



Hiring Pulse

January – March 2026



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— Q1 2026 HIRING PULSE

Quarterly synthesis of India GCC hiring. Three findings, full data backing, every figure sourced.

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The Big Picture

Precision hiring, GCC momentum, and skill-led competition will define 2026.



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The first quarter told a clear story: hiring held strong, and the growth was capability-led rather than broad. Demand ran through GCCs, AI/ML, BFSI, healthcare and travel, and across all of them employers spent the quarter buying scarce skills rather than adding headcount at large. This is precision hiring, and it rewards employers who know exactly which capability a role needs before they go to market.

Key takeaways:

- **Hiring held strong, and the growth is capability-led.** GCCs, AI/ML, BFSI, healthcare, and travel drove demand through the quarter. Employers spent the quarter buying scarce skills.
- **GCCs are the strongest structural growth engine.** 19,000 active GCC roles at the March peak, a 12–30% pay premium over non-GCC roles, and rising demand for GenAI, MLOps, cloud, cybersecurity, and product engineering.
- **Competition for digital talent has spread well beyond IT.** India faces a projected 53% AI/data talent gap, which makes speed, niche skill and EVP the deciding factors.
- **Tier-2/3 markets and targeted fresher hiring became real talent levers.** Internal mobility opens a faster, lower-cost path to senior capability than external hiring.

The theme for 2026 is precision. Know the scarce capability, price it against the GCC, and use mobility and Tier-2 as deliberate levers rather than fallbacks.



Executive Summary

— Q1 2026 AT A GLANCE

India ranked #2 globally in hiring demand. Employer confidence strengthened, led by GCCs, an IT rebound, a travel surge, and a decisive shift toward skill-led hiring.

NET EMPLOYMENT OUTLOOK

52%

AVG SALARY HIKE 2026

9.1%

TECH OPENINGS (MAR PEAK)

119K

GCC ROLES (MAR PEAK)

19K

FRESHER HIRE INTENT

73%

Year-on-year

AI TALENT GAP, PROJECTED 2026

53%

— MONTHLY HIRING MOMENTUM

Sentiment strengthened through the quarter. January was measured; February surged across IT and non-IT; March sustained expansion in tech and GCC roles.

Jan 2026

Measured start. GCC active roles at 17,000. Bengaluru fresher intent at 84%, retail at 91%. Tier-1 cities held 72% of roles; Tier-2/3 grew 26% YoY. AI/ML hiring accelerating.

Feb 2026

Momentum surge. IT/software postings +55% YoY; AI/ML roles +49%. GCC roles grew to 18,000. India faces a projected 53% AI/data talent gap by 2026.

Mar 2026

Sustained expansion. Tech openings peaked at 119,000. GCC roles hit a Q1 high of 19,000 before quarter-end. Finance & Insurance outlook at 61%. Quick-joiner urgency at 58%, sharpest in IT/BFSI for 3–6 year bands.

The Market Read

The Big
Picture

The Market
Read

The People
Read

Where to Act
This Quarter





Capability is driving growth.

Q1 hiring was strong, but it was not broad. Demand concentrated in specific capabilities and specific places, which is why an average national read misses the picture. Geographically, Bengaluru still leads with around a quarter of all roles and an 84% fresher intent, followed by Hyderabad and Pune, but the striking number is Tier-2 and Tier-3, which together account for roughly 28% of demand as GCC overflow and fresher hiring spread beyond the metros to Jaipur, Kochi, Coimbatore, Ahmedabad and Indore.

The common thread is skill. Across every hub the pull is toward AI/ML, analytics, product and GCC engineering, and employers are increasingly briefing for a specific capability rather than a generic role. The cities differ in which sectors dominate, but the scarce-skill competition is everywhere.

What hiring leaders should act on:

Plan around the scarce capabilities you actually need, then resource the search to match. Brief every mandate by the skill and the band it sits in, and choose the location deliberately: metros for the deepest specialist pools, Tier-2 and fresher pipelines where the work allows. Precision at the brief stage is what makes the rest of the search efficient.



