GAME 7 STAFFING · QUARTERLY INTELLIGENCE REPORT

The Engineered Career.

AI, contract strategy, and the new engineering career playbook for verification, embedded, IC design, DFT, and systems engineers.

ISSUE
Q2 · 2026

AUDIENCE
Engineering candidates

SOURCE
Proprietary placement data

Built on proprietary placement data from Jan 1 – Apr 24, 2026, supplemented by Brookings, WEF, Plandek, Cortex, LinkedIn, and SIA.

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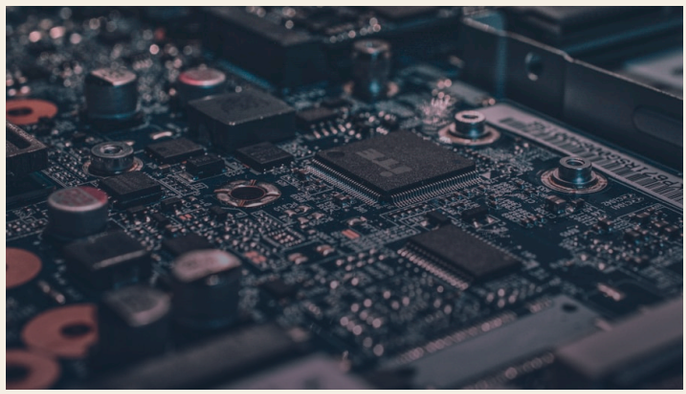
What's inside

FOREWORD

We wrote this because the careers content for engineers got really generic.



Every quarter, another LinkedIn-influencer thread tells engineers to "build their personal brand" and "embrace AI." Helpful the way a weather forecast that says *it might rain* is helpful.

This report is different. It is built on the same proprietary placement data we use to advise hiring managers — recut for the engineer on the other side of the desk. We supplement that with the best available external research from Brookings, the World Economic Forum, Plandek, Cortex, LinkedIn, and SIA.

Something genuinely new is happening.

The shape of engineering careers has shifted in measurable, structural ways since 2024. The market for principal-level engineers is not softening — it is concentrating. Teams are smaller, talent bars are higher, contract is the default, and the disciplines where AI has the least leverage — verification, embedded/firmware, DFT, systems architecture — carry the longest fills and the highest compensation premium.

If you are still planning your career the way you did in 2023, this report is for you. If you have already started adapting and want data to validate your moves, this report is also for you.

BY THE NUMBERS

+69%

growth in openings per requisition since 2024.

43%

of our 6–12 month placements extended by the client past the original term.

41 days

median time from req to first day in our 2026 data.

SOURCE · GAME 7 STAFFING PROPRIETARY PLACEMENT DATA

SECTION ONE

01 — The bar moved up. Here is where you stand.

The market is hiring fewer engineers, paying more for the ones it hires, and concentrating its hiring in disciplines where AI has the least leverage.

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY · SIX THINGS TO KNOW

01

The shape of hiring changed, not the volume. Multi-seat reqs are the default — openings per req jumped from **1.3 in 2024 to 2.2 in 2026 (+69%)**.

02

Engagements compressed from **~10.5 to ~7 months** in two years; by design, not weakness. Plan around project phases, not annual stints.

03

Among 6–12 month placements, **43% are extended** by the client. Contract is delivering quality, not just flexibility.

04

AI is making teams faster, not automatically better. Hiring is concentrating into mid- and senior-level; **junior-titled roles have effectively vanished**.

05

Candidate inflow is up **~45% since January**, but time-to-fill has not improved. Volume sourcing is losing to precision sourcing.

06

Onsite is 65% of placements. Defense, fab access, and hardware prototyping are physical constraints, not cultural ones.

SECTION TWO

02 — The market in Q1 2026: what actually happened.

The slow start that fooled people.

