that 51%. Companies need entire teams to be AI-capable, not just specialized AI roles.

 **Why it matters:** Your database likely has dozens of candidates who fit here but aren't labeled as "AI talent." Auditing your existing network for AI tool proficiency opens up massive pipeline.

Key job titles: Software Engineer (AI-Enhanced), Product Manager (AI-Enhanced), Business Analyst (AI-Enhanced), Technical Writer (AI-Enhanced)



# How Sourcing and Recruiting Firms Can Use This Framework

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## Before the client call

Review their business and determine which tier they actually need. A fintech company "implementing AI for fraud detection" probably needs Orchestrators, not Builders.

02

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## During discovery

Ask questions that reveal tier mismatch. "Are you building proprietary models or implementing existing AI solutions?" "Do you have a data science team, or are you looking to start one?"

03

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## When presenting candidates

Frame expertise in tier-specific language. For Orchestrators, emphasize implementation track record. For Builders, highlight research and technical depth.

04

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## Pricing strategy

Builders command top-tier rates. Orchestrators are the premium growth segment. Enhanced Professionals offer volume opportunity.

## Market Forces You Need to Understand

Texas is growing faster than California (152% vs 87% YoY), but California still has the largest absolute talent pool (134,188 AI jobs).

**What this means:** If your clients are flexible on location or offer remote work, you can tap high-growth markets with less competition. If they need immediate access to deep talent pools, California still dominates.

Midwest is surging: Minnesota (+90%), Illinois (+89%), Michigan (+84%). Traditional enterprise tech hubs are implementing AI fast, and there's less recruiter competition.



## Industry Patterns

Traditional industries are outpacing tech companies:

### Telecommunications

337%

Growth in AI hiring

### Insurance

290%

Growth in AI hiring

### Finance/Banking

164%

Growth in AI hiring

Consulting firms dominate hiring: Multiple consulting firms rank among top AI employers because they're implementing AI for clients who need to scale fast.

**What this means:** Your clients in traditional industries are competing for the same talent as tech companies, but many don't realize it yet. This is a consultative selling opportunity.

## Implementation Skills Are Hot

The fastest-growing AI skills are about implementation, not research:

LangChain: +404%

Agentic AI: +26,200%

RAG (Retrieval-Augmented Generation): +333%

**What this means:** Companies need people who can deploy AI tools, not necessarily build them from scratch. Search for implementation experience, not just ML theory.

## Action Items for Agencies

### Audit your existing database

Identify candidates with platform-specific skills (Claude AI, Microsoft Copilot), implementation expertise (LangChain, RAG), or work in high-growth industries (telecom, insurance, finance). You likely have more AI-relevant candidates than you think.

### Reframe client conversations

Stop asking "Do you need an AI hire?" Start with "Which tier of AI talent does this role require?" Position yourself as the expert who prevents expensive hiring mistakes.

### Target high-opportunity sectors

Consulting firms implementing AI at scale, traditional industries racing to catch up, Midwest metros with lower competition.

### Price for expertise

When you can explain why their timeline should be 90 days instead of 30, why their budget needs to account for AI premiums, and why the candidate they need differs from who they asked for—you command premium fees.

The AI market rewards deep knowledge over volume. You have the expertise. Now connect it to the talent pool at scale.

# Chapter 2: Where the AI Talent Opportunities Are

The data reveals exactly where you should focus to maximize placements. While generalist recruiters chase the same visible candidates in Silicon Valley, you can leverage market intelligence to access undeserved opportunities.

## Who's Hiring AI Talent?

Top AI Employers (October 2025):

Rank	Top Companies
1	Amazon
2	Deloitte
3	Google
4	Wells Fargo
5	Lumen Technologies
6	Meta
7	Accenture
8	JPMorgan Chase
9	Apple
10	KPMG
11	CVS Health
12	Rubrik
13	Capital One
14	PricewaterhouseCoopers
15	General Motors
16	Energy Jobline
17	DataAnnotation
18	IBM
19	Staffmark
20	Coinbase Global
21	Ford
22	Microsoft
23	ServiceNow
24	Evolent
25	Eliassen Group

### What this tells you

Multiple consulting firms rank among top hirers. They're implementing AI for clients who need to scale teams rapidly. These firms are your competition for candidates and potential partners or acquisition targets for talent.