City-wise demand and skill pull

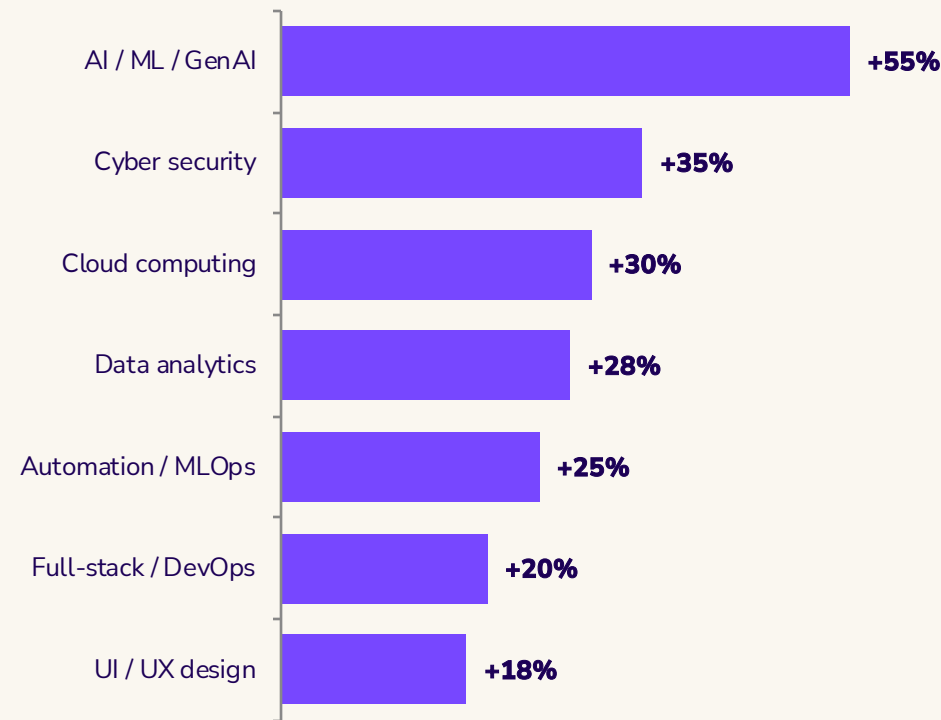
WHERE THE ROLES ARE

City	Role share	Fresher intent	Key sectors
Bengaluru	~25%	84%	IT, analytics, AI/ML, product, GCC engineering
Hyderabad	~13%	78%	IT, digital ops
Pune	~11%	72%	IT, manufacturing, automotive EV
Chennai	~9%	68%	Manufacturing, engineering, shared services
Delhi NCR	~9%	65%	BFSI, consulting, e-commerce
Mumbai	~8%	63%	BFSI, insurance, healthcare, fintech
Tier-2/3 cities	~28%	70%	Fresher ops, GCC expansion, delivery

Tier-2/3 hotspots: Jaipur, Kochi, Coimbatore, Ahmedabad, Indore. Fintech, BPO, textiles-to-tech, and GCC overflow from Bengaluru/Hyderabad.

Source: NASSCOM, LinkedIn India, Glassdoor, Naukri.com (public, Jan–Mar 2026).

SKILL DEMAND GROWTH





FINDING TWO

GCCs set the pace and the price.

No channel is shaping India's hiring market more than the GCC. India now hosts around 2,117 centres employing some 2.36 million professionals, and on our read the sector momentum ran broad this quarter, with travel and tourism leading the rebound while finance, IT and healthcare formed the durable base. The centres pay a premium of roughly 12 to 30% over comparable non-GCC roles, so wherever a GCC is hiring, it resets the local price.

The growth is also changing shape. Nano GCCs, specialised centres of 30 to 200 staff focused on chip design, clinical data science and cybersecurity, are multiplying, and GenAI, MLOps and cloud roles led GCC hiring in the quarter. Demand outpaced supply most sharply for AI/ML, cybersecurity and product engineering, the fastest-growing GCC functions in Q1.