January and February were quiet. Engineering req volume across our client base dipped compared to early 2025. If you read tea leaves in February, you might have concluded that AI was finally suppressing hiring. *You would have been wrong.*

March surged. April sustained the surge. By the end of Q1, total req activity was within a few percentage points of the prior year's pace. What changed wasn't the volume — it was the shape.

Fewer reqs, more openings per req.

This is the number that tells the real story.

AVERAGE OPENINGS PER ENGINEERING REQUISITION

2024	2025	2026 YTD · +69% SINCE 2024
1.3	1.6	2.2

SOURCE · GAME 7 STAFFING PROPRIETARY PLACEMENT DATA

READ IT FROM YOUR SIDE

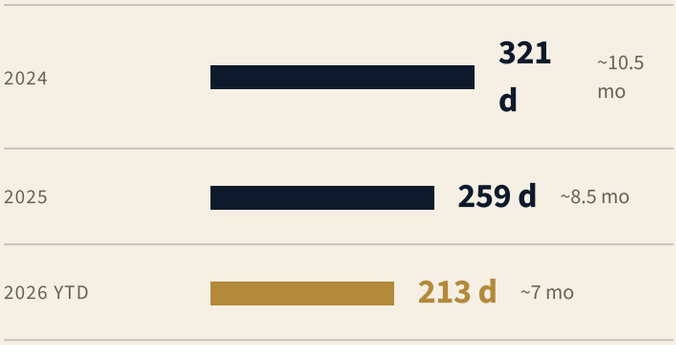
Multi-seat reqs are now the default. If you are interviewing for one role with one panel, you are competing against teams running coordinated buildouts.

One placement on a multi-seat program puts you on the inside of the next four.

Engagement duration is compressing. On purpose.

AVERAGE ENGINEERING ENGAGEMENT LENGTH

Days, mapped to project phases — not weakness in the market.



SOURCE · GAME 7 STAFFING

This is not a sign of weakness — it's a sign of sophistication. Hiring managers are mapping contract talent to specific project phases instead of open-ended engagements. Verification engineers come in for closure. Firmware engineers come in for bring-up. Systems architects come in for definition.

FOR YOU

The engineers winning this market run two or three high-leverage 6-month engagements a year — not one 18-month seat.

Treat the pipeline as the career, not as a series of unrelated jobs.

43%

of our engineers on 6–12 month contracts are **extended** by the client past the original term.

WHY IT MATTERS FOR YOUR RESUME

Nobody extends a contractor they aren't getting value from. The extension is a *performance verdict* delivered through a formal change request — most pronounced in IC verification, where swapping engineers mid-tapeout is the last thing any program manager wants. A clean record of extensions on shorter engagements outperforms a single long tenure.

THE 41-DAY REALITY

Median time from req to first day, 2026. **41d**

The contract-dominant market.

Contract has become the default model for engineering hiring. **40% of the U.S. workforce is now contingent** (Nexus CW/Conexis, 2026), and the share runs higher in specialized engineering. SIA reports engineering staffing is outperforming the broader staffing industry on the back of project-driven demand in defense, data center, and semiconductor programs.

> LINKEDIN 2026
>
> **Over 60% of contingent workers now choose contract work deliberately for autonomy and flexibility — not as a fallback while job-hunting.**

SECTION THREE

03 — Where the demand is.

Defense, semiconductor, embedded — the disciplines that don't bend to AI.

Defense and aerospace.

The largest concentration of engineering requisitions in our Q1 2026 data came from defense, aerospace, and government-adjacent companies. The drivers are structural, not cyclical — which is the part that matters for your career planning.

$$

CHIPS ACT

$52.7B

42,465–54,385 jobs across 149 U.S. counties (Brookings, 2026)

Measured impact already on the books — not projections.

★

DOD MICROELECTRONICS

$25B

Defense Microelectronics Activity contract, early 2026

Long tail: design, verification, test, packaging, integration — for years.

