

2026 Career and Salary Outlook:

Content and Marketing Professionals

New research from the Content Marketing Institute explores the gap between expectations and reality amid layoffs and AI disruption.

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State of the marketing job market: Ghastly and ghostly for some

Layoffs have jumped 30% in two years, job searches are taking longer, and entry-level on-ramps are dwindling.

CMI's latest research shows that 76% of marketers feel they are doing the work of more than one job, and 59% say their workloads are overwhelming — yet just 11% of organizations have actually replaced workers with AI.

Wasn't AI supposed to free everyone up to focus on higher-order, more satisfying work?

One interpretation is that organizations are using AI as a cover for not filling vacated roles, quietly reorganizing tasks, and extracting more from the people who remain. If true, AI has created a kind of "ghost workforce": one person carrying the cognitive load of two or three, theoretically augmented by AI but practically stretched thin and feeling overwhelmed.

This report examines both sides of a profession under pressure — those locked out of the job market (of whom there are many) and those still inside it who have more work than is reasonable.

The numbers confirm what most suspected

As those who work in marketing intuitively understand, the job market has deteriorated significantly since 2024, when CMI conducted its last career and salary survey. Three in four (75%) employed marketers say finding a marketing job is more challenging now than two years ago — up from 54% in 2024. Just 1% say it has gotten easier.

And for those who recently faced layoffs, job searches are taking longer. The average time to find a new role has grown from 3.1 months in 2024 to 5.2 months today. (Keep in mind, this figure only includes those who have found jobs, so the average time-to-hire is likely significantly higher.)

Tougher job searches, longer waits

75%

say finding a job is more challenging than two years ago
up from 54% in 2024

5.2

months to find a new job
up from 3.1 months in 2024

Q: Do you think it's more or less challenging to find a professional job in marketing now compared to two years ago?

Q: How long did it take you to find a new marketing role? (Respondents who found a new role after a layoff, n=65.)

Base: Employed full-time content and marketing professionals.

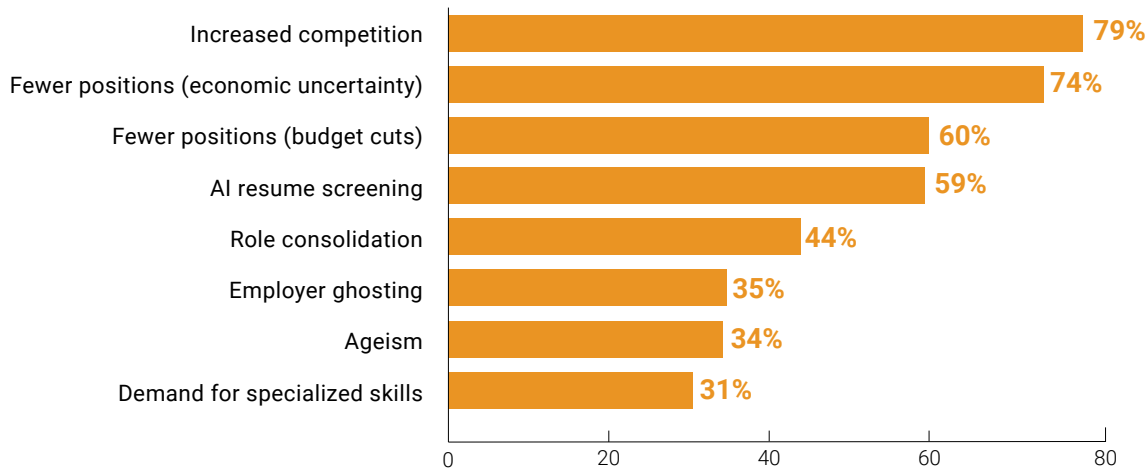
Source: 2026 Career and Salary Outlook: Content and Marketing Professionals

The reasons why marketers say the job market is more challenging? Increased competition tops the list (cited by 79%, up from 69% in 2024). Marketers also say there are fewer open positions due to economic uncertainty (74%) and budget cuts (60%). In addition, they cite AI-driven resume screening that overlooks qualified candidates (59%), role

consolidation (44%), employer ghosting (35%), ageism (34%), and demand for specialized skills (31%).

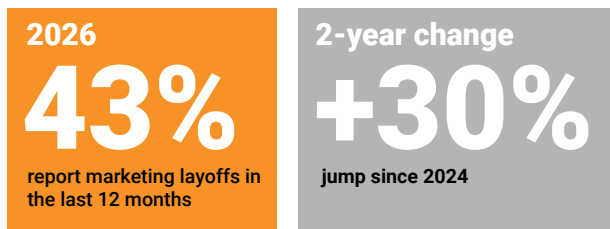
And when we asked marketers a fill-in question on this same topic, many pointed to phantom job postings. One such response: “Most of the roles advertised on LinkedIn are either old or fake.”

A market stacked against job seekers



Q: Why do you think it's more challenging to find a marketing job now compared to two years ago? (Select all that apply.)
 Base: Employed full-time content and marketing professionals who say finding a job is more challenging than two years ago (n=485).
 Source: 2026 Career and Salary Outlook: Content and Marketing Professionals

Marketing teams grapple with layoffs



Q: Has your company laid off marketing employees in the last 12 months?
 Base: Employed full-time content and marketing professionals.
 Source: 2026 Career and Salary Outlook: Content and Marketing Professionals

Layoffs are widespread, especially in large companies

Fully 43% of employed marketers report their company laid off marketing employees in the last 12 months – a 30% jump in two years.