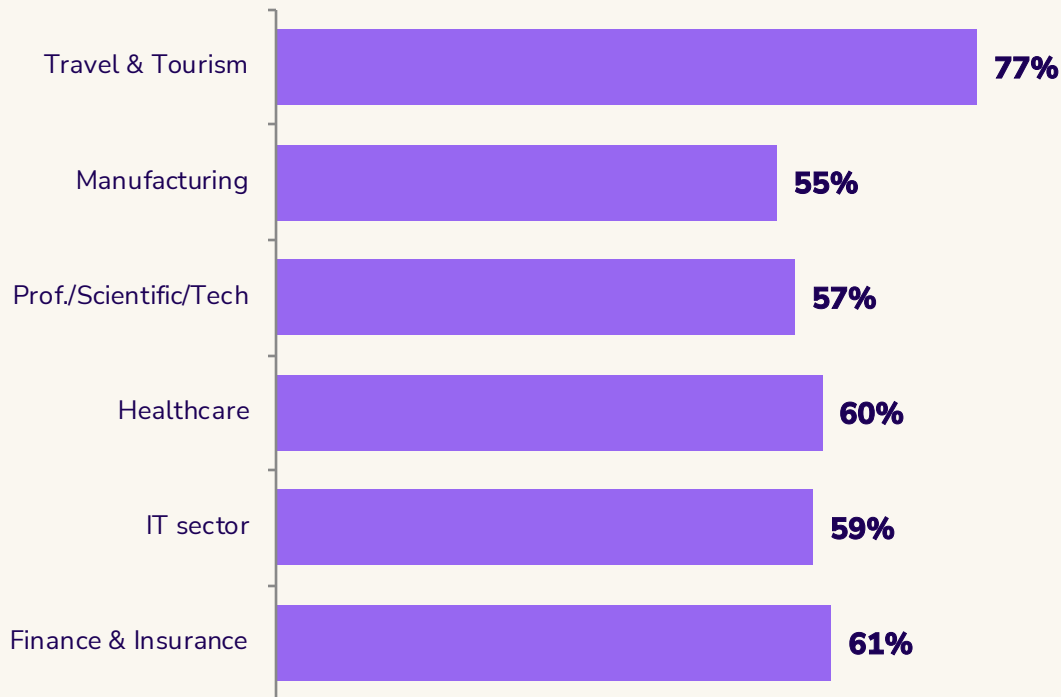
What hiring leaders should act on:

Treat the GCC channel as a primary pipeline rather than one option among several. Benchmark your offers against the GCC premium, build first for the GenAI, MLOps, cloud and product roles where the competition is fiercest, and assume a capability centre is in the race for any scarce-skill hire you are running.



Net Employment Outlook & GCC pull

THE HIRING BASE



Sector hiring momentum: Travel & tourism led the rebound; finance, IT and healthcare formed the broad, durable base.

GCC HIRING

GCC CENTRES IN INDIA

~2,117 (FY26)

NEW GCC ROLES BY 2026

+300K

GCC PROFESSIONALS EMPLOYED

2.36M (FY26)

GCC SALARY PREMIUM

~12–30%

GCC hiring by sector

Nano GCCs rising: specialised centres of 30–200 staff, focused on chip design, clinical data science and cybersecurity, are growing fast. Capability milestone: GenAI, MLOps and cloud roles led GCC hiring, with 300,000+ professionals projected by 2026. Demand outpaced supply for AI/ML, cybersecurity and product engineering, fastest-growing GCC functions in Q1.



Demand has outrun the AI talent pool.

The defining constraint of the quarter is AI talent. India holds about 16% of the world's AI talent, yet faces a projected shortfall of more than a million AI professionals by the end of 2026, and a 53% AI and data talent gap. The scarcity is not confined to tech: across the sector heatmap, AI/ML, cloud, cybersecurity and data engineering all read high in IT and GCCs, BFSI, e-commerce and professional services alike.

That paradox, a large absolute talent base and a large relative shortfall, is why demand and supply keep diverging. There is talent, but not job-ready talent in the scarce specialisms, and every sector is now reaching for the same people. It is also why hiring has turned skill-first, with employers prioritising the specific capability over the traditional degree.

What hiring leaders should act on:

With a gap this size, you win on three things: (1) speed, because the strongest profiles clear the market fast; (2) niche skill, because a precisely briefed mandate beats a generic one; and (3) a sharp employee value proposition, because when pay converges, the work and the environment decide.

Waiting for the market to loosen is not a strategy this year.



Sector / Skill Demand Heatmap

SECTOR	AI/ML	Cloud	Cyber	Data Engg	Automation	Full-stack
IT / GCC	High	High	High	High	Mid	High
BFSI / Insurance	High	Mid	High	High	Low	Mid
Manufacturing	Mid	Low	Mid	Mid	High	Low
Healthcare / Pharma	Mid	Mid	Mid	High	Low	Low
E-commerce / Retail	High	High	Mid	Mid	Mid	High
Automotive / EV	Mid	Low	Low	Mid	High	Mid
FMCG	Low	Mid	Low	Mid	Mid	Mid
Prof. services	High	Mid	High	High	Low	Mid

AI talent paradox

India holds 16% of global AI talent yet faces a projected shortfall of 1M+ AI professionals by end-2026.

AI talent gap

India faces a projected 53% AI/data talent shortfall by 2026.

Skill-first hiring

Employers increasingly prioritise specific capabilities over traditional degrees.

Source: LinkedIn India, Glassdoor, Naukri.com (public) + Recruise Intelligence, Jan–Mar 2026.