◎

AUTONOMOUS SYSTEMS

All disciplines

Embedded · firmware · RF · systems · hardware

Concentrated demand that is very hard to staff through traditional channels.

Semiconductor.

IC design and verification represent a consistent, significant share of our placements going back three years. Verification has been a top-volume discipline every year since 2024 — chip math: *verification effort scales faster than design effort*. Every new feature, every new IP block requires disproportionately more verification work that requires human engineers who understand the architecture.

INDUSTRY SIGNAL

IC design and verification talent shortages are directly impacting 2026 tapeout schedules. That is not a staffing problem — that is a revenue problem.

For you: a verification engineer with UVM, formal, and a real coverage closure story is one of the most placeable profiles in the market.

Embedded and firmware: the quiet premium.

Ask people to name the "hot" discipline and they'll say AI/ML. In actual market scarcity and compensation premium, embedded and firmware has been the quiet winner for years. Bring-up engineers, RTOS specialists, and board-level firmware engineers sit on the longest premium in our rate data.

Software: transformed, not disappearing.

The elephant in the room. Yes, generalist software postings have softened. Reports of front-end demand declining by nearly 10% are consistent with what we're seeing. AI coding assistants now handle a meaningful share of routine application development. *But software engineering isn't dying. It is specializing.*

The roles still in strong demand sit at the boundary of software and something else: low-level systems programming, cloud infrastructure and platform engineering, DevOps, and software that integrates with hardware or domain-specific constraints. An engineer who can write Rust for an embedded system, build a CI/CD pipeline for a defense program, or architect a distributed simulation environment isn't competing with AI — they're leveraging it.

SECTION FOUR

04 — The AI productivity paradox.

This is the section that matters most if you are interviewing in 2026. AI is making teams faster. It is not automatically making them better.

PLANDEK 2026

AI is boosting struggling engineering teams' productivity by *up to 4×*.

CORTEX 2026

AI is making engineering faster, but not necessarily better.

WAYDEV 2026

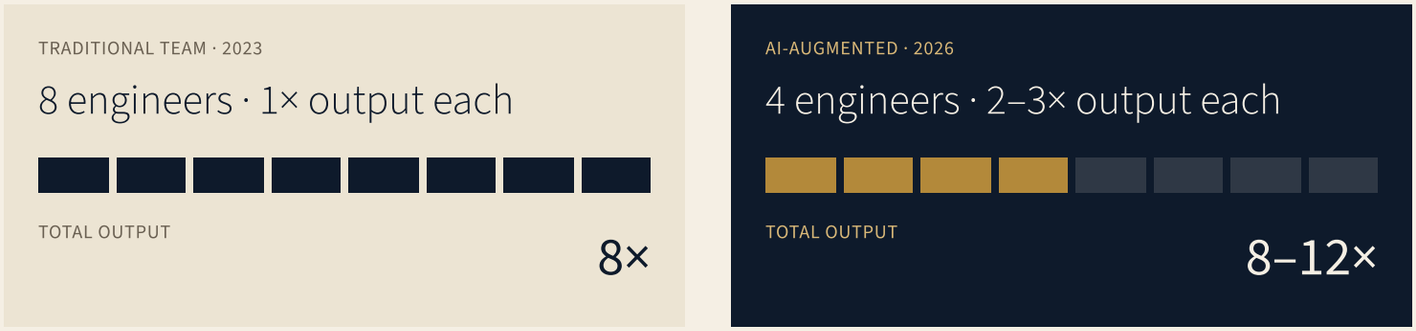
"AI didn't kill engineering jobs. It *raised the bar*."

What this means for your interviews.

Teams using AI tools effectively report **30–50% productivity improvements**. *"Effectively"* is doing a lot of heavy lifting in that sentence — and the interview process is increasingly designed to find out whether you fall on the right side of it.

AI tools amplify whatever you give them. Experienced engineers ship faster while maintaining quality, because they know what good architecture looks like before the model emits its first token. The same tool in less experienced hands gets you speed without correctness. Speed went up across the board. Quality did not follow uniformly.