Layoffs are heavily concentrated in large organizations: Nearly two in three companies with 1,000 or more employees (62%) laid off marketing staff in the last 12 months, compared to just 28% of companies with fewer than 100 employees.

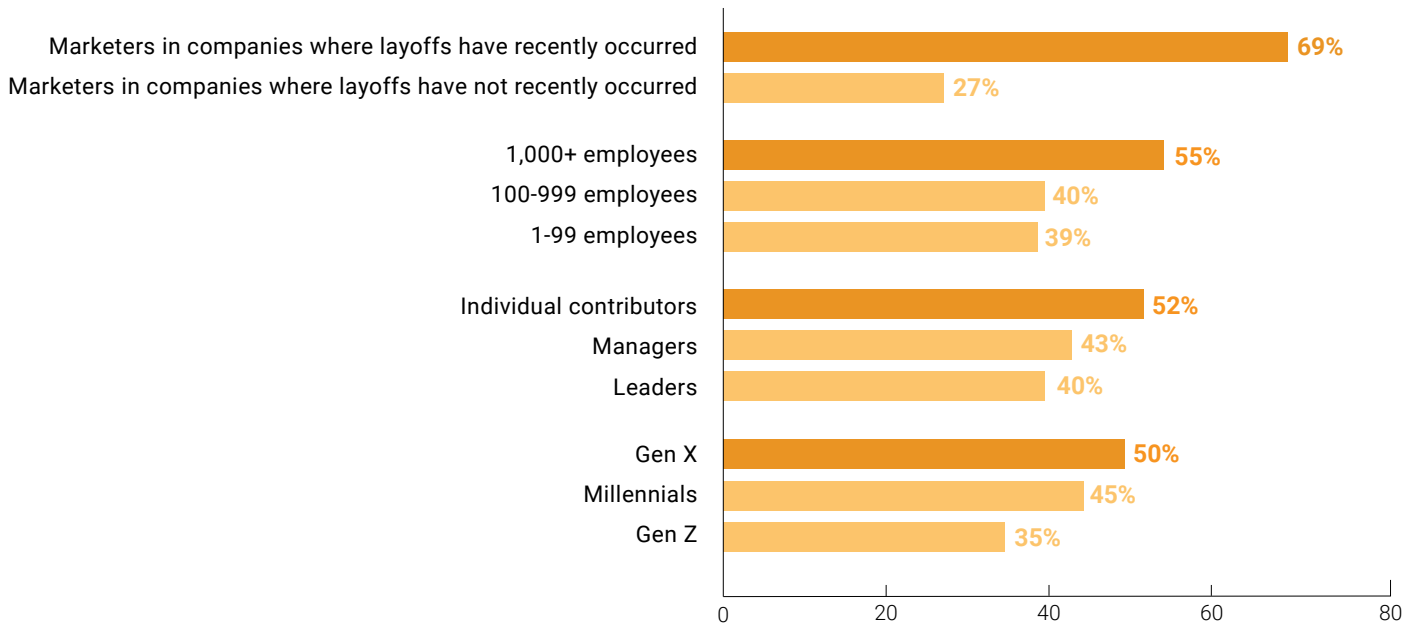
For some, the high rate of layoffs is stoking concerns about their careers and livelihoods. Overall, 45% are concerned about being laid off. This concern is:

- Greatest among marketers working for companies where layoffs have recently occurred (69%), those working at large companies (55%), individual contributors (52%), and Gen X (50%).

- Lower among marketers working for companies where layoffs have not recently occurred (27%), Gen Z (35%), those working at small companies (39%), those working at midsize companies (40%), leaders (40%), managers (43%), and millennials (45%).

Who's most worried about losing their job?

% concerned or somewhat concerned about being laid off



Q: Are you concerned that you may be laid off in the coming 12 months?

Base: Employed full-time content and marketing professionals. Baby boomers excluded from generation lines (n=609) due to smaller sample size (n=35).

Source: 2026 Career and Salary Outlook: Content and Marketing Professionals

Historically, a difficult job market causes employees to hold on tightly to their existing jobs. That's not what this year's data shows.

For those still employed, interest in pursuing a new job persists at a level comparable to two years ago, when the job market was much less volatile. More than one in three (39%) are either actively or highly interested in pursuing a new role in 2026, a signal that, in an era of layoffs, marketers have learned to keep their options open regardless of whether they're actively searching.

Entry-level hiring down, but overall hiring growth up among 'analog natives'

One in three companies are reducing entry-level marketing hiring. In fact, the percentage of companies that are reducing entry-level hiring is nearly 2.5 times the percentage that are increasing entry-level hiring, producing a net score of -19.8 points.

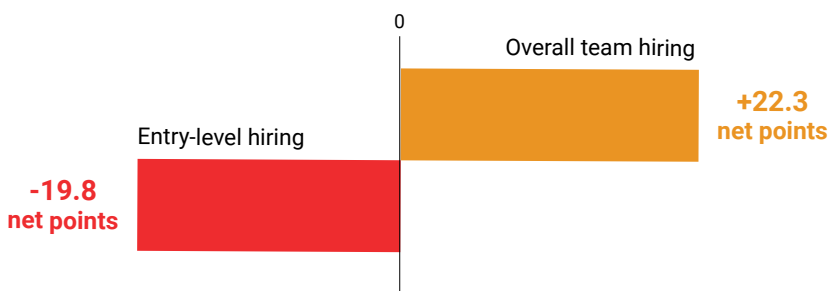
The sharp decrease in entry-level hiring makes sense in the current conditions. AI gives organizations cover to consolidate roles and eliminate entry-level positions – particularly those that include more routine, automatable tasks.

