



The Must-Have Tech Talent Hiring Playbook For 2026

4 strategies used by leading
businesses to bridge tech talent gaps



2025 exposed a truth most companies didn't want to admit...

...the real issue behind roadmaps derailing wasn't the scarcity of quality tech talent. It was the inability of traditional recruitment and outsourcing to access the right people and integrate them quickly.

Meanwhile, the fastest-growing companies:

- Didn't add recruiters, inflate budgets, or hope for "better candidates."
- Used a model designed to elevate engineering performance.
- Onboarded quicker, saved more, and outpaced competition – without hiring blindly.



Strategy 1

Adopting a hiring model that complements your roadmap

(Stop fighting “talent shortages”; change the system)

Why the outdated recruitment system will never be able to get you exactly the talent you need...

If you run a tech-driven business today, you've felt it: the constant **drag between your need to deliver rapidly** and **how long it actually takes to get the right people** in place.

Scarce quality talent. High recruitment costs. Increasing tech salaries (+ National Insurance up to 15% now).

Recruitment delays. All these stand in the way of you actually delivering according to plan. And that's **The Tech Talent Problem**; the real-world version of what we call the 'agility gap'.

When the economy shifts, technology advances, or competitors make bold moves, most organisations can't respond fast enough. Often, the reason isn't strategy, or even leadership. It's the **inability to scale skilled people quickly, reliably, and without breaking budgets.**

It's the main reason why **even the best tech companies are struggling** to scale fast enough.

The growing divide between how fast your company needs to move and how fast your current hiring model allows it IS your agility gap. We've broken this down into **3 quick sections** designed to help you **understand your gap**...and move from conundrum to control.

1. What a scalable hiring engine actually looks like

The ability to scale tech talent dictates your productivity, innovation, and growth. Without it, everything slows down. Your forecasts become fiction. Product launches slip. Costs rise faster than output.

Agility isn't a mindset problem; it's an operational bottleneck (read red flag). And for most tech-driven businesses, that bottleneck is mostly due to how they locate, hire, and integrate engineering talent. This isn't a talent shortage problem, it's your approach to scalability - reliance on a system that simply cannot and will not expand fast enough to meet your talent needs.

2. The warning signs your current hiring model isn't built for speed

Most leadership teams will admit:

- It takes months, not weeks, to get people (especially great devs) from search to start.
- Recruitment costs and notice periods keep creeping up.
- Teams are constantly 'patchworking' capacity to keep up with delivery timelines.

These are early warning signs of a system that can't scale fast enough to match market speed. A system set up for failure - we're seeing this happen too often.

Regain control by diagnosing your tech talent gap.

It starts with honest benchmarking. Ask yourself, how long it takes you to:

- Approve, source, hire, and fully integrate key roles,
- Get new engineers productive and contributing,
- Train them in AI tech, new tools and tech stacks.

Or to make it simpler, check out our RAG approach that gives you a clear answer by benchmarking key indicators of your ability to scale tech talent.

	Red Can't scale	Amber Hard to scale	Green Super scalable
Total cost of hire (For senior tech talent)	>£80k plus NI and pension, with £20k recruitment fee on top	£60-80k plus NI and pension, potentially with £20k recruitment fee on top (depending on complexity of hire)	£50k all in cost (salary, pension, taxes), no recruitment fee on top
Time to hire (fewer than 3 people) (From search to signature)	>3 months	1-2 months	<1 month
Time to hire (10 people) (From search to signature)	> 6 months	3-6 months	<1 month
Notice Periods (From signature to start)	>3 months	1-2 months	< 1 week. (yes really)
Team fit (Cultural fit and ways of working)	Siloed working Glassdoor rating <3	Some mismatch in working methods Glassdoor rating 3-4	Integration, unified culture Glassdoor rating >4
AI enablement (Enhanced productivity from effective AI use)	<15% productivity boost	15-30% productivity boost	>30% productivity boost
Average Tenure (How long they stay)	<12 months	12-24 months	>24 months

Strategy 2

Not compromising quality for speed

(You can get both at the same time)

Leading businesses didn't get their elite tech teams by hiring harder or increasing budgets...