The "one engineer does the work of three" problem — from your side.



SOURCE · STRIPE DEVELOPER PRODUCTIVITY DATA; THE PRAGMATIC ENGINEER 2026 AI TOOLING SURVEY

Your job in 2026: be unambiguously a member of the four engineers — and prove it in 45 minutes against a panel that has read the same studies you have.

AI is also changing how engineers get matched to roles.

It's reshaping how you get placed in the first place. At Game 7, our AI-enabled delivery has increased successful fill ratio by **60%** — not speed-to-first-resume, successful fills. The tools help us identify domain-fit, availability, rate alignment, and geographic readiness faster and with higher precision than manual screening.

When 87% of companies and **99% of Fortune 500 firms** are now using AI in hiring (DataRefs, 2026), the question is whether the recruiters on your other end optimized their tools for outcomes, not activity. Most AI recruiting tools optimize for *volume*: more resumes, faster. Ours optimize for *precision*: fewer candidates submitted, higher conversion.

60%

increase in successful fill ratio using AI-enabled delivery.

SOURCE · GAME 7 STAFFING

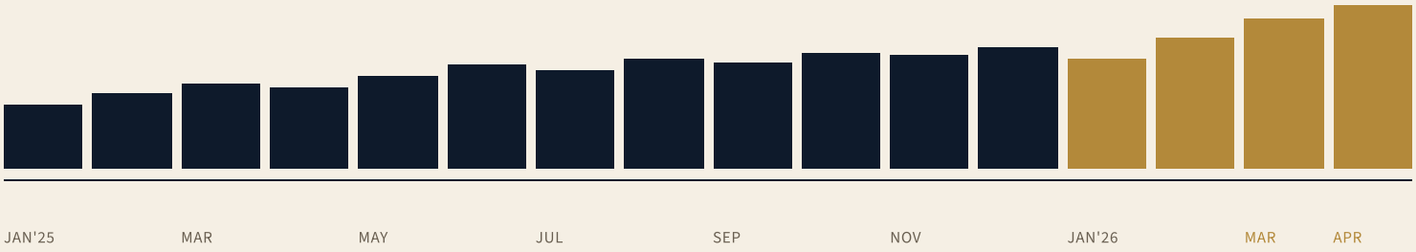
SECTION FIVE

05 — The talent supply picture.

More candidates. Not easier hiring. What that means for you.

MONTHLY NEW ENGINEERING CANDIDATE REGISTRATIONS

Jan 2025 – Apr 2026 · navy = 2025, gold = 2026



+45% SINCE JAN 2026 · 622 REGISTRATIONS · APRIL

01 TEAM COMPRESSION

Engineers aren't underperforming. Org charts are being redrawn.

02 SHORTER CYCLES

When engagements drop from 10 to 7 months, the same pool turns over faster.

03 PROACTIVE MOVES

More inbound from currently-employed engineers than at any point in years.

More candidates does not mean easier hiring.

Candidate volume is up. Time-to-fill has not improved. The submission-to-placement ratio in engineering remains demanding. The skills gap has widened — the World Economic Forum projects **44% of worker skills will be disrupted in the next five years**. Precision sourcing is the model that's converting. Volume is not.

SECTION SIX

06 — Geographic realities.

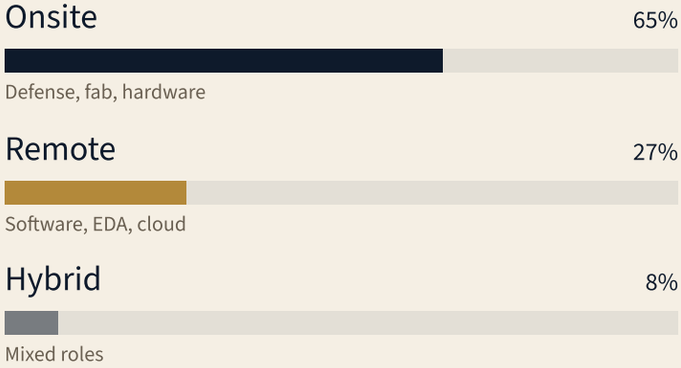
Onsite is the default. Remote is the exception. For specialized engineers who can be where the work is, that is leverage — not a constraint.

