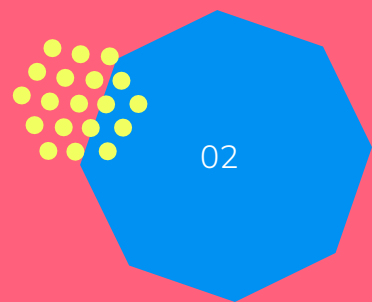


THE NO-BS CANDIDATE'S GUIDE

# WHAT 'AI EXPERIENCE' ACTUALLY MEANS IN 2026 JOB ADS.

# CONTENTS

|                                                      |    |
|------------------------------------------------------|----|
| The AI Job Spec Panic .....                          | 5  |
| Why AI Mentions Are Confusing Everyone.....          | 6  |
| The impact on jobseekers.....                        | 7  |
| When hiring managers add to the confusion .....      | 8  |
| What AI Phrases Usually Mean in Practice .....       | 9  |
| Product vs Engineering: What's Really Expected ..... | 10 |
| When AI Really Matters and When It Doesn't .....     | 14 |
| How to Position Yourself with Confidence .....       | 17 |
| What We're Hearing from Hiring Managers.....         | 21 |
| From Panic to Plan. How to Move Forward.....         | 23 |



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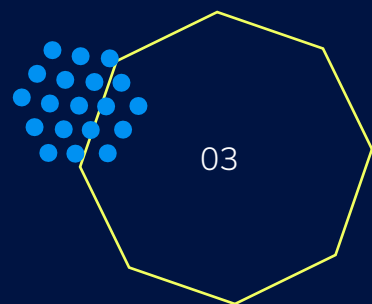
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### PEOPLE YOU'LL ACTUALLY WANT TO TALK TO

Got questions, plans, or just curious what's next? **Start with us.** ➤



# THE AI JOB SPEC PANIC

If you work in tech right now, chances are you've seen job specs asking for "AI experience," "prompt engineering," or even an "AI-first mindset." These phrases look impressive on paper, but for many candidates they spark confusion more than clarity.



**Do you need to be an expert in machine learning?  
Is using ChatGPT enough? Or is it all hype?**

When it comes to AI, a lot of hiring managers don't always know what they're asking for.

Across engineering and product roles, AI mentions have crept into job descriptions without clear definition. Candidates are then left second-guessing their skills, skipping roles they could succeed in, or panicking about whether to upskill overnight.

At MRJ, our recruiters talk daily with both candidates and employers. We know which skills are genuinely valued, which ones are just filler, and how hiring teams interpret AI exposure in interviews. That's why we've pulled together this guide to give you a true picture of what AI experience really means in your job search.

This paper builds on our earlier blog, **What does 'learning AI' actually mean?**, which explored how AI learning can look in practice. Here, we go a step further, decoding how AI is being asked for in real job specs, how to read between the lines, and how to position your experience with confidence.

**The goal is to stop the panic. By the end of this guide, you'll know when AI skills are essential, when they're optional, and when your existing experience already speaks for itself.**



# WHY AI MENTIONS ARE CONFUSING EVERYONE

Over the past 18 months, references to AI have exploded across tech job ads. Whether you're a Product Manager, Software Engineer, or Cloud specialist, there's now a line about AI experience, prompt engineering, or GenAI familiarity within nearly every job advert. On the surface it looks like companies know exactly what they want. In reality, it's often the opposite.

## The stats behind the AI buzz:



**73%** of employers say they'd choose a less experienced candidate with AI skills over one without (World Economic Forum, June 2024).



AI mentions in UK job postings surged in 2024 despite an overall weaker labour market (PwC UK, June 2025).



Even employers admit they're unclear on what counts as AI experience, especially in non-specialist roles (OECD, Demand for AI Skills in Jobs).

AI might be everywhere, but the meaning behind it is inconsistent. One company's ChatGPT, is another company's AI-powered product. Without context, candidates are left to fill in the blanks.



# THE IMPACT ON JOBSEEKERS

From our recruiter conversations with jobseekers, three clear themes stand out:

1.

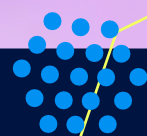
**Overthinking the spec:** Mid-level engineers panic they need to retrain in ML frameworks overnight.

2.

**Avoiding roles they could do:** Some product managers skip jobs that mention LLMs, even when the role only requires awareness, not deep expertise.