Despite a lower rate of entry-level hiring, **organizations are net-positive about growing their overall teams in 2026** – a hiring net score of 22.3 points. The data suggests that talent growth is targeted at the experienced and specialized end of the market: people who can direct, oversee, and – when necessary – rebut AI rather than compete with it.

This raises an interesting idea: A decade ago, there was a push to hire so-called digital natives to manage digital marketing. Is it possible there's now a flight to experience (i.e., a flight to *analog natives*)?

Growth at the top, contraction at the bottom

Net point scores = % increasing hiring minus % decreasing hiring



Q: Would you say that your organization's hiring of entry-level marketers (including new college graduates) in the last two years has increased, stayed the same, or decreased?

Base: All employed full-time content and marketing professionals.

Q: In 2026, do you plan to increase, keep the same, or decrease the size of your marketing team? Base: Employed full-time content and marketing leaders and managers only.

Source: 2026 Career and Salary Outlook: Content and Marketing Professionals

“AI is disrupting marketing at both ends of the career ladder: Senior marketers are being asked to reinvent how they work – and at a faster rate than most organizations are prepared to support. And junior marketers are struggling to get in the door at all.”

Stephanie Stahl
managing director, CMI

AI: Friend or foe?

The answer depends entirely on whom you ask ... and how much disruption they've already lived through.

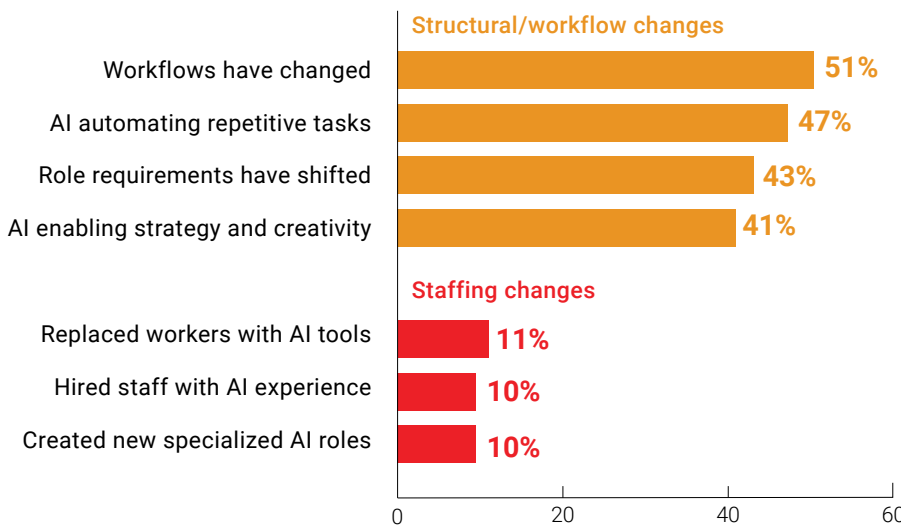
Nearly half (47%) say AI is reshaping their team's workflows, roles, or tasks extensively or significantly; only 4% report no impact at all.

For now, marketers are focused on workflow transformation, not job replacement. Fifty-one percent say internal workflows have changed, 47% say AI is automating repetitive tasks, 43% say role requirements have shifted around AI usage, and 41% say AI is enabling strategy and creativity.

And despite higher-than-normal layoffs in the industry, marketers tell us that the above-mentioned structural/workflow changes are much more common than these staffing changes:

- 11% say their company has replaced workers with AI tools.
- 10% say they've hired staff with AI experience.
- 10% say they've created new specialized AI roles.

What changes has AI brought to your marketing team?



Q: What changes have you noticed in your marketing team and roles due to AI adoption? (Select all that apply.)

Base: Employed full-time content and marketing professionals.

Source: 2026 Career and Salary Outlook: Content and Marketing Professionals

Even while AI tools are being adopted at high speed and workflows are being transformed, a significant number of companies are not keeping up with investments in people. One in four marketers (27%) say their organization offers no career development opportunities at all. And only 25% of marketers say they are very satisfied with their organization’s career development opportunities.

As one marketer shares, “We have access to AI tools at our own expense to make the workload and work processes streamlined, but no support and no time to learn how to properly use them.”

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Marketer survey respondent

Using AI to directly replace workers is still not typical

Just 11% say their companies are replacing workers with AI today, though that figure will likely grow.

