THE COLLECTIVE X · DIGITAL JOBS & SKILLS OBSERVATORY

Sightlines

A quarterly read of South Africa's digital jobs and skills market

+1.4%

Talent pool growth

311,754 → 316,010 professionals

+23%

February posting surge

4,026 → 4,933 LinkedIn postings

4,005

March postings

roughly where the quarter began

South Africa's digital jobs and skills market in the first quarter of 2026 looked broadly stable on supply, and volatile on demand. The visible LinkedIn talent pool grew by 1.4% over the quarter, from 311,754 occupation-level observations in January to 316,010 in March, while LinkedIn job-posting volume swung sharply: 4,026 postings in January, a 23% leap to 4,933 in February, and a fall back to 4,005 in March. The quarter ended roughly where it began on both supply and demand headlines.

DEMAND

A surge with a hangover

The lift in February hiring was not even: software development, systems and network administration, and data analysis and warehousing accounted for the bulk of the additional hires. Every category that surged in February eased back in March. The pattern is consistent with a catch-up of hiring deferred over the December–January holiday until February.

Four roles ran against the broader pattern with persistent demand across the quarter: Microsoft developers, web developers, data engineers, and data scientists. These four are where demand was not just present but accelerated.

> Every category that surged in February eased back in March.

LinkedIn job postings by month

POSTINGS



Persistent demand, all quarter

- Microsoft developers
- Web developers
- Data engineers
- Data scientists

DEMAND

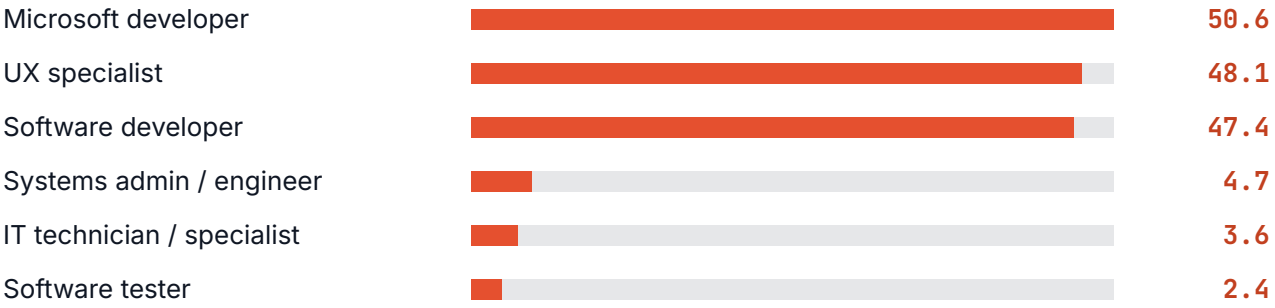
Where hiring pressure actually sits

Hiring intensity at the occupation level was led by three roles. Microsoft developers ran the highest demand intensity in the dataset at an average of 50.6 LinkedIn postings per 1,000 professionals; UX specialists were second at 48.1 per 1,000; and software developers were third at 47.4 per 1,000. The latter is particularly striking because the pool of software developers in South Africa is large — the intensity of hiring is therefore not a product of a small denominator but a signal of substantial demand.

The opposite end of the intensity scale was occupied by occupations with large pools and modest posting volumes, suggesting that the labour market for these roles is well supplied. IT technicians and specialists had the largest pool in the dataset, but hiring intensity sat at only 3.6 postings per 1,000. Software testers sat at 2.4 per 1,000 despite a 27,000-strong pool, and systems administrators and engineers were similarly low at 4.7 per 1,000. The pattern was consistent across the support and administration job family: deep pools, steady but modest hiring, and relatively little hiring pressure.