3.

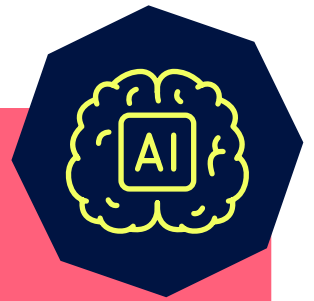
**Applying blind:** Others apply without asking questions, then get surprised in interview when expectations don't match their skills.



# WHEN HIRING MANAGERS ADD TO THE **CONFUSION**

It's clear that many hiring managers include AI in specs because:

- ✓ They want to look current, even if the detail isn't clear.
- ✓ They're under pressure from leadership to show they're thinking about AI.
- ✓ They genuinely don't know the level of detail needed, so they use umbrella terms like AI experience as a catch-all.



It's not always deliberate hype, sometimes it's just uncertainty.

But for you, that lack of clarity makes career decisions harder than they need to be.

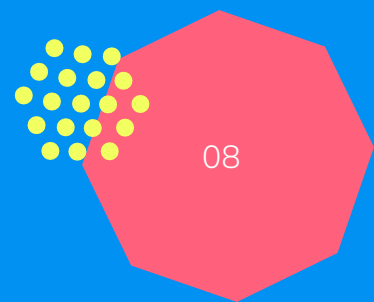


# WHAT AI PHRASES USUALLY MEAN IN PRACTICE

If you're looking at job ads right now, you'll see the same vague AI phrases cropping up again and again. They look technical, but don't worry, most aren't as complex as they sound. The key is knowing how to read between the lines and not assuming every mention of AI means hardcore model building.

Below is a breakdown of the most common phrases we're seeing in job specs, what they mean in practice, and what you should be checking during the hiring process.

| Job spec phrase        | What it might mean                                               | What to ask                                                                    |
|------------------------|------------------------------------------------------------------|--------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| AI experience required | Could mean anything from tinkering with ChatGPT to calling APIs. | What counts as experience? Using tools, building with APIs, or something else? |
| Prompt engineering     | Ability to write and refine clear prompts for AI tools.          | Does this involve day-to-day tooling, or occasional use in workflows?          |
| AI-first mindset       | General openness to new tech and innovation.                     | Is there a defined product roadmap involving AI, or is it exploratory?         |

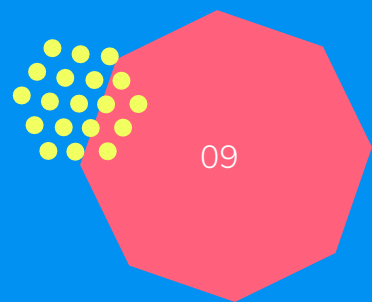


| Job spec phrase             | What it might mean                                                                                                     | What to ask                                                                   |
|-----------------------------|------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|-------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| Familiarity with GenAI      | Comfort with tools like ChatGPT, Gemini, Claude.                                                                       | How does this connect to the actual responsibilities of the role?             |
| Experience with LLMs        | Could mean deploying models, or just integrating APIs.                                                                 | Ask for clarity: is this about infrastructure, experimentation, or awareness? |
| AI-powered tools            | Usually means using existing SaaS platforms with AI features (e.g. GitHub Copilot, Notion AI, Jira AI Assist).         | Which tools are currently in use? Is the expectation to evaluate new ones?    |
| AI integration              | Often means connecting APIs from OpenAI, Anthropic, or others into existing systems, not building models from scratch. | Is this about engineering integration or simply using no-code connectors?     |
| Machine learning experience | Can mean anything from understanding regression models to building production ML pipelines.                            | Do they mean academic ML, production deployment, or just applied analytics?   |
| Automation using A          | Usually refers to RPA or workflow automation enhanced by AI, e.g. document processing or customer support bots.        | What processes are they trying to automate, and how mature are those systems? |

If you're still unsure about what a term means, make sure to ask for context in interviews or conversations about the role.

AI is advancing fast, which means job specs evolve often too. A Product Manager might only need to show awareness of how AI shapes roadmaps, while an Engineer may need to demonstrate hands-on testing with APIs or tooling. Either way, being able to frame your experience clearly and ask for clarity will make you stand out.