### Metro-level opportunities:

#### Austin, TX

Tech hub growth without Bay Area competition density

#### Minneapolis, MN

Enterprise tech concentration with strong AI adoption

#### Chicago, IL

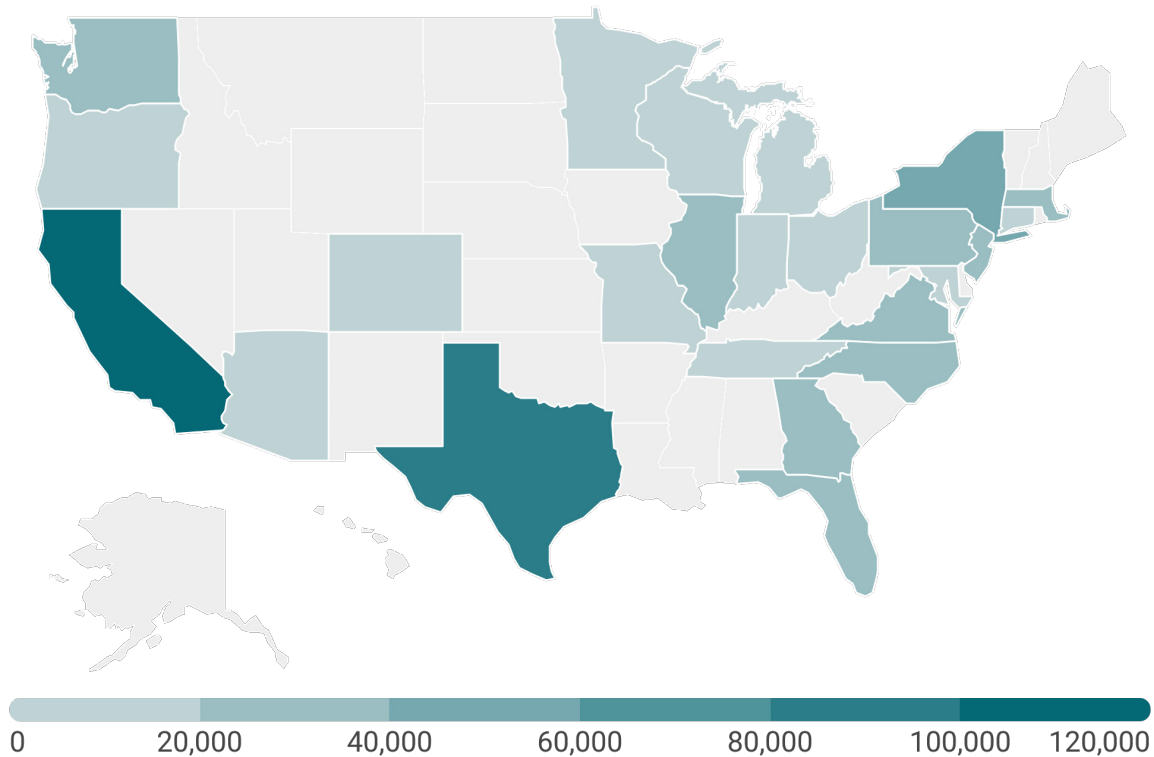
Financial services and insurance AI boom

#### Detroit, MI

Automotive AI transformation creating specialized demand

## Top 25 States with AI Job Postings

(January - October 2025)



## AI Job Growth by State

(January - Oct 2024 compared to January - Oct 2025)

Rank	Top 25 States	YoY Growth
1	Texas	152%
2	New York	95%
3	Minnesota	90%
4	Illinois	89%
5	California	87%
6	North Carolina	82%
7	Oregon	81%
8	Indiana	81%
9	Florida	80%
10	Georgia	76%

### What this tells you

California has the deepest talent pool but highest competition. Texas offers explosive growth with less recruiter saturation. Midwest states (Minnesota, Illinois, Michigan) represent high-growth, lower-competition opportunities, especially for clients open to remote work.

# Which AI Skills Are Hot Right Now?

Candidates who've implemented LangChain applications, built RAG systems, or deployed enterprise AI tools are in massive demand. These skills are more valuable than generic "machine learning" experience right now.