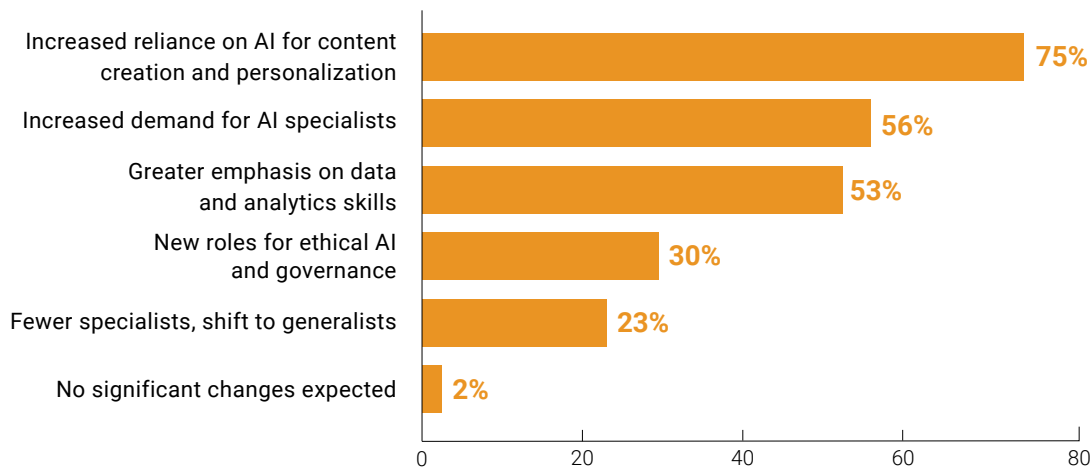
Looking ahead, 75% expect increased reliance on AI for content creation and personalization over the next one to three years – the top-ranked expected change by a significant margin.

For a profession that has staked its value on the ability to create compelling content, this will be a fundamental disruption.

Other changes marketers expect in the next one to three years include:

- Increased demand for AI specialists (56%)
- Greater emphasis on data and analytics skills (53%)
- New roles for ethical AI and governance (30%)
- Fewer specialists/shift to generalists (23%)
- No significant changes expected (2%)

What changes do you expect AI to drive in the next 1 to 3 years?



Q: Which of the following changes do you expect AI to drive in marketing roles over the next one to three years? (Select all that apply.)

Base: Employed full-time content and marketing professionals.

Source: 2026 Career and Salary Outlook: Content and Marketing Professionals

Individual marketers are not panicking about replacement ... yet

We asked marketers how AI will affect them personally in the coming five years.

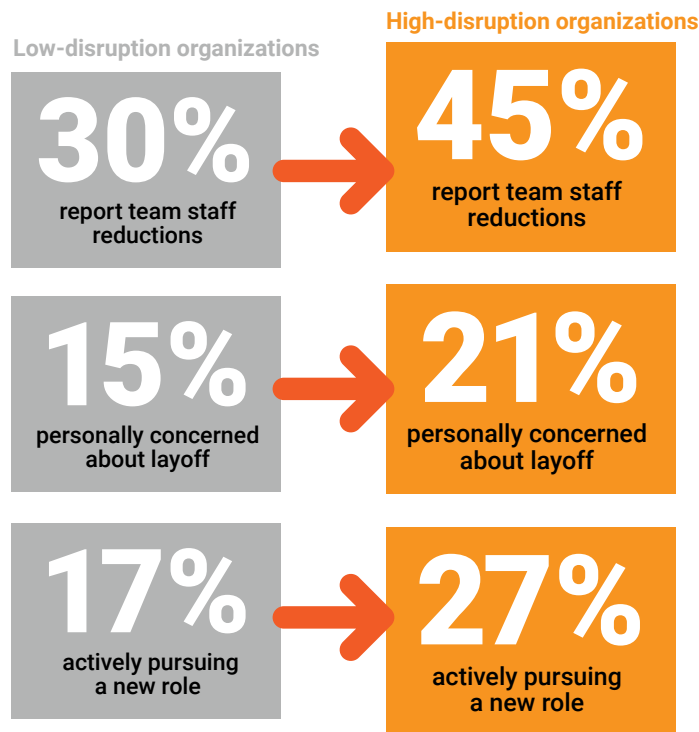
More than half (53%) believe AI will augment their roles, making it more efficient or strategic. Only 4% expect AI will fully replace them.

But a look at the granular details tells an interesting story. Marketers working in companies where AI is extensively reshaping the workflows, roles, or tasks (i.e., highly disrupted organizations) report a very

different reality from their peers in low-disruption companies (companies where AI has had somewhat limited or no impact).

Consider that 45% of those in high-disruption organizations report team staff reductions vs. 30% in low-disruption organizations. It makes sense, then, that highly disrupted workers are significantly more likely to feel anxious about layoffs compared to other marketers: 21% say they are genuinely concerned about being laid off, compared to 15% in low-disruption organizations. They're also more likely to be actively pursuing a new job (27% vs. 17%).

AI disruption amplifies job market anxiety



Q: To what degree is AI reshaping the workflows, roles, or tasks within your marketing team today?

"Low disruption" = respondents who say AI has had somewhat limited or no impact (n=124).

"High disruption" = respondents who say AI is reshaping extensively (n=90).

Base: Employed full-time content and marketing professionals.

Source: 2026 Career and Salary Outlook: Content and Marketing Professionals

How do marketers stay relevant in the face of disruption?

Individual marketers and employers appear to disagree on this point. Fully 59% of marketers rank AI skills among the top three most critical for future relevance – second only to strategic thinking. Yet only 10% report hiring staff with AI experience, and just 10% have created dedicated AI roles.

What accounts for the gap?

Unlike earlier waves of marketing technology – CRM platforms, programmatic advertising, analytics dashboards – AI tools don't require technical skills to operate. Using them well is all about asking good questions, understanding how to refine outputs, and having the judgment to know when AI outputs are wrong or misleading. In other words, the same analytical, critical, and creative skills that have always distinguished smart marketers.