Strategy 1 took you through our RAG model. The move from **Red/Amber to Green is easier and a lot less expensive** than most recruiters would have you believe.

Once you recognise that your biggest barrier to finding the right people fast is structural, not personal, your path forward becomes clear. You don't **fix your tech talent problem** by hiring harder or throwing more money at it. You fix it **by changing how the system itself scales** (and **save 50%** while getting the absolute best tech people in the world).

The traditional approach builds teams linearly, i.e., hire one, onboard one, grow one. But when markets move exponentially, the businesses that keep up are the ones that rebuild the engine while the plane's still flying.

Eliminating the old, unlocking the new

More recruiters, bigger budgets, more agencies – the traditional system always wants more, but it just doesn't work. The **new way is quicker, big on savings, and a lot more quality focused**.

Even well-funded teams are discovering that money doesn't buy time or speed. The real blocker isn't capital, it's how fast you can mobilise capability.

Scaling tech teams is now centered around five key shifts:

- **From compromise to quality:** It's no longer speed vs. quality. Don't compromise one for the other anymore. When quality is intentional, speed becomes a natural by-product.
- **From transactional hiring to embedded teams:** Remote doesn't mean detached, it means fully integrated from day one, working your hours, your tools, your sprints.
- **From employment admin to managed infrastructure:** With HR, payroll, compliance, performance management, and AI upskilling handled centrally, you have the freedom to focus on building and delivering.
- **From static skill sets to continuous learning:** Engineers trained and re-trained in AI and emerging tools to compound productivity and keep you future-proofed.
- **From “recruit and hope” to partnership and accountability:** Success measured in delivery speed, retention, integration, and sustained performance; not just headcount filled.



Strategy 3

Learning from teams that got it right

(If you don't study what works, you'll keep repeating what doesn't)

Stories from the CXO frontline

...businesses that got it right

"Their quality is excellent, their work ethic is excellent and they're delivering what they say they will reliably. And as a business owner, they're costing me significantly less than the same quality I'd get elsewhere."

"We were really impressed at how fast the engineers got up to speed and how they just get on with things. We started them out on slightly simpler stuff to get them familiar with our products, but they quickly moved on to new and more complex tasks."

"We love the customer success team support and the upskilling that Smart Working provides their engineers as standard."



Company size:
80-150

Benchmark agility level:
Amber

Why were things so stressful?

- Funding round closed – so it was time to turn excitement into growth, fast.
- There was board and investor pressure to deliver quickly on the product roadmap.

Challenges (in their words)

- “Hiring choices make a huge difference to a company of our size – getting it wrong just delays the ability to deliver something that makes revenue.”
- “We needed to assemble a team of engineers who could hit the ground running at a price we could afford.”
- “In the past, recruitment agencies have been expensive for the quality we’ve received.”

Lagging KPIs

Cost: £50-70k for a mid-level engineer, £80k for a senior engineer

Time to hire: Average of 3 months

How they moved to Green

Some level of offshoring was needed to get the costs down for the number of engineers required.

Their key questions were:

- How do we scope it?
- How do we control it?
- How do we ensure the right quality?
- How do we manage the IT and data security?

They tested 2 approaches:

- An Indian outsourcing company
- Smart Working, a UK company that provides remote engineers as a service

Smart Working won the test:

Scoping

“Smart Working didn’t slavishly follow a job spec. It was a discussion where they clearly understood our tech and the capabilities needed.”

Control

“The remote engineers align with our work mechanisms and use our tools. We manage them like a normal team member, plus the Smart Working customer success manager is on hand to help. We had one minor performance concern with one engineer; I mentioned it, and it was sorted immediately.”

Quality

“Candidates were pre-vetted well so only needed 1 interview round. They onboarded quickly and were adding value within the first month. The quality and work ethic are excellent.”

IT and data security

“Smart Working’s ISO 27001 certification gave us confidence in the controls. The remote engineers are integrated into our team and use our tools.”



Green achieved:
The new benchmarks

COST SAVINGS

£48k annual savings
per engineer (with remote salaries, plus no pension or NI costs) – a 49% savings.

£200k freed
to allocate to other hires and projects.

TIME TO HIRE

Hiring decision made in 10 days.