**Still not sure what employers really mean by "AI experience"?  
Get in touch — our team can help you make sense of it. ➔**



# PRODUCT VS ENGINEERING: WHAT'S REALLY EXPECTED

According to research by Autodesk, roles such as AI Engineer (+143.2%), Prompt Engineer (+135.8%), AI Content Creator (+134.5%), and AI Solutions Architect (+109.3%) are among the fastest-growing positions year-on-year in tech. These figures underline the rapid expansion of both technical and non-technical AI roles.

If you work in Product or Engineering, understanding how AI expectations differ between the two is now essential. Getting it right could be the difference between panicking unnecessarily or positioning yourself with confidence.

## Product Roles: Awareness over algorithms

For Product Managers, Owners, and Tech PMs, AI expectations usually focus on awareness, not hardcore technical ability. Hiring managers want people who can:

- **Frame business opportunities:** Spot where AI could streamline processes, improve user journeys, or open new revenue streams.
- **Challenge assumptions:** Ask sensible questions about feasibility and ROI when AI ideas are raised in roadmap discussions.
- **Guide conversations:** Translate AI potential into clear priorities for engineering and design teams.

Many Product briefs include AI not because teams are actively building with it, but because leadership wants exposure or to keep up with competitors. In practice, this often means curiosity and confidence discussing AI is more valuable than hands-on coding.

**Example expectation:** A PM might be asked to show how they explored GenAI tools to shape user research or market analysis, rather than demonstrate model training.

## Engineering Roles: Practical application

For Engineers, DevOps, and Cloud specialists, AI expectations are more concrete. Employers look for people who can:

- **Experiment with APIs and tooling:** Integrate services like OpenAI, Anthropic, or Hugging Face into workflows.
- **Build automations:** Apply AI to speed up testing, improve monitoring, or support customer-facing features.
- **Keep systems scalable and secure:** Ensure AI-powered features fit with existing architecture.

This is where continuous learning matters. Specs may start vague (experience with LLMs) but evolve quickly as products mature. Engineers who show adaptability, not just a list of frameworks, stand out.

**Example expectation:** An engineer may be expected to demonstrate how they used Copilot to speed up coding, or built a small prototype that called an LLM API, even if they weren't the one training models.

## Where They Overlap

While the depth of knowledge differs, both Product and Engineering roles benefit from:



**Clear communication:** Explaining what an AI tool can and can't do.



**Business impact:** Linking AI work to real outcomes with better user experience, faster delivery, and reduced costs.



**Confidence in uncertainty:** Being able to say “I don’t know yet, but I can explore this” is often more valuable than pretending expertise.

| Focus Area                | Product Roles                                        | Engineering Roles                                       |
|---------------------------|------------------------------------------------------|---------------------------------------------------------|
| Core Expectation          | Awareness, context, and curiosity                    | Practical application, integration, and problem-solving |
| Typical “AI” Task         | Assessing impact of AI features on roadmap           | Building features with APIs, tools, or automations      |
| Depth of Knowledge Needed | Enough to guide conversations and spot opportunities | Hands-on familiarity with coding tools and integrations |
| Recruiter Tip             | Curiosity + confidence in discussion is key          | Show adaptability and link AI work to business outcomes |

# WHEN AI REALLY MATTERS AND WHEN IT DOESN'T

Most job specs that mention AI aren't looking for an expert prompt engineer. The real question is whether the role you're considering genuinely needs AI skills, or if the wording is just noise.

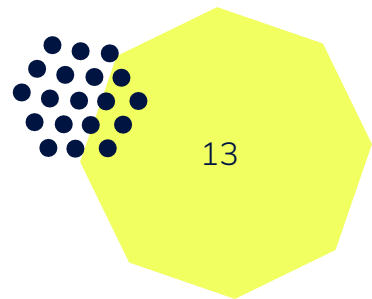
## When AI Matters

There are roles where AI experience is central to the work. These include:

- ✓ AI-focused engineering roles: e.g. AI Engineers, Data Scientists, ML Ops specialists, where building, training, or deploying models is part of the job.
- ✓ Product roles in AI-first companies: Where the entire roadmap depends on delivering AI-powered features.
- ✓ Technical leadership positions: CTOs, Heads of Engineering, or Product Directors expected to set AI strategy.



**Recruiter insight:** We're starting to see demand for prompt engineering, tooling, and LLM experience growing fast. Right now it's still niche, but more clients are asking, and this trend is only heading one way.