Employers may intuitively understand this, which could explain why they aren't rushing to hire for "AI experience" specifically. An army of tool pilots who

know how to prompt their way through a content calendar add little value.

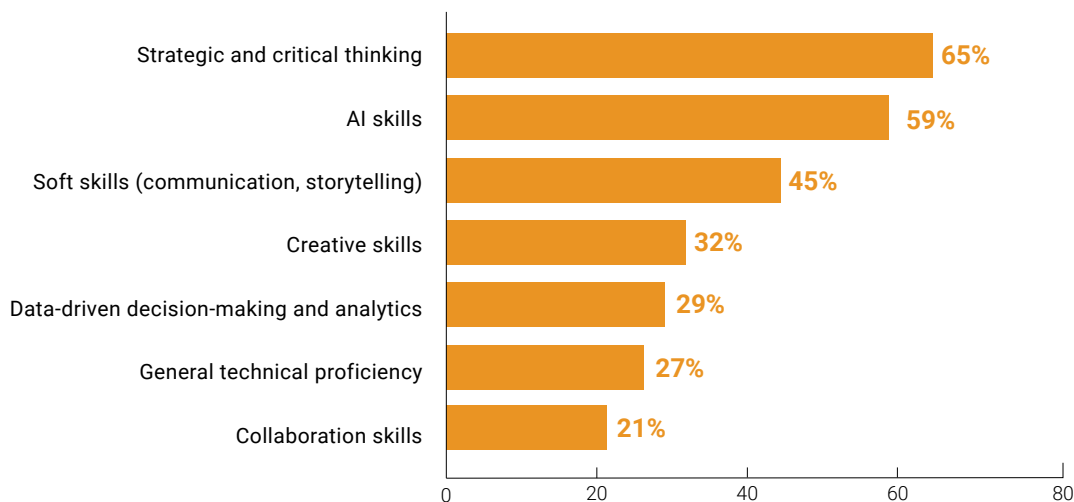
As one marketer put it, the risk of following the AI herd is real: "When everyone adopts the same techniques, marketing starts to look superfluous."

Only 32% of marketers rank creative skills as critical for future relevance – lower than strategic thinking (65%), AI skills (59%), and soft skills (45%), yet higher than data-driven decision-making and analytics (29%), general technical proficiency (27%), and collaboration skills (21%).

That ranking for creativity deserves scrutiny.

"Content marketing, at its core, is a creative discipline," says Stephanie Stahl, CMI's managing director. "It exists because audiences respond to ideas that surprise, move, or challenge them. If the profession collectively decides that creativity is less important than AI tool proficiency, it risks producing exactly the kind of undifferentiated pablum that gives company leaders reason to question whether marketers are needed at all."

What skills are most critical for future relevance?



Q: Please select up to three skillsets that you believe are the most critical to help marketers stay relevant in the future (2026 and beyond).

Base: Employed full-time content and marketing professionals.

Source: 2026 Career and Salary Outlook: Content and Marketing Professionals

The lies of AI efficiency

Marketers say they're satisfied with their jobs. But a strong majority also report overwhelming workloads and subpar career development.

Despite AI-driven stressors and rising layoffs, overall job satisfaction among employed marketers remains relatively stable. Three in four (75%) report being very or somewhat satisfied in 2026, compared to 76% in 2024.

Surface-level satisfaction masks significant strain

In the last year, 50% gained new responsibilities without advancement or increases in pay. Seventy-six percent feel they are doing the work of more than one job and nearly all (91%) say they're expected to do more without support. Add to that, 59% describe their workload as overwhelming, most often due to role consolidation.

Earlier, we described the ghost workforce – one person carrying the cognitive load of two or three. What the overall numbers don't show is that this burden is felt unequally.

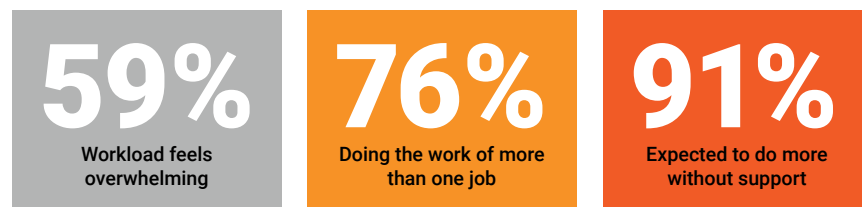
Burden by role:

- Leaders are most overextended: 59% strongly agree they are doing the work of more than one job vs. 36% of individual contributors.
- Managers feel the role-consolidation squeeze most acutely: 29% cite it as the primary driver of their overwhelm, compared to 18% of individual contributors.

Burden by gender:

- Nearly two in three (62%) women report overwhelming or somewhat overwhelming workloads, compared to 47% of men.
- Women are also more likely than their male counterparts to absorb new responsibilities without corresponding advancement or increases in pay (53% vs. 43%).

The burden is building



Qs: For the most part, I feel that my workload is overwhelming, manageable, or light (select one).
Agreement statements: I feel like I am doing the work of more than one job; Organizations expect individuals to handle multiple marketing roles without adequate support or resources.
Base: Employed full-time content and marketing professionals.
Source: 2026 Career and Salary Outlook: Content and Marketing Professionals

The skills trap

The most troubling finding of all isn't about workload, but the direction in which the marketing profession is heading.

Marketers tell us that strategic thinking (65%) and soft skills like communication and storytelling (45%) are the most critical capabilities for staying relevant in the years ahead.

