

AI & Data Salary Guide

Australia 2026-27

Salary bands for machine learning, AI, MLOps, data science, data engineering and analytics talent. Built for founders, CTOs and Heads of Data scaling technical teams.

SENIOR ML ENGINEER · BASE SALARY

\$160-190k

Melbourne

\$165-200k

Sydney

SENIOR DATA ENGINEER · BASE SALARY

\$145-175k

Melbourne

\$150-180k

Sydney

All figures are base salary. Superannuation of 12% sits on top.

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How to read this guide

Every figure is annual base salary in AUD for a permanent role. Superannuation (12% from 1 July 2026), bonus and equity sit on top. Each band shows the typical range for that role and level, in \$k. If you want to win the candidate, price at the midpoint or above.

Junior 0-2 years. Delivers with guidance.	Mid 3-5 years. Owns features end to end.	Senior 6-9 years. Owns systems in production.	Lead / Principal 10+ years. Sets direction, leads people or platforms.
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FIVE THINGS TO KNOW

- 1 Production pays.** People who own models in production (serving, monitoring, retraining) price well above peers who mostly work in notebooks, whatever the title says.
- 2 "Data Scientist" is two jobs.** One who deploys models prices toward the ML Engineer band. One focused on analysis and experimentation sits in the Data Scientist band. Scope before you budget.
- 3 Junior AI hiring has almost stopped.** Nearly every AI engineering role asks for 3+ years. Mid and senior people with shipped work are where the competition is.
- 4 Melbourne sits 3-5% under Sydney.** Remote-first roles increasingly pay Sydney rates to land senior people.
- 5 Most AI job ads hide the pay.** And job-board averages blend every level. Treat them as a floor, not a target.

WHAT WE'RE HEARING

I recently spoke with an AI engineer who built his company's entire AI platform on his own. Front end, back end, the AI layer and the cloud setup, start to finish. He's now looking to leave, and it isn't money or a bad boss. He's outgrown the role and there's nobody above or beside him to learn from.

It's not the first time I've heard it. A young engineer promoted to lead early told me the same thing. Great for the CV, until he realised he was leading a team of one.

The ownership is what gets them in the door, and it's also what walks them back out. If you're hiring your first AI engineer, plan who they'll learn from, not just what they'll own.

Max Horowitz, Founder

Melbourne salary bands

Funded scale-ups and financial services sit in the upper half of each range. Early-stage startups often sit lower on base and make it up in equity.

All figures in \$k. 160-190 means a base salary of \$160,000 to \$190,000.

ROLE	JUNIOR	MID	SENIOR	LEAD
ML Engineer Ships and runs models in production	90-115	130-150	160-190	200-230
AI Engineer LLM, RAG and agentic products	100-125*	140-170	165-205	205-245
MLOps / ML Platform Serving, pipelines, CI/CD for ML	95-115*	125-145	155-180	170-200
Data Scientist Modelling, experimentation, forecasting	85-110	130-150	155-185	185-210
Data Engineer Pipelines, platforms, modern data stack	95-110	120-140	145-175	175-205
Data Analyst Reporting, BI, insight	90-110	100-130	130-150	150-160

* Estimated: few AI and MLOps roles hire at junior level.

LEADERSHIP ROLES

ROLE	TYPICAL RANGE (\$K)
Data / Data Engineering Manager	170-215
Head of Data / Head of AI	200-300
Chief Data / Chief AI Officer Mostly enterprise and listed companies	300-400

Junior bands draw on fewer data points than mid and senior, so treat them as indicative. Leadership base varies most with team size and equity.

Sydney salary bands

The deepest and highest-paying market, driven by banks, big tech offices and funded AI companies. Sydney runs 3-5% above Melbourne, with the gap narrowing at lead level where people are hired nationally.

All figures in \$k. 160-190 means a base salary of \$160,000 to \$190,000.

ROLE	JUNIOR	MID	SENIOR	LEAD
ML Engineer Ships and runs models in production	95-120	135-155	165-200	210-240
AI Engineer LLM, RAG and agentic products	105-130*	145-175	170-215	215-255
MLOps / ML Platform Serving, pipelines, CI/CD for ML	100-120*	130-150	160-185	175-210
Data Scientist Modelling, experimentation, forecasting	90-115	135-155	160-190	190-220
Data Engineer Pipelines, platforms, modern data stack	100-115	125-145	150-180	180-215
Data Analyst Reporting, BI, insight	95-115	105-135	135-155	155-165

* Estimated: few AI and MLOps roles hire at junior level.

LEADERSHIP ROLES

ROLE	TYPICAL RANGE (\$K)
Data / Data Engineering Manager	175-225
Head of Data / Head of AI	210-310
Chief Data / Chief AI Officer Mostly enterprise and listed companies	310-415

Brisbane salary bands

Brisbane runs about 5-7% below Melbourne for AI and ML roles, and closer to parity for data engineering. Defence and government work is often pegged to public sector levels or day rates.

All figures in \$k. 160-190 means a base salary of \$160,000 to \$190,000.

ROLE	JUNIOR	MID	SENIOR	LEAD
ML Engineer	85-105	120-140	150-175	185-215
AI Engineer	95-115*	130-160	155-190	190-230
MLOps / ML Platform	90-110*	120-135	145-170	160-190
Data Scientist	75-100	115-135	140-165	165-190
Data Engineer	90-105	115-135	140-170	170-195
Data Analyst	85-100	95-120	120-140	140-150

* Estimated: few AI and MLOps roles hire at junior level.

Head of Data / Head of AI in Brisbane: typically 185-280.