Why onsite won.

The onsite majority is a function of the sectors driving demand. Defense programs operate in classified facilities. Semiconductor work requires labs and clean rooms. Hardware engineering requires prototyping. These constraints are *physical, not cultural* — and they're not going away.

For you, the willingness to work onsite opens access to the highest-margin, longest-runway programs in the market. The remote-only filter is the single biggest self-imposed cap on engineer earning power in 2026.

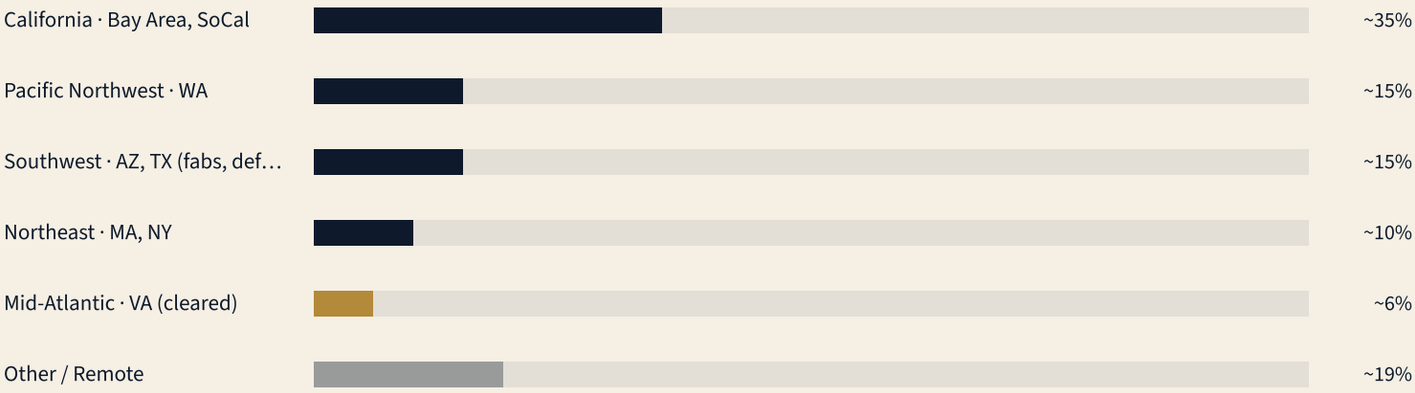
ENGINEERING WORK MODEL · Q1 2026



SOURCE · GAME 7 STAFFING

Where the work is.

Engineering placements concentrate in a handful of regions defined by their industry centers — semiconductor fabs, defense primes, cleared programs, and hardware ecosystems. **Mid-Atlantic carries the highest average compensation**, driven by cleared and intel-adjacent work.



SOURCE · GAME 7 STAFFING PROPRIETARY PLACEMENT DATA, Q1 2026

FOR YOU

Mid-Atlantic is the smallest slice and the highest-paying. Cleared, intel-adjacent work is the most underpriced career trade an engineer with the right background can make in 2026.

IF YOU'RE REMOTE-ONLY

Concentrate on specialized software, EDA tooling, infrastructure, and cloud/platform work that integrates with regulated industries.

IF YOU CAN BE ONSITE

Build relationships in two or three hubs. Onsite optionality is one of the most underpriced career assets in 2026.

SECTION SEVEN

07 — Six moves for the next 90 days.

No frameworks, no career fluff. Just what we'd tell you if we were sitting across the table.