## When it Doesn't, Yet

In many cases, AI mentions don't signal a requirement for deep technical knowledge. Instead, they're about awareness, adaptability, and curiosity. Examples include:

- **General software engineering roles:** Expectation may be limited to using tools like GitHub Copilot or experimenting with APIs.
- **Product roles in traditional companies:** AI may be on the radar, but without a clear use case yet.
- **Exploratory briefs:** Some clients openly admit they want "exposure" to AI, even if they don't know what that looks like in practice.



### How to Spot the Difference

Look for these signals:

- The spec links AI expectations to a business problem (e.g. improving customer support with automation).
- The role outlines specific AI tools already in use, such as Copilot or ChatGPT, and how they fit into daily workflows.
- AI expectations are proportionate to the level of the role - awareness for PMs, hands-on for engineers.
- The interview process includes practical discussions about how AI is applied.
- Interviewers can explain how AI fits into workflows or the roadmap.

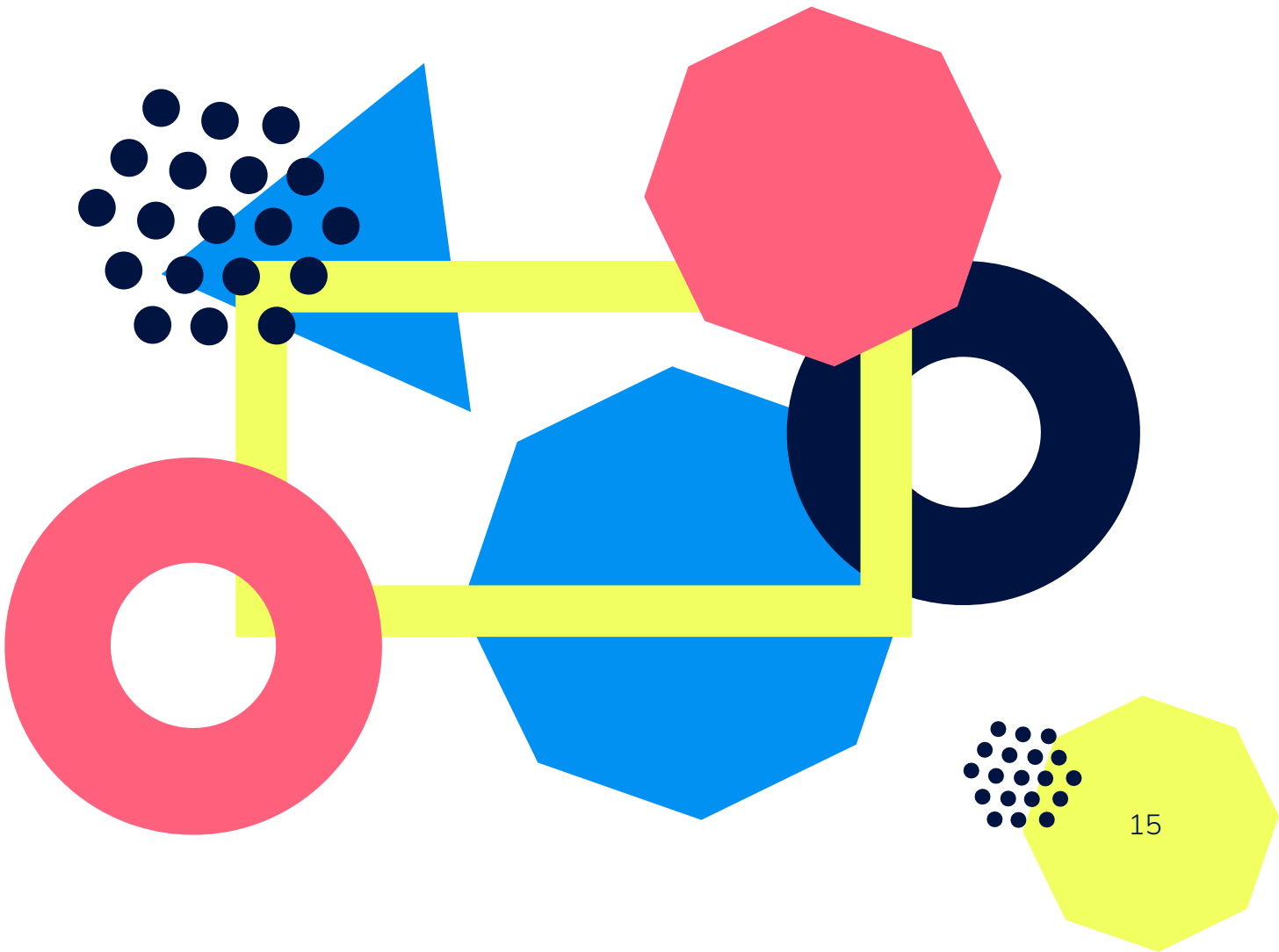
- The spec lists AI alongside a long stack of unrelated skills, with no detail on usage.
- Vague requirements like "AI knowledge" or "AI-first mindset" with no link to responsibilities.
- AI included as a must-have but never mentioned again in the interview process.
- Job ads asking for expertise in every major AI framework without clarity on actual application.
- Hiring managers can't describe what "AI experience" actually means when asked.