3 assessment rounds reduced to 1 thanks to the vetting quality.

ONBOARDING TIME

4 engineers onboarded
within 21 days from search to start.

Smart Working conducted pre-briefings on the team culture and processes meaning code could be shipped fast, with real value seen within the first month.



Company size:
150–250

Benchmark agility level:
Red

Why were things so stressful?

- They needed to speed up new feature development.
- They lacked the internal infrastructure to keep up with rising demand.

Challenges (in their words)

- “The senior leadership team had a ‘no outsourcing’ mindset, but we were struggling to get sufficient throughput of candidates at a price we were willing to pay.”
- “Our preference was UK first from a team culture perspective, but the talent pool was limited. Recruiters were charging 15–20% while pushing candidates who weren’t quite the right fit.”
- “Our technical team had to spend lots of time interviewing to ensure candidates had the right skills and could meet our technical needs. This time came with a big opportunity cost.”

Lagging KPIs

Time to hire: 6 months
Costs: £60–70k per engineer at the required quality and seniority
Retention: Of 3 recent hires, only 1 worked out for the long term

How they moved to Green

UK partner, huge remote talent pool

It didn’t feel like outsourcing with Smart Working, a UK company with UK-based account managers. The company accessed a huge global candidate pool at affordable prices, where it felt like hiring in-house.

Quality candidates to choose from

“When Smart Working said they’d have good candidates with us by the end of the week, I was sceptical. But they came through. Not having enough relevant candidates can be a frustrating thing in hiring. We had a big stream quickly.”

Streamlined assessment and interview process

“The candidates had clearly gone through effective technical assessments through Smart Working, which massively sped up the process, reduced the time the technical team had to spend interviewing and increased the conversion rate for hiring interviewed candidates.”

Fast onboarding

“We had a good choice of people who could start fast, without waiting for them to serve their notice.”



Green achieved:
The new benchmarks

COST SAVINGS

50% savings.

TIME TO HIRE

1 month from CV delivery to start.

RETENTION

All Smart Working hires have stayed, and regular feedback cadences with the Smart Working customer success manager quickly resolved any niggles.



Company size:
80-150

Benchmark agility level:
Amber/Red

Why were things so stressful?

- Updated strategy was ambitious. Forget hiring the odd new developer – they needed a full squad to hit roadmap milestones.

Challenges (in their words)

- “Once the business figured out what it wanted to do, we had to move quickly to find the resource. But scaling up the team made it hard to maintain our culture, which is very entrepreneurial despite our size.”
- “There was pressure on our budgets, but as we tried to reduce costs, team integration and cultural fit became bigger and bigger issues.”
- “We’d tried a nearshoring supplier in Eastern Europe, but they were reaching parity with UK costs.”

Lagging KPIs

Team fit: Struggled to find engineers who delivered the right quality and integrated with their entrepreneurial culture

Cost: £60-80k per engineer

Time to hire: 1 month, but there was an issue with candidates withdrawing late in the process

Onboarding time: 2-3 months

How they moved to Green

To get a whole new squad in place fast and within budget, the leadership team knew remote was the only way. They chose Smart Working because of:

Rigorous vetting

- Communication: Verifying fluent English through live interviews and invigilated exams
- Cultural fit: “The candidates have been very targeted towards our business in terms of who would fit. Every candidate was good, even with trickier roles like AI/ML engineers.”
- Technical skills: Live coding challenges, technical interviews and logical reasoning tests

Broad and deep candidate pool

- High-quality candidates ready for immediate start across disciplines (seniority, languages, data and AI/ML)
- “The remote engineers brought different perspectives from the various tools and projects they’ve worked on. They provided valuable insights.”

Robust quality control

- ISO 27001 certification for information security management
- HR compliance verifying past employment, education and identity to meet ISO standards
- Customer success managers supporting with regular feedback

AI training

- Regular training in AI and GenAI tools to keep remote workers at the cutting edge of fast-moving developments
- Upskilling investment in their remote workers reflected Smart Working’s commitment to supporting the company’s needs over the long term



Green achieved:
The new benchmarks

TEAM FIT

- “The squad has pretty much been ‘plug and play’.”
- “Perfect integration – they feel like normal members of the team, with the same hours and working style even though they’re remote.”