The People Read

The Big
Picture

The Market
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The People
Read

Where to Act
This Quarter





With talent scarce and expensive, employers are changing both *how they pay and how they build.*

The three findings describe the pressure: capability-led demand, a GCC channel that keeps resetting the price, and an AI talent gap that keeps widening. What matters next is how employers are actually responding to it, and in Q1 2026 the response ran along two lines.

The first is *pay*. With the average hike settling near 9%, the money is no longer spread evenly across the workforce. Employers are concentrating it where scarcity is real, paying a premium of up to around 40% for AI, GenAI and cybersecurity skills, and focusing their retention effort on the roles where attrition volatility is highest. The average increment has become a floor rather than the lever.

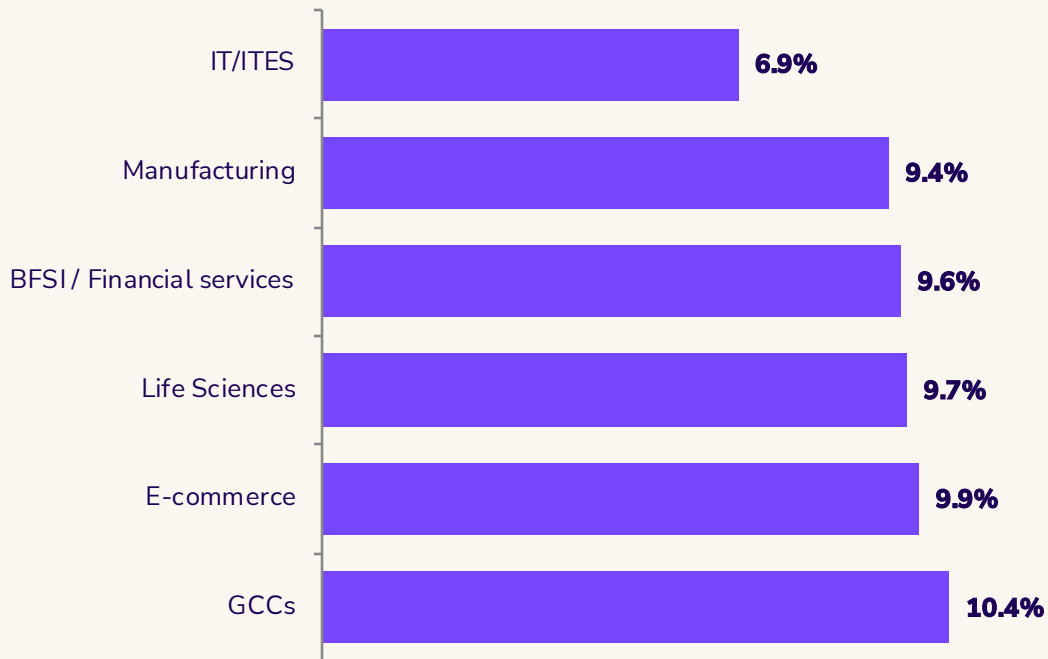
The second is *leadership and development*. Faced with talent they cannot simply buy, employers are building it. Internal mobility has become a faster and lower-cost route to senior capability than the open market, L&D budgets have risen to support it, and the definition of a strong leader has shifted toward human-centred, AI-fluent judgment.

The two reads that follow take each in turn: what the quarter did to pay and retention, and how leadership and culture are adapting to keep scarce people and grow the next layer from within.