## Why it Matters for Candidates

Misreading these signals leads to wasted time by either avoiding roles you're qualified for or chasing ones that don't match your skills.

We've seen plenty of overblown specs where AI is bundled into long, unrelated skill lists with no clear context. In contrast, the more effective and realistic asks are the ones that tie AI directly to a business outcome.

What matters is showing you can adapt, ask the right questions, and connect your skills to the outcomes companies care about. By treating specs as a starting point and using them to guide better conversations with hiring managers, you'll put yourself in control of the process and your progression.



# HOW TO POSITION YOURSELF WITH CONFIDENCE

Once you know that not every mention of AI means the same thing, you need to understand how to present your skills and experience in a way that feels confident and credible without overselling or underselling what you bring to the table.

## Expert or Explorer? Either Way, Show the Impact

Hiring managers don't expect every candidate to be a machine learning expert. What they do value is curiosity and practical exploration. If you've done any of the below, you already have meaningful exposure worth mentioning.

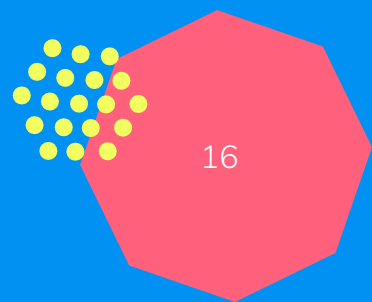
Frame these examples around what problem they solved rather than listing tools:

- Used ChatGPT or Claude to speed up research or drafting,
- Experimented with GitHub Copilot to improve your coding workflow,
- Played with AI-powered analytics or automation tools in your current role.



**Recruiter insight:** A common red flag for hiring managers is when candidates list every AI tool under the sun but struggle to explain how they used them or what impact it made. The strongest individuals link experimentation to real outcomes. Think better user journeys, faster shipping, or clearer insights.

Ready to connect with forward-thinking employers around the world? Get in touch and we'll help you make your next move. ➔



### Be Honest About Level of Involvement

If your AI exposure has been light-touch, don't hide it (but don't downplay it either). Employers respect candidates who can say:

- I've started using AI tools in my workflow, and here's the value I've seen so far
- I haven't built models, but I understand how APIs fit into product development

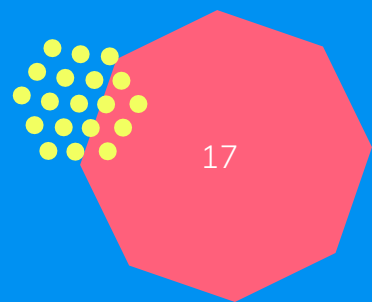
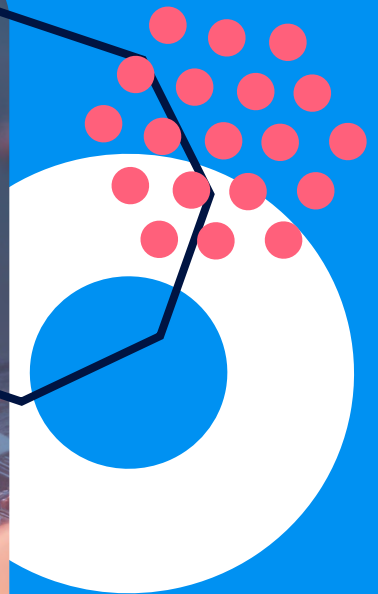
This shows honesty and readiness to grow, which is often more appealing than inflated claims.