Yet 85% expect to spend more time on technology optimization than on creative work going forward. And, three in four (75%) anticipate an increased reliance on AI for content creation and personalization.

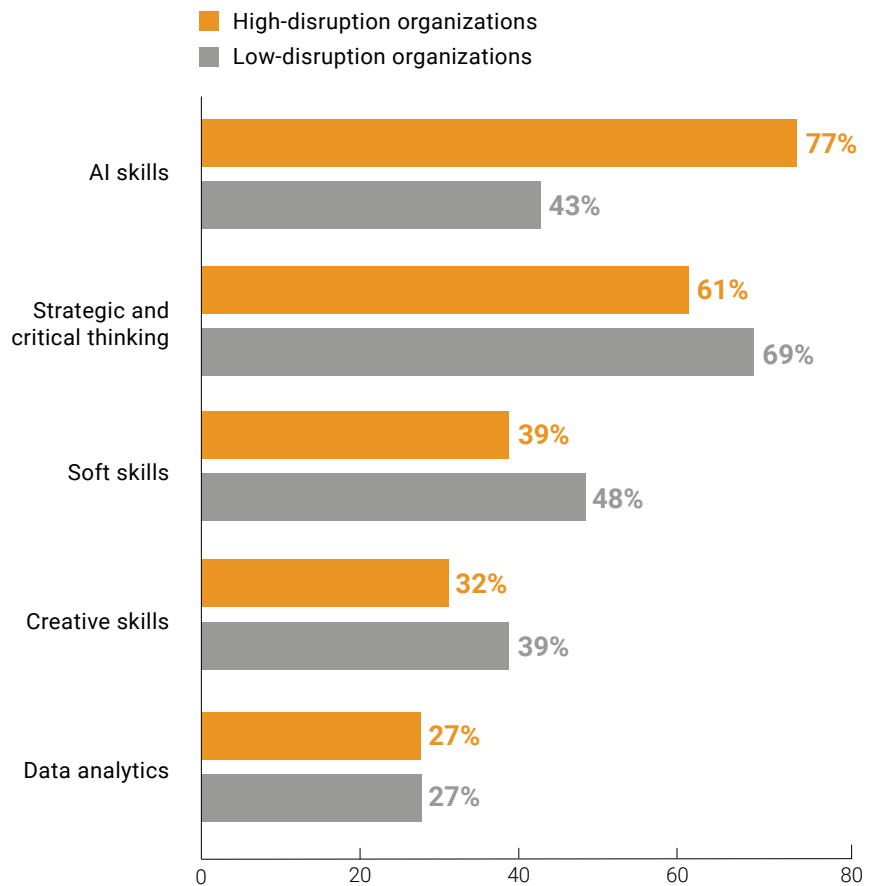
In other words, marketers are systematically being pushed away from the skills they believe matter most.

We can see how this plays out in companies that are already experiencing high levels of AI disruption.

More than three in four (77%) marketers within highly disrupted organizations rate AI skills as critical for future relevance — more than any other skill. Just 43% in low-disruption organizations choose AI skills. Here's how those in highly disrupted organizations rate additional skills:

- 61% say strategic/critical thinking is critical for future relevance (vs. 69% in low-disruption organizations).
- 39% cite soft skills (vs. 48% in low-disruption organizations).
- 32% reference creative skills (vs. 39% in low-disruption organizations).
- 27% in both groups say data analytics.

Critical skills for future relevance: high vs. low disruption



Q: Select up to three skillsets that you believe are the most critical to help marketers stay relevant in the future (2026 and beyond).

"High disruption" = respondents who say AI is extensively reshaping their marketing team's workflows, roles, or tasks (n=90). "Low disruption" = respondents who say AI has had somewhat limited or no impact (n=124).

Base: Employed full-time content and marketing professionals.

Source: 2026 Career and Salary Outlook: Content and Marketing Professionals

Are marketers hastening their own obsolescence by prioritizing AI skills? And will highly valuable skills such as creativity, analysis, and reasoning all atrophy from disuse?

Robert Rose, CMI's chief strategy advisor, pushes back on the impulse to prioritize AI skills: "Go get good at AI' is terrible advice. The skills, the creativity, the taste, the discernment — being able to recognize what excellence looks like — that's the differentiating skill of the 21st century with or without AI."

How much are marketers paid?

We asked marketers how much they make and whether they supplement their incomes.

U.S. content and marketing salaries are up overall and outpacing inflation. Average compensation for content and marketing professionals reached \$126,175 in 2026, up roughly 16% from \$108,380 in 2024 – well ahead of the roughly 5 to 6% cumulative inflation over the same period. In a year marked by layoffs and job market anxiety, rising pay is a bright spot.

The experience premium is widening. Gen X marketers saw the largest salary gains of any generation – up approximately 21% since 2024, compared to roughly 18% for millennials and 10% for Gen Z. Average compensation now stands at \$149,763 for Gen X, \$118,088 for millennials, and \$74,075 for Gen Z.

The gap between Gen X and millennials' pay grew from a 23% premium in 2024 to nearly 27% in 2026 – consistent with a market that is increasingly rewarding seasoned talent.

The gender pay gap persists. Male marketers average \$140,213; female marketers average \$123,488 – a gap of roughly 13%. Men are more than three times as likely to earn \$250,000 or more (6.8% vs. 2.1%), while women are much more concentrated in the \$75,000 to \$99,000 band (25% vs. 18%).