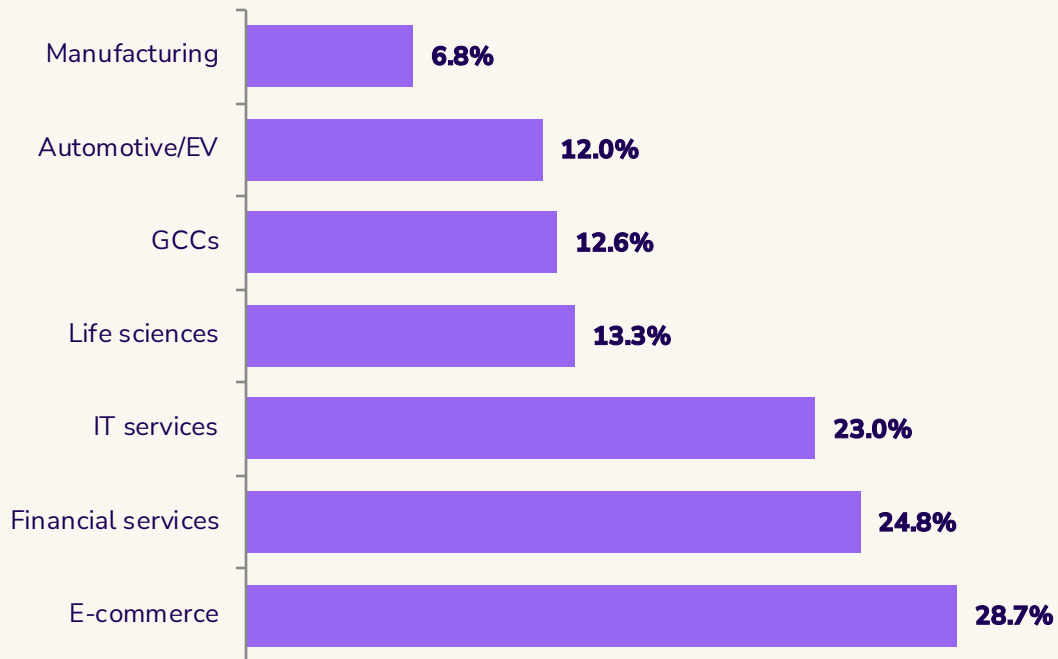
Compensation and Attrition

SECTOR SALARY HIKE PROJECTIONS 2026



Avg hike 9.1% · top performer premium 1.5x · AI/GenAI/ML & cybersecurity skills command up to a ~40% premium over base pay (EY).

ATTRITION TRACKER



Attrition stabilised near pre-pandemic lows across most sectors; e-commerce and financial services stayed the highest exposure. Volatility remains highest where AI/data and cloud skills are scarce.

Source: NASSCOM, LinkedIn India, Glassdoor, Naukri.com (public, Jan-Mar 2026), Recruise Intelligence.



Leadership and Culture Outlook

Successful leadership in 2026 is human-centred: empathy, relational intelligence, and AI-augmented decision-making. Coaching shifted from remedial to strategic growth lever.

Human-centred leadership. Empathy, deep listening and psychological safety replace command-and-control models.

Coaching democratised. Coaching now serves mid-level and emerging leaders as a growth lever, well beyond its old remedial role.

Workforce derailment. Key 2026 challenge: resistance to feedback, low accountability under stress, and disengagement after overcommitment.

AI as teammate. Leaders use AI for data-driven decisions and real-time feedback in practice simulations. AI literacy is a leadership competency.

Continuous feedback. Annual appraisals give way to real-time performance support and micro-learning embedded in daily work.

Relational intelligence. Trust and communication flow through distributed systems; RI prioritised over basic EQ for senior roles.

L&D budgets. ~59% of organisations increased L&D budgets (FY25) to support digital transformation and inclusive skilling.

Bench strength. Internal mobility offers a faster, lower-cost path to senior capability than external hiring.

Where to Act This Quarter

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WHAT THIS MEANS FOR Q2 2026

Precision wins the quarter and *speed decides the close.*

What stood out this quarter was how much precision mattered. Hiring held up, but the growth wasn't broad. Demand went to specific, scarce skills, and the employers who did well were the ones who knew exactly which capability they were hiring for before they started looking.

The GCCs kept setting both the pace and the price, and the shortage of AI and data talent widened rather than eased. For anyone hiring into that, a few things follow. Brief the role by the skill it actually needs and the band that skill sits in, and be deliberate about where you look, because Tier-2 cities and fresher pipelines are pulling real weight now where the work suits them.

On most scarce hires, you are up against a GCC, so budget for the 12 to 30% premium that comes with it; a capability centre resets the local price wherever it lands. And for the hardest AI and data roles, moving quickly and giving people a real reason to join count for more than headline pay, so the quicker route to senior capability is often growing it in-house.

The yearly hike carries less of the load than it used to. With increments settling around 9%, holding your best people comes down to paying properly for scarce skills and not losing them to a counter-offer, and that gets settled long before appraisal season.



Want to hire talent that makes a real difference to your organisation?

Cut through the hype to get to what really matters.

About Us

Recruise is a global intelligence-led talent partner for enterprises, with offices in Bengaluru and Austin. For two decades, we have been a trusted partner to Fortune 2000 companies, scaling mid-market global capability centres, and the senior professionals who lead them — across Technology, Pharma, Life Sciences, and BFSI.

We combine deep sector expertise and proprietary hiring intelligence to deliver measurable impact across talent acquisition, executive search, and GCC transformation. Our work is reinforced by industry-leading research, deep market insights, and thought leadership across a wide range of sectors including Digital Services and ER&D, Enterprise Software, Internet of Things, Healthcare, Pharma, Lifesciences, Retail, Automotive, BFSI and Media & Telecom.

From scaling innovation to navigating disruption, global leaders turn to us to build, buy, and grow technology-led businesses that are ready for what's next.



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