### Show you're ready to learn

Because AI is moving quickly, the ability to adapt is just as important as current skills. Highlight times you've:

- Picked up new tools or frameworks quickly
- Taken online courses or workshops to upskill
- Learned on the job as requirements evolved

Many roles evolve after hire. Employers want to see candidates who are comfortable learning as they go, not those who panic if a job spec feels unfamiliar.



## When to Invest in Your AI Upskilling

AI training is becoming essential to workplace learning. In fact, **71%** of L&D professionals report they are already exploring, experimenting with, or integrating AI into their work practices.

However, not every skill is equally valuable right now, and part of making life easier in your job search or career progression is knowing the difference between what's worth learning today and what can wait until later. This split helps you focus your energy where it has the most impact.

### Product managers:

#### What you need to learn and what can wait

##### Learn:

- How to assess GenAI use cases and spot where they add value.
- Awareness of ethical risks, bias, and data privacy considerations.
- How to evaluate prompt performance and know when outputs are reliable.

##### Can wait:

- Deep knowledge of ML model structures.
- Building and managing coding pipelines.

For most PMs, curiosity, structured questioning, and the ability to guide a conversation around AI is enough.

### Software engineers:

#### What you need to learn and what can wait

##### Learn:

- API integration and orchestration.
- Hands-on with GenAI toolkits (e.g. OpenAI, Anthropic, Hugging Face).
- Applying AI to automate parts of testing, monitoring, or feature development.

##### Can wait:

- Training or building models entirely from scratch.
- Academic theory in ML or data science.

### 5 Ways to Frame AI on Your CV

1.

Add a short “AI Tools & Exposure” line in your skills section (keep it selective).

2.

Under each role, give one tangible example of how you used AI to improve a task.

3.

Focus on impact, not features. What changed for the team or business?

4.

Avoid stacking acronyms (or buzzword stuffing) without context.

5.

If you’ve completed training, include it, but place it below practical experience.

# WHAT WE'RE HEARING FROM HIRING MANAGERS

AI is causing as much confusion for hiring managers as it is for candidates. Specs are getting padded with AI terms, but the reality on the ground is often very different. Here's what we're hearing from hiring managers across product and engineering.

## Overblown Specs vs Realistic Asks

We've seen job descriptions that throw in every AI buzzword from LLMs, automation, prompt engineering, NLP with no clear sense of how these skills fit the role. That's an overblown spec. It creates panic among candidates and slows down hiring.

By contrast, a realistic ask ties AI back to business outcomes. For example:

- Experience using AI tools to speed up QA testing (Engineering)
- Awareness of GenAI's impact on product roadmaps (Product)
- Ability to evaluate and integrate AI-powered tools into existing workflows (Across functions)



## The Hiring Manager Dilemma

It's tough for hiring managers right now. AI is evolving fast, leadership pressure is high, and nobody wants to risk missing out, so job specs get stuffed with terms as a safeguard. It's understandable that things aren't perfect.