OTHER MARKETS AND REMOTE

MARKET	VERSUS MELBOURNE	WHAT TO KNOW
Perth	On par to 5% lower	Resources companies pay a premium for computer vision, sensor and predictive maintenance ML.
Adelaide	About 15-20% lower	Smaller market with defence-adjacent demand.
Canberra	On par, higher if cleared	Mostly government classifications or cleared contracts.
Remote-first	Close to Sydney	At senior level remote roles track Sydney. Regional discounts lose people at offer.

Job boards vs signed offers

Most hiring managers sanity-check a salary on Indeed, Glassdoor or SEEK. Here's what they show, city by city, next to the bands in this guide. Job-board figures are averages across all levels.

ML Engineer

SOURCE	MELBOURNE	SYDNEY	BRISBANE	NATIONAL
Indeed	\$162.7k	\$148.5k	\$124.1k	\$131.7k
Glassdoor	\$131.1k	\$150.5k	\$112.5k	\$137.5k
SEEK ads (via Jora)	\$125.0k	\$155.0k	\$120.0k	\$142.5k
This guide, mid	\$130-150k	\$135-155k	\$120-140k	-
This guide, senior	\$160-190k	\$165-200k	\$150-175k	-

Data Engineer

SOURCE	MELBOURNE	SYDNEY	BRISBANE	NATIONAL
Indeed	\$135.1k	\$150.7k	\$130.7k	\$129.5k
Glassdoor	\$128.0k	\$128.0k	\$125.8k	\$130.0k
SEEK ads (via Jora)	\$140.0k	\$140.0k	\$137.8k	\$130.0k
This guide, mid	\$120-140k	\$125-145k	\$115-135k	-
This guide, senior	\$145-175k	\$150-180k	\$140-170k	-

Public averages as published in October 2026. SEEK salary data is published through Jora, which SEEK owns.

The pattern: job-board averages mostly land inside the mid-level band and well short of senior pay. They blend every level, lag the market and mix base with package. Indeed's Melbourne ML figure is the outlier, resting on a small number of postings.

WHAT MOVES SOMEONE UP THE BAND

FACTOR	TYPICAL EFFECT ON BASE
Owens models in production: serving, monitoring, retraining	+10-20%
Has shipped LLM or agentic systems to real users	+10-20%
Computer vision in production	+10-15%
Built an ML platform: feature store, registry, CI/CD for ML	+5-15%
Shipped work in a regulated domain such as fintech or health	+5-10%
Leads people, not just systems	Moves to Lead band
Notebook-only work, limited cloud or deployment	Bottom of band

Total comp by company stage

Base tells you where an offer starts. Stage decides what sits on top. Superannuation at 12% applies to every permanent offer and is usually quoted as "plus super".

STAGE	WHERE BASE SITS	BONUS	EQUITY
Seed to Series A	Lower half of the range. First senior hires often stretch higher.	Rare	Options. The main lever.
Series B to D	Midpoint to upper end of the range	Small, if any	Options. Total comp often 20-50% above base.
AI-native scale-up	Top of range and above	Varies	Meaningful equity. Total comp can run 50-100% above base.
Listed tech, banks	Midpoint to top of range	10-25%	Shares at senior levels and above
Government	Public sector classification	None	None. Higher employer super.

CONTRACT DAY RATES

For project work, backfills and proofs of concept. AUD per day, excluding GST, including super. Sydney and Melbourne sit within about 5% of each other.

LEVEL	ML / AI ENGINEER	DATA SCIENTIST	DATA ENGINEER
Mid	\$850-\$1,050	\$750-\$950	\$600-\$875
Senior	\$950-\$1,250	\$950-\$1,225	\$875-\$1,125
Principal / specialist	\$1,250-\$1,550	\$1,250-\$1,575	\$1,100-\$1,300

LLM and MLOps specialists who can own a production system sit at the top of these ranges. A day rate carries no paid leave or bonus, and gaps between contracts are unpaid, so it does not convert neatly into a salary.

EQUITY, PUT SIMPLY

Candidates value vague equity at zero. If options are part of the offer, put the number of options, strike price, vesting schedule and total shares outstanding in writing. That lets a candidate compare your offer with a bigger base elsewhere.

Five moves that win offers

- 1 Scope before you price.** Write down what this person will own in their first 90 days. That decides ML Engineer vs Data Scientist vs MLOps, and it can swing the budget by 15-20%.
- 2 Budget at the midpoint or above.** Offers in the bottom half of a range are where final-stage declines happen.
- 3 Move in days, not weeks.** Strong senior AI and data candidates are usually in more than one process.
- 4 Sell the work.** Real production problems, a team that ships and a clear path up beat a small base premium for most engineers.
- 5 Put equity in writing.** Numbers, not "a meaningful stake". See page 07.

HOW WE BUILT THIS

This guide is Thor Talent research. For every role and level we collected 2026 salary figures from public job boards and salary sites and from published 2026 industry salary guides and benchmarking reports. We converted each figure to base salary excluding super, adjusted it to the city, and took the median. Each band shows the typical spread around that median. We then checked every band against our own conversations with candidates and hiring managers.

Public sources: SEEK, Jora, Indeed, Glassdoor and Payscale, plus published 2026 industry salary guides. Mid and senior bands draw on 5-8 data points each; junior bands on 2-3.

BUILD THE 2027 EDITION

Edition 2 will be built from anonymised offers shared by our network. Add yours in three minutes and get the next edition first.

thortalent.com/salary-survey

PRICING A LIVE HIRE?

Tell me the role and I'll give you a straight read on where your offer sits and who is actually available.

Max Horowitz, Founder

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General market information, not remuneration or legal advice. Thor Talent is a specialist AI and data recruitment agency based in Melbourne, placing ML, AI, MLOps, data science and data engineering talent into Australian startups and scale-ups.