The explosion in implementation skills (LangChain, RAG, Microsoft Copilot) confirms that companies need deployment expertise, not just research capabilities.

## Platform Expertise Matters

- Claude AI skills growing rapidly
- Microsoft Copilot integration expertise
- GPT coding and API implementation

## Soft Skills Are Key

- Cross-Functional Collaboration
- Stakeholder Engagement
- Change Management

These "soft skills" are requirements for AI Orchestrators who need to bridge between technical teams and business stakeholders.

## Domain-Specific AI

- **Healthcare AI** (clinical decision support, medical imaging)
- **Financial AI** (fraud detection, algorithmic trading)
- **Manufacturing AI** (predictive maintenance, quality control)

Firms can command significant premiums by pairing technical AI knowledge with industry context.



### For client conversations:

When a client asks for "AI expertise," ask whether they're building proprietary models or implementing existing solutions. Most need the latter, which completely changes your search criteria.

## AI Skill Growth Year Over Year

(January - October 2024 compared to January - October 2025)

Skills to Watch	YoY Growth
Agentic AI	26200%
AI Agents	1434%
Variational Autoencoders	822%
Claude AI	648%
CPT Coding	490%
Microsoft Copilot	473%
Retrieval Augmented Generation	413%
Workflow Automation	401%
LangChain	324%
FastAPI	318%

# Chapter 3: Turning Market Intelligence into Client Conversations

You win by positioning yourself as an AI hiring consultant, not an order-taker. Use this market intelligence to lead client conversations, identify red flags early, and demonstrate why your expertise commands premium fees.

In this chapter we offer some example scripts and talk tracks to inspire your next client conversation.

## Opening Client Conversations with Market Intelligence

### Lead with the 51% milestone

"As of October 2025, 51% of all tech jobs require AI skills. This became the majority requirement, which means your hiring strategy needs to account for a fundamentally different market than even six months ago."

### Frame the urgency

"The jump from 36% to 51% happened in five months. Companies that hesitated are now competing against organizations that moved fast. The talent you need has multiple offers, so positioning matters."

### Establish your expertise

"We've been tracking AI hiring across our placements, and we're seeing clear patterns. Most companies ask for AI Builders when they actually need AI Orchestrators. Getting this right is the difference between a 30-day search and a 90-day search that ends in a failed hire."

## Discovery Questions That Reveal Real Needs

Instead of: "Tell me about the role"

**Ask: "Are you building proprietary AI models from scratch, or implementing existing AI solutions into your products?"**

This reveals whether they need Builders or Orchestrators.

Instead of: "What's your timeline?"

**Ask: "Do you have a data science team already, or is this your first AI hire? That completely changes the profile we're looking for."**

This surfaces whether they need someone who can operate independently or someone who can build a team.

Instead of: "What's your budget?"

**Ask: "Are you aware that AI roles command 18% salary premiums over equivalent non-AI positions? Let's discuss what competitive compensation looks like for the specific tier of talent you need."**

This educates on market realities before they waste time on underpriced searches.

Instead of: "What skills do you need?"

**Ask: "I'm seeing explosive growth in implementation skills like LangChain, RAG, and Microsoft Copilot. These grew 300-400% year-over-year. Does your role involve integrating existing AI tools, or are you looking for someone to build custom models?"**

This demonstrates market knowledge and helps them refine requirements.

# Scripts for Positioning Your Expertise

## Market intelligence sharing:

"Telecommunications companies are hiring AI talent at 337% growth, insurance at 290%, finance at 164%. Traditional industries are outpacing pure tech companies, which means competition for talent is fiercer than you might expect. Here's how we position opportunities to stand out..."

"Texas is growing at 152% versus California's 87%, but California still has the largest absolute talent pool. Depending on your flexibility around remote work, we can access either high-growth markets with less competition or established talent pools with deeper expertise."

## Expertise differentiation:

"Most recruiters search for 'AI developers,' but the market evolved. We help clients understand whether they need AI Builders who create models from scratch, AI Orchestrators who implement systems, or AI-Enhanced Professionals who use AI tools in traditional roles. This clarity is why our placements stick."