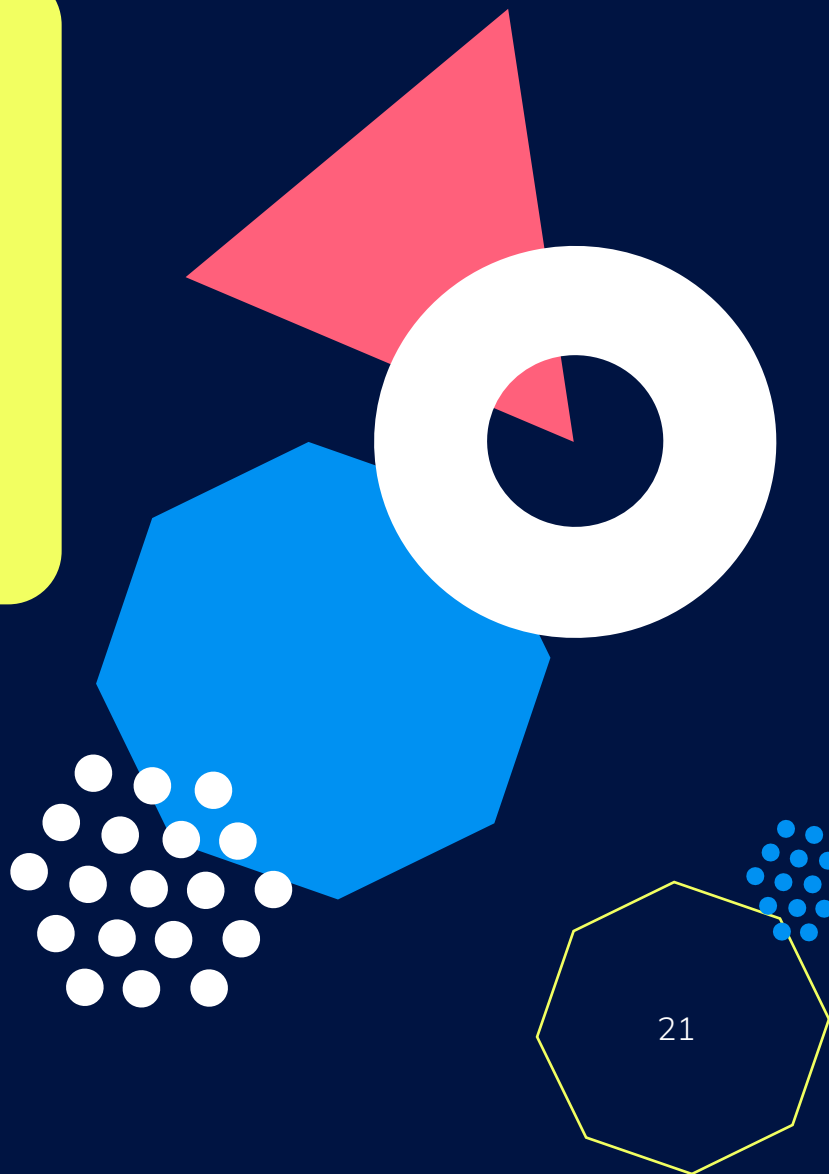
But when hiring managers ask for AI experience, they often mean something far less defined than it looks on paper. They're looking for

- Curiosity and willingness to explore new tools
- Practical exposure, not necessarily deep technical ability
- Confidence to ask the right questions in roadmap or architecture discussions

## For Candidates Feeling Behind

The strongest candidates are actively engaging with AI in their current work and showing they're ready to learn more. Using what's available now and being open to new tools is what employers value most in 2026.

If you feel behind, start small. Experiment with a tool relevant to your workflow. Show how it saved you time or added value. That's often enough to tick the AI experience box in today's market.



# FROM PANIC TO PLAN. HOW TO MOVE FORWARD

We've put this guide together to make it easier for candidates to understand what AI mentions in job specs really mean, highlight what's important, and help make sense of the confusion.

Now it's about turning that clarity into practical steps you can take in your job search. We've put this guide together to make it easier for candidates to understand what AI mentions in job specs really mean, highlight what's important, and help make sense of the confusion.

Now it's about turning that clarity into practical steps you can take in your job search.

## Key Takeaways

- Don't panic at the jargon. AI mentions in specs are often shorthand for curiosity, awareness, or practical exploration, not deep technical mastery.
- Spot the difference. Overblown specs throw in every AI term; realistic ones tie AI to business outcomes.
- Know your role.
  - Product = awareness and impact.
  - Engineering = hands-on application.
  - Both = communication and adaptability.
- Position with confidence. Show how you've explored AI tools, link them to outcomes, and be clear about your level of involvement.
- Keep learning. The strongest candidates show curiosity and adaptability, not a laundry list of frameworks.



### What To Do Next

1.

Review your CV and highlight practical examples of how AI tools improved your workflow.

2.

Use interviews to ask for clarity on what AI experience really means for that role.

3.

Review your CV and highlight practical examples of how AI tools improved your workflow.

4.

Use interviews to ask for clarity on what AI experience really means for that role.

If you're unsure where you stand, talk to us. We're in daily conversations with hiring managers and candidates, and we know which AI mentions matter and which ones don't. Specs can often feel confusing or overblown, and part of our role is to make it easier for you to understand what opportunities that are genuinely right for you. Sometimes a five-minute chat can save you months of second-guessing.

If you're navigating confusing specs, want to sense-check your next career move, or are actively looking for your next role, reach out to the MRJ team.



EXPLORE WHERE YOUR  
SKILLS COULD TAKE YOU.

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