01

Plan your career around project phases, not annual stints.

Engagement length compressed from 10+ months to ~7 in two years. The engineers winning this market run two or three high-leverage 6-month engagements a year, with a pipeline. Map your skills to your *next* phase, not your last full-time title. Build relationships before you need them.

02

Lean into contract. It's working for a reason.

40% of the U.S. workforce is contingent (Conexis, 2026). 60%+ of contingent workers choose contract deliberately for autonomy (LinkedIn, 2026). 43% of our 6–12 month placements are extended by the client — the proof quality doesn't suffer. If your mental model of contract is still *"between jobs,"* update it.

03

Move faster. Seriously.

A 41-day median time-to-fill means the window is narrow. The best candidates receive competing offers within days of hitting the market. Have your resume current, references warm, and rate decided *before* you start. If you are 60 days from your contract ending and you haven't started conversations, you are already late.

04 Position for the AI-augmented world, not the AI-replaced one.

Don't sell yourself as a "prompt engineer." Sell yourself as a domain engineer who uses AI as a multiplier. The Pragmatic Engineer's 2026 survey found the heaviest users of AI agents are staff and principal engineers — the people with enough context to use AI tools wisely. Bring a specific AI workflow to your screen, the human review step, and a bug or hallucination you caught that the model didn't.

05 Invest in disciplines where AI has the least penetration.

Embedded/firmware, IC verification, DFT, systems architecture. Longest fills, highest premium, most resistant to AI automation. If you're a generalist software engineer feeling pressure, the move is laterally *into* a domain — not toward a more "AI-flavored" version of the same generalist work.

06 Go narrow and deep on your recruiter relationships.

The 2026 hiring funnel is wide at the top and extremely narrow at the bottom. Generalist recruiters burn time and produce noise. Work with partners who understand your discipline, can evaluate your technical depth before you ever reach a hiring manager, and have done the work of building the relationships you want on the other side. *One right introduction is worth more than a hundred cold applications.*

A CLOSING THOUGHT

The roles you want are not posted on job boards. Your next move is a phone call from someone who already knows your work.

SECTION EIGHT

08 — Methodology, sources & about.

Methodology.

This report is based on analysis of engineering hiring activity — job orders, placements, candidate registrations, and submissions — processed through our ATS / CRM from **January 1 through April 24, 2026**. Year-over-year comparisons draw on data going back to January 2024. All proprietary data has been aggregated and anonymized.

Sources cited.

BROOKINGS INSTITUTION

CHIPS Act employment study, 2026 (149 U.S. counties).

WORLD ECONOMIC FORUM

Future of Jobs Report; 44% skills disruption projection.

PLANDEK

2026 Engineering Productivity Benchmarks.

CORTEX

Engineering in the Age of AI: 2026 Benchmark Report.

WAYDEV

2026 AI & engineering productivity analysis.

THE PRAGMATIC ENGINEER

2026 AI Tooling Survey.

STRIPE

Developer productivity data, 2026.

U.S. DEPARTMENT OF DEFENSE

Defense Microelectronics Activity contract, 2026 ($25B).

CONEXIS · NEXUS CW

U.S. contingent workforce share, 2026 (40%).

SIA

Engineering staffing performance vs. industry, 2026.

LINKEDIN · DATAREFS

Contingent worker preference; AI in hiring adoption (87% / 99%).

GAME 7 STAFFING

Proprietary ATS / CRM data, Jan 2024 – Apr 2026.

About Game 7 Staffing.

Game 7 Staffing places engineers in the industries where precision matters most: semiconductor, defense, aerospace, and advanced technology. We specialize in verification, embedded/firmware, IC design, DFT, systems architecture, and software engineering roles.

FOR ENGINEERS

Talk to a recruiter who already knows your work.

Verification. Embedded / firmware. DFT. Systems architecture. Cleared engineers in defense. Two to four interviews per cycle, not twenty. Days, not weeks.

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