
A GUIDE FOR FOUNDERS, OPERATORS & INVESTORS

The 2026 Talent Report

How startups, founders, and the investors who back them are building teams in the age of AI — and why the companies getting it right treat talent as strategy, not logistics.

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Talent Is the Strategy Founders Skip

Every founder we talk to has a product strategy. Most have a go-to-market strategy. Almost none have a talent strategy — a real one, written down, tied to the roadmap, revisited on a schedule. Instead, hiring happens the way most things happen in a startup: reactively, under pressure, when the gap has already started costing the business money.

That gap is more expensive in 2026 than it's ever been. AI has changed what “good” looks like in almost every function — which means the cost of a wrong hire, a slow hire, or a team structured around last year's assumptions is higher too. This report is a practical, no-fluff look at how to think about talent right now.

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How to use this report. We work with companies at every stage — first hire to scaling team, bootstrapped to funded — and this is the same thinking we bring to every engagement. Use it. Steal it. And if you get partway through and realize you'd rather have someone do this with you than do it alone, that's exactly the conversation we want to have.

01 PART ONE Talent Strategy: Build the Plan Before You Need It

A talent strategy is not a headcount spreadsheet. It's the answer to a specific question: which roles, in which order, will actually move the business forward — and which ones are you hiring out of anxiety, habit, or because a competitor has one?

1 Tie every hire to a 90-day outcome, not a title.

Before you open a role, write the sentence: “In 90 days, this person will have ____.” If you can't finish that sentence, you don't have a role yet — you have a job description. Titles attract resumes. Outcomes attract the right ones.

2 Build your hiring plan backward from your roadmap, not forward from your org chart.

Most founders start with “what does our team look like” and work toward “what do we need to hit our goals.” Flip it. Start with the 12-to-18-month roadmap, identify the three or four capability gaps that will block it, and build the plan from there. Everything else is a maybe-later.

3 Separate “urgent” roles from “important” roles — they're rarely the same.

The role that's on fire right now (an open seat, a frustrated team) competes for attention with the role that actually determines whether you hit your next milestone. Founders default to solving urgent. The companies that scale well force themselves to solve important first.

4 Revisit the plan quarterly, not annually.

A talent strategy built in January is half-obsolete by June in a company growing fast or pivoting hard. Quarterly review isn't bureaucracy — it's the only way the plan stays attached to reality.

PEOPLE ATX CAN HELP

We build talent strategy as a standalone engagement — a roadmap-backed hiring plan you can run yourself, or hand to us to execute. Most founders don't need more advice; they need someone to build the plan with them and then go find the people on it.

PART TWO

02 Retained Search & Scaling: Finding the People Who Aren't Applying

The candidates who will actually change your trajectory are almost never the ones applying to your posting. They're employed, not looking, and getting six other messages a week from recruiters using the same templated outreach. Winning that search requires a different approach than posting and praying.

1 Source from adjacent roles and industries, not just your competitors.

If you're only looking at people who've done your exact role at a company like yours, you're fishing in the same small pond as everyone else. The best operators we've placed over our careers often came from adjacent industries — different problems, transferable judgment, and far less competition for their attention.

2 Discretion isn't optional for senior roles — it's the search.

Your best candidates for an executive or lead role are often currently employed somewhere that would be very unhappy to learn they're looking. A search that can't move quietly will lose those candidates before it ever reaches them.

3 A slow process doesn't prevent bad hires — it loses good ones.

A drawn-out process doesn't protect you from a bad hire; it costs you the good candidates, who have other offers moving faster. The fix isn't "hire faster and worse," it's having a process tight enough to move fast on the right person when you find them.

4 The interview should test judgment, not memory.

Generic behavioral questions get rehearsed answers. The interviews that actually predict performance put a candidate in front of real, verifiable past behavior and probe it. What that looks like in practice — the panel, the questions, the scoring — is Part 3.

PEOPLE ATX CAN HELP

Retained, discretion-first search built for startups and growing companies at any stage — bootstrapped, venture-backed, or somewhere in between — with AI-native sourcing that finds the adjacent talent your competitors aren't even looking at. We run searches the way we'd want one run for our own company.

03 PART THREE Inside the Search: The Process, Stage by Stage

Principles tell you what a good search values. This section shows what one actually looks like end to end — what to run yourself, and what to expect from any search partner you hire, including us.

One piece of context first: research on hiring is unusually consistent that unstructured interviews are weak predictors of performance. Structured interviews — the same core questions for every candidate, defined competencies, independent scoring before anyone compares notes — are roughly twice as predictive. Not because they're bureaucratic, but because they force the decision to rest on evidence instead of charisma.

1 Define the outcome before the role

A serious search starts with a scorecard, not a job description. The 90-day sentence from Part 1 is the first line; extend it to month twelve and month eighteen. Revenue shipped, team built, system replaced — specific and measurable. The scorecard becomes the standard every candidate is evaluated against, which is what keeps a search honest when a charming candidate shows up who's impressive but wrong.