TIME TO HIRE

2-3 weeks from seeing the CV to deciding, without the previous problem of candidates withdrawing at the last minute.

ONBOARDING TIME

Engineers were delivering value before the first month was finished.

COST SAVINGS

- 50% savings on their UK and Eastern European staff costs.
- £350k saved annually for a 7-person squad.

AI ENABLEMENT

AI training led to a 35% uplift in developer productivity.

Strategy 4

Using a hiring model designed for fool-proof quality (and speed)

(Onboard elite, AI-fluent tech teams in weeks, not months)

**Get the top 1% of
global tech
talent whenever
you want...every
single time!**

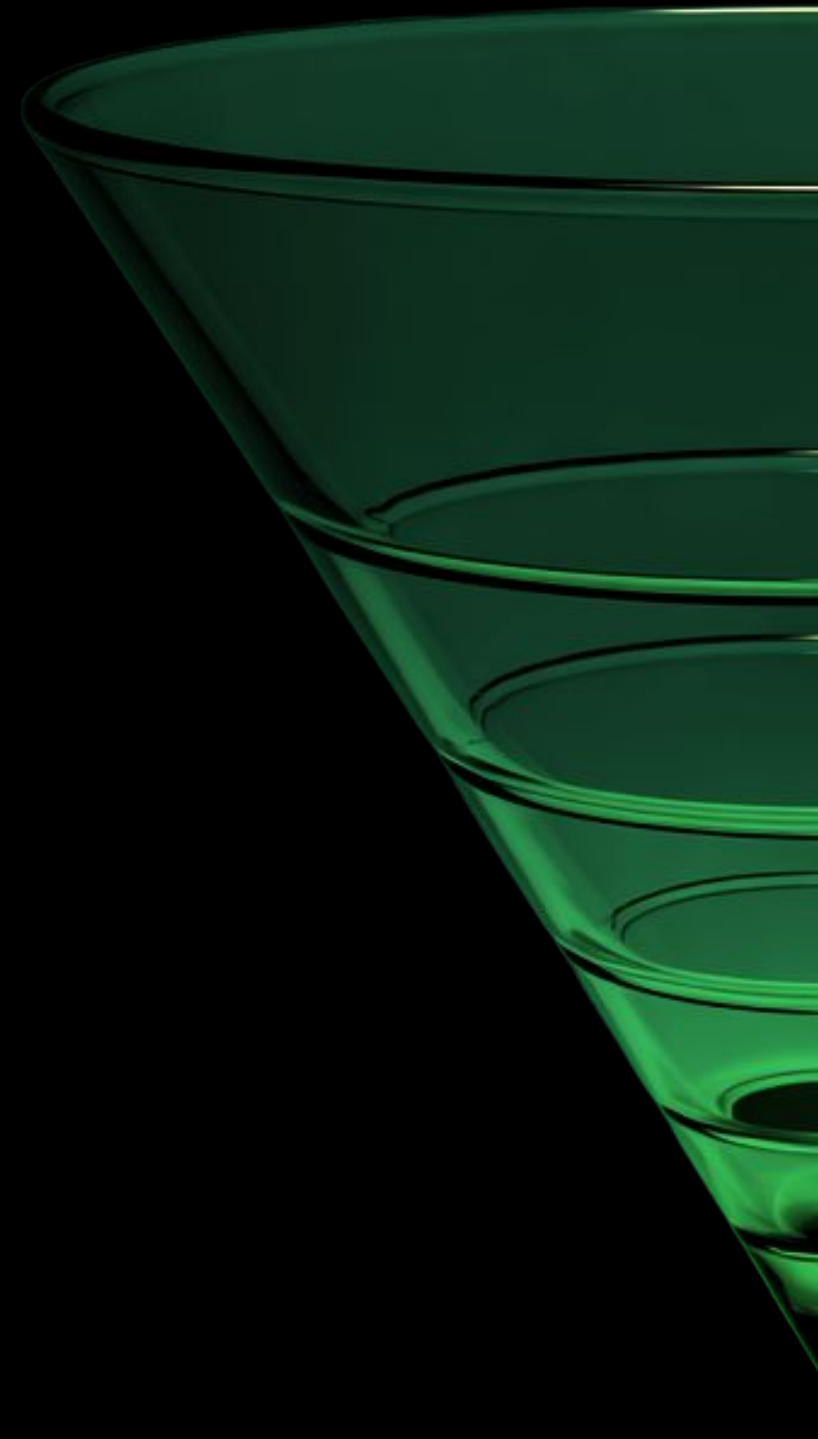
By now, you've seen what happens when companies fix their Tech Talent Problem with Smart Working. They hire faster, deliver sooner, and save money; without cutting corners.