Hiring intensity — the two ends of the scale

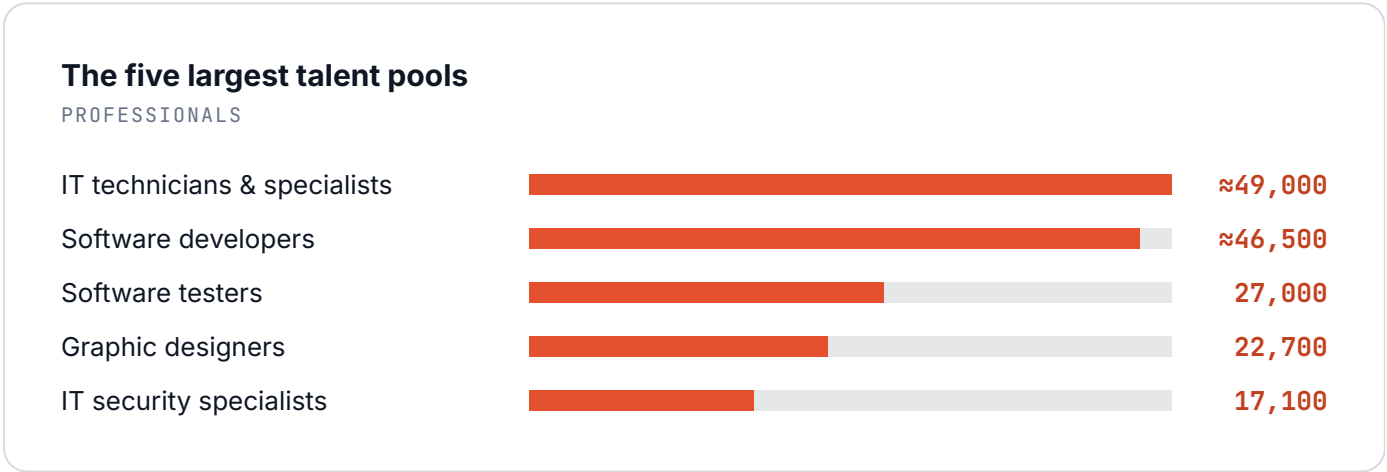
POSTINGS PER 1,000 PROFESSIONALS



SUPPLY

Deep pools, thin frontiers

The supply mix was heavily concentrated. The IT technicians and specialists occupation alone held approximately 49,000 professionals — the single largest occupation in the dataset. Software developers followed at around 46,500, software testers at 27,000, graphic designers at 22,700 and IT security specialists at 17,100. Eighteen of the 51 tracked occupations show fewer than 1,500 professionals; eleven show fewer than 500.



18 of 51
occupations
fewer than 1,500 professionals

11 of 51
occupations
fewer than 500 professionals

SUPPLY

The data and AI workforce forms

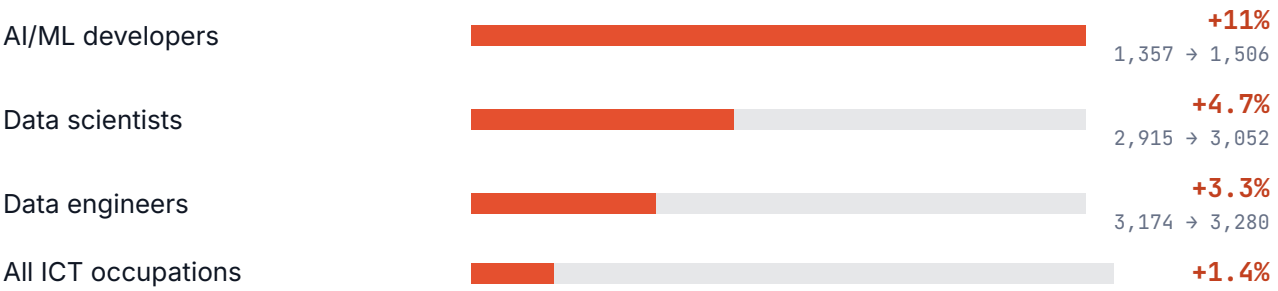
The most striking movement was concentrated in three small but growing pools. AI/ML developers grew from 1,357 professionals in January to 1,506 in March — an 11% gain and the largest growth in any occupation. Data scientists grew from 2,915 to 3,052

(4.7%), and data engineers grew from 3,174 to 3,280 (3.3%). These three occupations might be regarded as the crux of the data and AI workforce, and all three are growing faster than the overall ICT supply rate of 1.4% across the quarter.