2 Map the market, not the applicants

The candidates who will change your trajectory are almost never applying to postings. A real search maps the market first — including the adjacent industries and roles from Part 2 — and reaches those people quietly, with outreach specific enough that they respond.

3 Run a structured interview panel

Every candidate for the same role should face the same core questions, evaluated against the same competencies, by a panel where each interviewer owns a distinct area. A typical executive panel:

ROUND	FOCUS	LENGTH	FORMAT
1 • Search Partner Screen	Role fit, career narrative, motivation	60 min	Video
2 • Hiring CEO / Founder	Strategic vision, leadership style	60 min	Video or in person
3 • Board / Key Stakeholder	Judgment, governance, culture add	45 min	In person preferred
4 • Peer / Functional Leader	Cross-functional collaboration, team fit	45 min	Video or in person
5 • Case Presentation	Strategic thinking, operating approach	90 min	In person, panel
References ×4	Verified performance, red flags	30 min each	Structured phone calls

Two rules make the panel work. First, every interviewer scores independently, in writing, before the group debriefs — otherwise the most senior voice in the room decides the hire. Second, every score needs written evidence from the conversation. A number without a note is an opinion, not an evaluation.

4 Ask questions that test judgment

Rehearsed candidates handle generic behavioral questions easily. The questions that actually predict performance ask for specific, verifiable past behavior, then probe. A few examples of the style:

“Tell me about the best hire you ever made and the worst. What did you learn from each?”

“Describe the most difficult board conversation you’ve had. How did you prepare, and what was the outcome?”

“Tell me about a major strategic bet that was contrarian. How did you make the case, and what happened?”

Notice the pattern: past behavior, real stakes, and room for follow-up. The follow-ups — “who pushed back hardest?”, “would you make the same call again?” — are where rehearsed answers run out and real judgment shows.

5 Score, debrief, decide

Strong processes use a simple, shared scale — we use 1 to 5, where a 5 means specific, quantified stories and honest ownership of failures, and a 1 means generic answers with no connection between past work and this role. The panel debriefs against the scorecard, resolves disagreements by going back to evidence, and lands on a clear recommendation: strong hire, hire, proceed with caution, or do not advance. “Proceed with caution” is a real outcome — it means naming the risk explicitly and deciding whether you can manage it, not hoping it away.

6 Reference checks that actually check

References done last and done casually confirm nothing. Done well, they're structured 30-minute conversations — four of them for an executive hire, including former managers, direct reports, and for CEO searches, prior investors. The goal isn't confirming the candidate is likable; it's verifying the specific claims made in interviews and asking the one question that matters: “Would you hire this person again for this role?” — then listening carefully to any pause before the answer.

What to expect from a search partner

Whether you work with us or anyone else, a retained search partner should earn the fee visibly:

- ✓ **They start with strategy, not a job description.** If the first deliverable is a list of resumes rather than a scorecard and a market map, you've hired a resume forwarder.
- ✓ **They bring candidates who weren't looking.** Anyone can screen applicants. The value of a search is the pipeline you couldn't have reached yourself.
- ✓ **They run the process, not just the sourcing.** Panel design, question frameworks, calibrated scoring, and a facilitated debrief should be part of the engagement — that structure is where bad hires get caught.
- ✓ **They move quietly.** Senior candidates are employed. A search that can't maintain discretion loses the best people before they're ever in the room.
- ✓ **They stay through the close and the landing.** Offer negotiation, resignation navigation, and the first 90 days are where searches quietly fail. A partner who disappears at the offer letter did half the job.

PEOPLE ATX CAN HELP

Every People ATX client receives our full Executive Interview Guide & Scoring Matrix — role-specific question banks for CEO, C-suite, VP, board, and VC-internal searches, complete scoring rubrics, and a facilitated debrief with our team — as part of every retained engagement.

PART FOUR

04 Workforce Planning: Org Design That Survives Reality

Workforce planning is the part of talent strategy founders most often skip — right up until a board asks for it, a raise stalls, or growth outpaces the org chart. Done well, it's not a defensive document. It's the thing that lets you move fast with confidence instead of guessing.

1 Plan for two scenarios, not one.

Build your headcount plan for the growth case and the flat case. If your only plan assumes the next raise closes on schedule, you don't have a plan — you have a hope. The companies that handle a slower market well are the ones who already knew what they'd protect and what they'd pause.

2 Know your ratios before you need them.

Engineers per manager. Reps per sales leader. Support tickets per support hire. Most founders can tell you their burn rate to the dollar and have no idea what their org ratios are — until they're badly out of line and showing up as missed deadlines or burned-out managers.