But none of that happens by chance. Strategy 1 proves that agility isn't achieved by luck, but by design. Behind every quick turnaround and every high-performing dev and team lies a system built for one thing: rigorous (+ ruthless) quality control at scale.

Speed is meaningless without trust. The Smart Working model isn't designed to just fill roles quickly. It's also built to make sure every person who joins your team already fits technically, culturally, and professionally.

We receive 100,000+ applications a month. We give companies a rigorously-vetted shortlist in 5 days. Our 4-stage vetting process filters out 99% of candidates before you even see a CV. That means only 1 in 100 candidates make it through. Here's how we deliver such exceptional quality (thereby reducing time-to-hire and onboarding time).....

**The 4 stages
that filter 99%
of candidates –
quality
guaranteed.**



Stage 1 | AI-powered screening and matching

Our AI-driven assessments filter applicants to identify top engineering talent, creating a longlist based on specific role requirements. We conduct compliance checks, verifying past employment, education and identity to meet ISO standards.

↓ *Only 40% of applicants progress*

Stage 2 | Communication and English fluency

We assess English and communication skills via invigilated exams. This is critical.

↓ *Only 50% of remaining applicants progress*

Stage 3 | Technical testing

Our tech team curates a bespoke technical test tailored to the role's requirements. We use industry-leading platforms which have exercises and coding challenges for all tech roles, skills and languages.

↓ *Only 25% of remaining applicants progress*

Stage 4 | Expert interviews

We have a large group of industry experts who conduct 1:1 technical interviews to put candidates through their paces. Each expert interviewer has 10+ years' experience in the specific tech skills the role requires.

↓ *Only 20% of applicants progress*

The remaining 1%
are the very highest calibre,
ready for client review.

About SmartWorking

Smart Working is Europe's #1 provider of remote developers, helping you tap into the world's best talent to win the innovation race. The maths is compelling: you get a top-quality team of talent in place at least 2x faster and save 50% on staff costs, with zero recruitment drama, infinite scalability, and continuous AI training.

But that's really just the start...

Smart Working is on a mission to empower companies to work with the best people in the world. We believe this will benefit businesses, communities and the global economy.

By improving access to the world's talent market we will create opportunities for growth, innovation and progress. Achieving our mission will unlock human potential. This is why we do what we do.

We want to create a world where great people and great businesses are less constrained by geography or resources.

When businesses work with the best people, the entire world benefits.

You get access to this incredible global talent pool of people eager to work for cool companies doing great things with tech. As a fully managed service they hit the ground running, fit with your culture and integrate with your teams from day one. It feels like hiring in-house but without the cost or hassle of HR admin.



Speed

Get a rigorously vetted candidate hired in 10 days.

You're in control

Your Smart Workers fully embed in your team, work your hours, use your tools and integrate with your culture.

Continuous AI training

All Smart Workers are continuously trained in our AI Academy.

50% saving

Vs UK staff costs, while paying competitive salaries and giving comprehensive benefits.

Devs love working with us

We have the highest Glassdoor rating (4.6/5) of any company providing remote developers

Robust information security

We're ISO 27001 certified – your data comes first.

 **SmartWorking**

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FREE PoC OFFER

Let's double your agility and halve your costs...

We'll deep dive into your requirements, do our research and **give you 3 top-quality, fully vetted CVs tailored to your needs** – within 5 days. And this proof-of-concept is free, with no obligation. As one COO said: "The service has been invaluable to our scaling." So let's see how fast you can scale (while saving 50%)?

[Contact us](#)