Where you live matters, especially early in your career. The major metro pay premium nearly disappears at the director level and above (+2%) but widens substantially for individual contributors (+14%). It appears that senior marketers have largely negotiated away the geographic penalty. For everyone else, location remains a meaningful factor in what the market will pay.

The gap between Gen X and millennials' pay grew from a 23% premium in 2024 to nearly 27% in 2026 – consistent with a market that is increasingly rewarding seasoned talent.



Compensation by the Numbers

<p>The average annual compensation for U.S.-based marketers jumped 16% over the last two years.</p>	<p>Average annual compensation for U.S.-based marketer: \$126,175 +16% vs. \$108,380 in 2024 Outpaces inflation over the same period</p>
<p>The pay gap between major metro* and non-metro (all other) areas widens moving down the org chart. Directors and above earn roughly the same regardless of location – just a 2% difference – but individual contributors in major metros out-earn their non-metro counterparts by nearly \$14,000, or 14%.</p>	<p>Director and above Non-metro: \$164,263 Major metro: \$167,913 +2% gap</p> <p>Manager Non-metro: \$111,538 Major metro: \$121,850 +9% gap</p> <p>Individual contributor Non-metro: \$98,575 Major metro: \$112,525 +14% gap</p>
<p>Women are more concentrated in the \$75,000 to \$95,000 band (25% vs. 18%). Men are more than three times as likely to earn \$250,000 or more.</p>	<p>Men: \$140,213 Women: \$123,488</p>
<p>Compensation climbs steeply by generation, reflecting both career stage and the years of accumulated experience the market is currently rewarding.</p>	<p>Gen Z: \$74,075 Millennials: \$118,088 Gen X: \$149,763</p>

*The survey defined the following cities as major metros: Atlanta, Boston, Chicago, Dallas, Detroit, Houston, Los Angeles, Miami, New York City, Philadelphia, Phoenix, San Francisco, Seattle, and Washington, D.C.

Q: What is your current annual compensation (salary plus bonus) in U.S. dollars?

Base: U.S.-based employed full-time content and marketing professionals only (n=533). Compensation figures are weighted averages calculated from salary band distributions.

2024 figure from CMI's Career and Salary Outlook for 2025

Source: 2026 Career and Salary Outlook: Content and Marketing Professionals

The Freelance Marketing Economy

Nearly one in four marketers freelances on the side, but the reasons and rewards vary considerably depending on job seniority.

- Leaders (director level and above) freelance at the highest rate (26%), and they earn the most from it: 12% bring in \$30,000 or more annually from side work, suggesting they are monetizing expertise the full-time market undervalues.
- Individual contributors freelance less (20%) and earn less – nearly a quarter take home less than \$1,000 a year from side work.

For some, freelancing is clearly a strategic choice. For others, it reads more like a pressure valve. One marketer explains, “I currently work a corporate job, a freelancing job, and I am starting a new business – all because I can’t get growth in my current role, I can’t find a higher paying job, and the cost of living is expensive to keep up with.”

Others likely use it as a career hedge. Robert Rose, CMI’s chief strategy advisor, explains, “For many freelancers, it’s not about money. Marketers are trying to stay relevant – and in a marketplace where they know the pink slip can hit at any time, freelancing keeps their options open.”



Bold action for a disrupted industry

The job market is turbulent. Your response doesn't have to be.

FOR CONTENT MARKETING EXECUTIVES AND TEAM LEADERS:

Get honest about employee experience.

More than three in four (76%) marketers feel they are doing the work of more than one job, and 59% describe their workload as overwhelming. Is this how AI-empowered teams are supposed to work?

It's time to think clearly about how AI, layoffs, and attrition have reshaped your team's workload — then develop a plan to address it. Start by asking each team member to map out everything they are responsible for today versus two years ago. Add a simple self-assessment that surfaces workload, stress, and early signs of burnout.

Rethink what you mean by "AI skills."

Let's be real: Using AI effectively is not a standalone, technical skill. Being a good "prompt engineer" just means knowing how to ask smart questions and having the experience to iterate effectively. Good at AI equals good at deep thinking.

Audit your job descriptions to weed out referencing "AI skills." If an opening calls for "AI proficiency" (or similar) without specifying what that means, rewrite the description to focus on the underlying capabilities you actually need.

Identify the flight risk of high-value employees.

Some leaders assume their employees won't leave because the current job market heavily favors employers. CMI's research suggests otherwise.



Using AI effectively is not a standalone, technical skill. Being a good "prompt engineer" just means knowing how to ask smart questions and having the experience to iterate effectively.



While 43% of companies have laid off marketing staff in the last year, organizations are simultaneously net-positive about growing their teams in 2026 — meaning competition for experienced, high-value talent is real. Identify the team members who add outsized value, then make a plan to develop and support them.

CMI's Robert Rose explains, "The incredibly valuable, mid-level marketing leaders who are carrying the most weight in AI-optimized organizations are often the first ones quietly updating their resumes."

Stop optimizing for the wrong things.

AI promised to make marketing teams extraordinarily efficient — faster content production, automated campaigns, real-time analytics, etc. The risk is that marketing organizations are building highly optimized machines to execute strategies that don't make authentic connections with their audiences.

Pick one campaign or content program currently running on autopilot and ask: Does this actually work? Not just "is it efficient?" but does it make a real connection?

FOR INDIVIDUAL MARKETERS:

Don't overfocus on AI skills.