3 Design for the team you'll have in a year, not the one you have today.

A structure that works at 12 people often breaks at 40 — not because anyone failed, but because the org wasn't designed to flex. Build reporting lines and decision rights with growth in mind, even if you're not there yet.

4 Treat org design as a living document, not a one-time project.

The org chart you build during a planning offsite is a snapshot, not a contract. The best operators revisit structure as deliberately as they revisit strategy — because the two are the same conversation.

PEOPLE ATX CAN HELP

We build workforce plans that hold up under real board and investor scrutiny — scenario-modeled, ratio-aware, and built before you need them, not assembled in a panic after the question gets asked.

PART FIVE

05 The 2026 Talent Landscape: What AI Has Actually Changed

It's tempting to treat AI as a tooling question — which copilot, which model, which workflow. For talent, the real shift is structural. AI hasn't just changed how individual people work; it's changed what roles exist, what “good” looks like inside them, and how fast a team needs to be able to reorganize around new capability.

What's changed for candidates

- The best people are evaluating you on your AI fluency as much as you're evaluating theirs. Strong candidates ask pointed questions about how a company actually uses AI day to day — and treat vague answers as a red flag.
- Skill half-life has shortened. The technical or operational skill set that made someone a strong hire two years ago may already be table stakes, or may already be partially automated. Resumes lag reality.
- Adjacent-industry and non-traditional candidates are more viable than ever, because AI fluency and judgment are transferring across domains faster than role-specific experience used to.

What's changed for companies

- Some roles that used to require a full hire now require a fraction of one, paired with the right tooling. Other roles — ones requiring judgment, trust, and ambiguity — are more valuable than ever and harder to fill well.
- Org charts built around AI-era workflows look different from org charts built three years ago. Companies that haven't redesigned theirs are often over-hired in some functions and under-resourced in others without realizing it.
- “We use AI” is no longer a differentiator. Nearly everyone says it. The differentiator is whether a company has actually rebuilt workflows around it, or just bolted a tool onto an old process.

What this means for hiring

The companies winning right now aren't the ones with the most headcount or the flashiest tool stack. They're the ones who can answer, role by role, which jobs need a human with judgment, which workflows should be redesigned around AI, and how to reorganize fast enough to act on that before a

competitor does. That's a talent question and an AI question at the same time — which is exactly why most companies are unequipped to answer it alone.

PEOPLE ATX CAN HELP

Our search and strategy work is built around this shift — AI-native sourcing, role design that accounts for what AI has already changed, and talent plans that don't assume 2023's org chart still applies.

PART SIX

06 AI Change Management: Why a System Isn't a Strategy

Most companies' AI rollout looks the same: buy the tool, send a Slack message, hope adoption happens. It usually doesn't — not because the tool is bad, but because adoption was never the actual problem. The problem is organizational: unclear ownership, no redesigned workflow, no one accountable for whether the change actually took.

Why tools alone don't work

A new AI tool dropped into an old workflow rarely changes the workflow — it just adds a step. Real change requires deciding what stops, not just what gets added: which approvals get removed, which roles get redefined, which meetings stop happening because the work that justified them is now automated. That's a judgment call, made role by role, team by team. No platform makes that call for you.

Why this needs a partner, not just a system

- Someone has to understand both the talent market and the operational reality of your business well enough to know which roles genuinely change and which don't — that's a strategic judgment, not a software feature.
- Someone has to manage the human side: the engineer worried AI is coming for their job, the manager whose team just got smaller, the leader who doesn't trust a tool they didn't choose. A dashboard doesn't have those conversations.
- Someone has to keep the change going past week one. Most AI rollouts have a burst of energy and then quietly revert to the old way of working within a quarter, because no one owned the follow-through.

What good AI change management actually looks like

It starts with an honest audit of where AI changes the org chart, where it changes a workflow but not a headcount number, and where it changes nothing yet. It moves through a deliberate rollout, role by role, with the people doing the work involved in redesigning it — not told about it after the fact. And it includes a follow-through plan, because adoption that isn't reinforced after 90 days quietly disappears.

PEOPLE ATX CAN HELP

Our AI Change Management & Transformation practice exists for exactly this work — helping leadership teams figure out where AI genuinely changes the org, and helping the people inside it actually adopt the change, not just survive the rollout.

PEOPLE ATX

The Common Thread

Talent strategy, search, workforce planning, and AI transformation aren't four separate problems. They're one conversation about how your company gets built, viewed from four angles. Most founders are forced to handle that conversation alone, or split it across vendors who only see their own slice of it.

People ATX was built to be the partner who sees the whole picture — for founders building their first team, operators scaling past their last one, and investors trying to make sure their portfolio companies get this right.

[Get in touch →](#)

[Learn more at peopleatx.com →](#)

Jami Adkins · jami@peopleatx.com · 954.802.3133

Andrés Traslaviña · andres@peopleatx.com · 737.900.1710

hello@peopleatx.com · peopleatx.com · Austin, TX