> **The talent base for the AI economy is forming — just on smaller absolute numbers.**

Quarterly pool growth vs the ICT average

GROWTH, JAN → MAR 2026



SKILLS

The skills that bind

Aggregating across the 51 occupations and three monthly readings of the quarter, SQL is the most widely held technical skill in the dataset — listed by an average of 51,500 professionals and appearing in the top common skills of 42 of 51 occupations. JavaScript follows with 32,600 professionals and presence in 29 occupations; HTML is held by 30,900 (36 occupations) and Java by 29,900 (31). Python is held by 23,400 professionals across 26 occupations.

Three broad-base skills form the connective tissue of the South African ICT workforce, appearing across 30 or more occupations. Analytical skills lead with presence in 47 of 51 occupations (held by 37,600 professionals), followed by business analysis in 37 occupations (31,400) and data analysis in 36 (27,500). These form a foundational layer

beneath the core programming language and database stack — skills that rarely dominate hiring conversations but underpin cross-functional digital work at scale.

Most widely held technical skills

PROFESSIONALS LISTING THE SKILL (OCCUPATIONS WHERE IT RANKS IN THE TOP COMMON SKILLS)



The connective tissue

PROFESSIONALS (BREADTH ACROSS OCCUPATIONS)



SKILLS

Four clusters on the move

Four fast-growing skill clusters characterise the quarter's workforce trends. The largest and most established is identity, access and remote operations: identity creation (93% year-on-year growth, 12,500 professionals), routing and remote access service (88%, 7,100) and secure remote access (71%, 16,400) reflect a clear shift from enabling remote

work to securing it at scale. These are durable, employer-validated skills, and their growth pattern maps directly onto the IT security specialist reskilling picture.

The second cluster is the formalisation of software work — software support (66%), automated software testing (58%), ETL testing (55%), software troubleshooting (54%) and technical requirements gathering (54%) suggest that employers want hires who can specify, test, debug and operate software, not just write it.

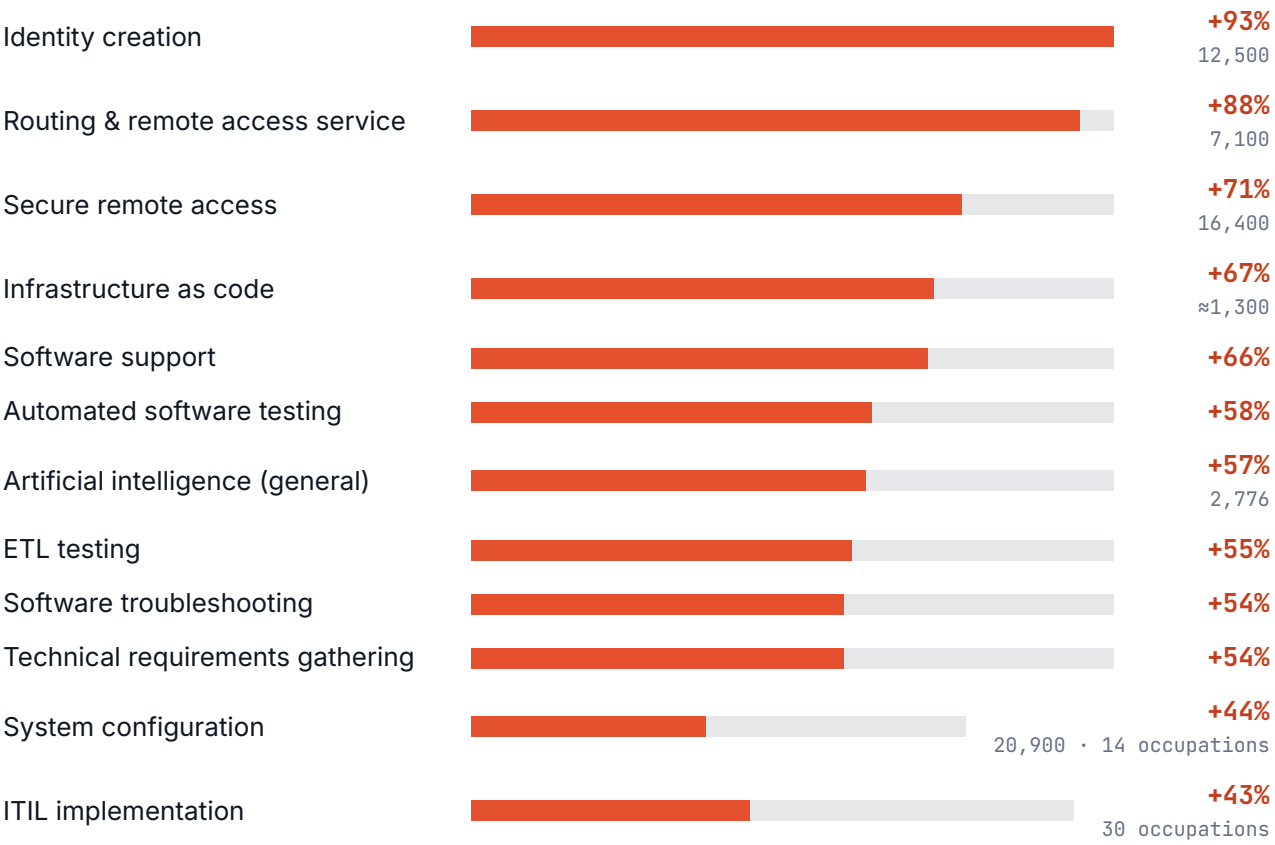
Third, infrastructure modernisation skills are broadening: infrastructure as code grew 67% (though still on a small base of roughly 1,300 professionals), system configuration grew 44% across 14 occupations with 20,900 professionals listing it, and ITIL implementation grew 43% across 30 occupations — signals of operational rigour becoming a professional norm.