As we've talked at length about in this report, "AI skills" is just code for marketing skills (i.e., data analysis skills, editorial know-how, domain knowledge, and AI-informed SEO). Don't get distracted by those who tell you to learn "prompt engineering" (a.k.a. asking good questions).

That said, it's important to spend a lot of time using AI and experimenting with its potential. AI models are able to do things today that they could not manage last month. That means the best way to develop AI fluency is simply to embrace a little AI wanderlust. Go and explore.

Career hedge, don't just job hug.

Keeping one eye on the door isn't disloyalty; it's self-preservation. Warm up your existing network, consider taking on freelance work that keeps your skills sharp, and treat your career as something you manage actively rather than something that happens to you.

Don't wait for your organization to develop you.

Only 25% of marketers are very satisfied with their organization's career development opportunities. If yours isn't investing in your growth, take matters into your own hands.

We won't sugarcoat it: AI is a threat to many marketing careers. It's time to punch back. Seek out mentors, pursue projects that stretch you, and invest in your own development if your organization isn't providing what you need. Do these things even if you think your job is safe.

Know your value — and make it visible.

Layoffs have jumped 30% in two years. The marketers who are hardest to replace are the ones whose contributions are clearly understood.

Every marketer should be able to answer these questions:

- What did I deliver this year that wouldn't have happened without me?
- Who in leadership can articulate my value?
- What is my 60-second case for why I'm hard to replace?

This is your moment for a little strategic chest-thumping. Document your impact. Make sure the people making decisions about your career can articulate why you matter.

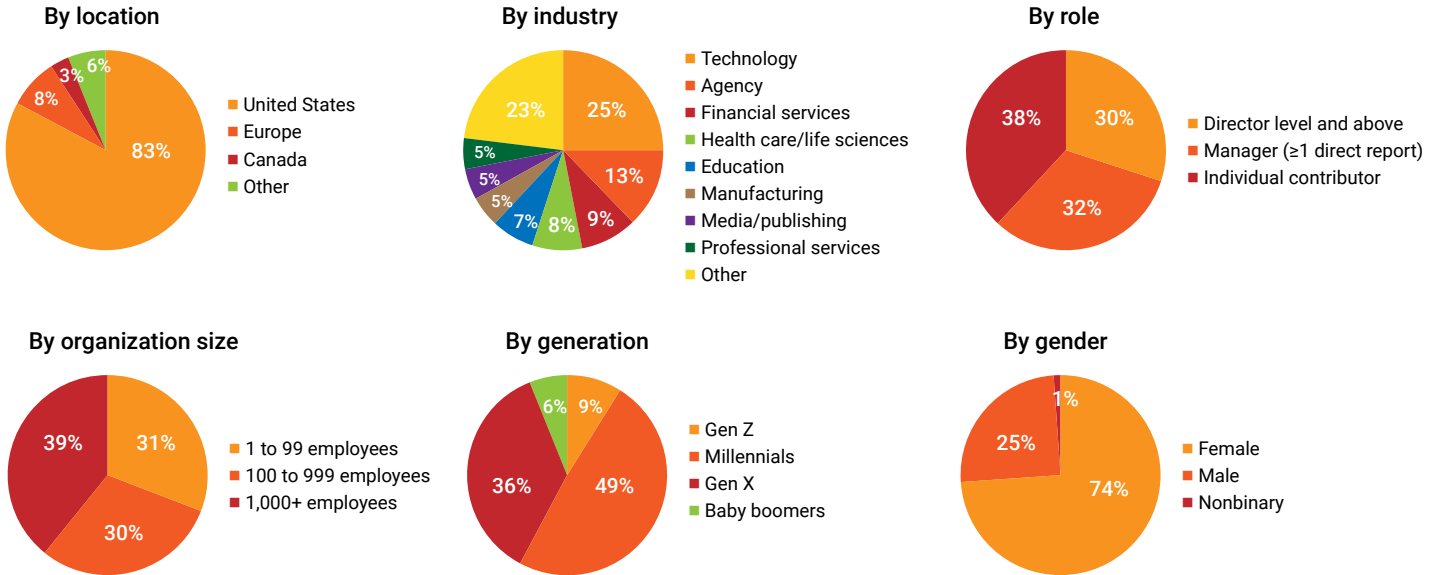
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We won't sugarcoat it: AI is a threat to many marketing careers. It's time to punch back.

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Methodology

The Content Marketing Institute surveyed 644 full-time global marketers in February 2026. This report presents findings on the global sample, except for the salary data, where we focused on full-time employed content and marketing professionals working in the United States (n=533). The charts below represent the full-time global marketer dataset.



About Content Marketing Institute

Content Marketing Institute (CMI) advances the practice of content-driven marketing through online education and in-person and digital events. We create and curate content experiences that teach marketers and creators from enterprise brands, small businesses, and agencies how to attract and retain customers through compelling, multichannel storytelling. Global brands turn to CMI for strategic consultation, training, and research. Organizations from around the world send teams to Content Marketing World, the largest content marketing-focused event, and CMI virtual events. Our community of 215,000+ content marketers shares camaraderie and conversation. CMI is organized by Informa.

To learn more, visit <https://contentmarketinginstitute.com>.

Special thanks to the African American Marketing Association (AAMA) and the Women in Content and Marketing Association (WICMA) for their help distributing the survey. Thanks, too, to Clare McDermott at Ravn Research for her analysis and support.