"We just analyzed the data—RAG skills grew 413% year-over-year. Data retrieval and governance are becoming critical to the next wave of tech work. Does your role involve these aspects? Because if so, we're looking for completely different candidates."

**78% of tech professionals feel today's hiring practices pressure candidates to exaggerate qualifications just to get noticed**

[Read the Trust Gap in Tech Hiring Report](#)



# Red Flag Identification

Watch for these warning signs that indicate the client has unrealistic expectations:



## **Red Flag: "We need an AI expert who can do everything"**

**What it signals:** They haven't defined what they actually need.

**Your response:** "That tells me we need to start with discovery. AI expertise ranges from research scientists building novel algorithms to implementation specialists deploying existing tools. Let's identify which tier of AI talent this role truly requires—that'll save us both time and prevent a bad hire."



## **Red Flag: "We need someone in 2-3 weeks"**

**What it signals:** Unrealistic timeline expectations.

**Your response:** "Quality AI placements average 60-90 days in the current market. Companies trying to hire in 2-3 weeks either compromise on quality or lose candidates to better-structured processes. We can move fast, but let's discuss what 'fast' realistically means for specialized AI talent."



## **Red Flag: Budget significantly below market rate**

**What it signals:** They don't understand compensation realities.

**Your response:** "AI roles command 18% premiums over equivalent non-AI positions, and senior AI engineers are seeing \$200K-\$400K packages depending on specialization. If your budget is below market, we'll struggle to compete. Let's discuss either adjusting the budget or reframing the role to match what your budget can attract."



## **Red Flag: Long list of unrelated AI skills**

**What it signals:** They've combined multiple roles or don't understand specialization.

**Your response:** "This job description combines what's typically three different roles—someone who builds ML models, implements enterprise AI tools, and manages AI strategy. Let's unbundle these requirements into realistic role definitions. Which of these capabilities is the highest priority?"

## Your Next Move

The AI talent market just handed you an unprecedented opportunity. When 51% of tech jobs require AI skills, specialized knowledge becomes the competitive advantage that matters most.

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### What Separates Winners from Everyone Else

Generalist recruiters post "AI developer" searches and hope. They can't distinguish between candidates who've taken online courses and candidates who've deployed production systems. They compete on volume and lose on quality.

You lead with market intelligence. You understand the three tiers of AI talent. You know that LangChain grew 404% while companies race to implement Generative AI. You can explain why Texas is growing at 152% versus California's 87%, and what that means for remote hiring strategy.

Your expertise is now relevant for the majority of tech placements, not just niche roles. Can you scale to meet demand?

### The Platform Advantage

Your deep technical knowledge is your moat. But when clients demand more AI placements faster, traditional sourcing methods can't keep pace.

Firms capitalizing on this moment pair their expertise with platforms that connect them directly to tech professionals with specialized AI skills. Not generic job boards. Not LinkedIn where every recruiter competes for the same visible candidates.

Dice specializes in tech talent exclusively. The AI professionals your clients need are actively exploring opportunities on Dice because it's where serious tech careers advance.

**When you combine your expertise in evaluating AI talent with Dice's access to specialized tech professionals, you can:**

- Scale your pipeline without sacrificing quality
- Access specialized AI skills instead of keyword-stuffed resumes
- Move faster on client searches while maintaining your reputation for quality placements
- Command premium fees because you deliver candidates generalist recruiters can't find

# Ready to Scale Your AI Placements?

Your deep technical knowledge is your best advantage in the 2026 hiring market.

## Immediate Actions:

### ▶ Audit your database

Identify candidates with platform-specific skills (Claude AI, Microsoft Copilot), implementation expertise (LangChain, RAG), or experience in high-growth industries (telecom, insurance, finance). You have more AI-relevant candidates than you think.

### ▶ Start leading with data

Open client conversations with the 51% milestone, share industry-specific growth patterns, explain the three tiers. Position yourself as the market intelligence source they can't ignore.

### ▶ Partner with the right platform

Your expertise needs access to talent at scale. Dice connects you with the tech professionals your clients need to hire

**Sourcing and recruiting firms are leveraging our specialized tech talent platform to scale their AI placements without sacrificing the quality that built their reputation.**

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