Finally, the AI cluster is small but growing: artificial intelligence (general) grew 57% to 2,776 professionals, while generative AI, prompt engineering and large language models each register under 200 professionals. Growth rates exceed 100% in most cases, but the absolute base is small enough that the numbers indicate direction rather than scale.

> **Employers want hires who can specify, test, debug and operate software — not just write it.**

Fastest-growing skills, year on year

GROWTH (PROFESSIONALS LISTING THE SKILL)



PATHWAYS

Three credible transitions

Career overlap is the share of one role's top skills that a holder of another role already possesses. High overlap signals that the gap between two roles is in specific tooling, contextual experience and credentialing rather than ground-up reskilling. The Q1 2026 data surface three pathways with overlap high enough that the transitions can credibly be supported with short, targeted bridging programmes.

Software developer → Web developer

SHARED GROUND

JavaScript, HTML, CSS and Git, in roughly similar proportions — the highest-overlap transition in the developer family.

THE GAP

Framework specialisation (React, Vue, Angular) versus broader system-level, back-end and database depth.

Business analyst → Systems analyst

SHARED GROUND

Requirements gathering, stakeholder management, business process modelling and SQL as core skills.

THE GAP

Specific tooling and contextual systems experience rather than new foundations.

Data analyst → BI developer

SHARED GROUND

SQL, data visualisation tools and stakeholder reporting at the top of both skill stacks.

THE GAP

BI platform tooling and credentialing rather than ground-up reskilling.

GEOGRAPHY

Two cities, one market

Geographic concentration remained extreme and stable. Across all three months, Johannesburg, Cape Town, Pretoria and Durban held between 87.6% and 87.8% of the visible software developer pool. Cape Town was the more active hiring market: across the quarter it produced 3,135 software developer postings against Johannesburg's 2,003 — 56% more, despite Johannesburg's pool being almost twice as large.

87.6–87.8%

Four-metro concentration

of the visible software developer pool, all three months

Software developer postings, Q1 2026

POSTINGS



PEOPLE

Representation, unmoved

Women are under-represented across all job families, ranging from 18.6% in technical and business architecture to 51.0% in UX/UI design, with virtually no change in representation across the quarter. Two patterns are worth surfacing. The higher-representation categories are the ones whose skill mix tips toward translation, communication and design (UX/UI, business analysis, systems analysis). The male-skewed categories are the ones where seniority correlates with technical autonomy (technical and business architecture, systems and network administration, software development). The pattern is consistent with international comparators — and the absolute South African levels are not better than the global average in any category.

Women’s representation — the range across job families

SHARE OF THE VISIBLE POOL



METHOD

Based on data from LinkedIn Talent Insights talent pool reports covering 51 ICT occupations grouped into nine role categories, reflecting data for South Africa. Figures are quarterly readings for January–March 2026 unless stated otherwise.