

Forward Deployed Engineers turn AI pilots into working products

SlideCraft example

AI companies hire FDEs because most AI pilots stall before production

800%+
Growth in FDE job postings
A: Jan-Sep 2025

~95%
Generation AI pilots with no measurable P&L impact
— 2025 study

2010s
Decade the role was created at Pinterest

Source: Burning Glass, The Search Science Group, AI in Business 2025 Study 2025, What is a Forward Deployed Engineer? 2025, The Forward Deployed Engineer - Burning 2025 - 02

02 AI companies hire FDEs because most AI pilots stall before production

The FDE owns the middle of the AI value chain, where most pilots stall

MODELS AND PLATFORMS: Bought or built over the course of many use cases

SECURITY AND COMPLIANCE: Reinforce data security and model behavior before launch

PEOPLE AND INCENTIVES: Design whether teams adopt the tool or stick around it

Pick the use case: Business owner and FDE agree

Build and integrate: FDE sets up the model and integrates it into the workflow

Ship and evaluate: FDE sets up the model and integrates it into the workflow

Adaptation: FDE sets up the model and integrates it into the workflow

Pilots stall in data access, integration and evaluation — the FDE's job

Source: Burning Glass, The Search Science Group, AI in Business 2025 Study 2025, What is a Forward Deployed Engineer? 2025, The Forward Deployed Engineer - Burning 2025 - 02

03 The FDE owns the middle of the AI value chain, where most pilots stall

The FDE cycle runs from the user's desk to the core product

Embed: Sit with the people who do the work and map the workflow and its data

Pick the job: Choose the step where AI changes cost, time or quality the most

Build: Connect data, prompts, evaluations and guardrails on the platform

Ship and measure: Run it in production and track adoption and the business metric

Feed the product: Turn custom work that repeats into product features

Source: Burning Glass, The Search Science Group, AI in Business 2025 Study 2025, What is a Forward Deployed Engineer? 2025, The Forward Deployed Engineer - Burning 2025 - 02

04 The FDE cycle runs from the user's desk to the core product

The profile combines production engineering, applied AI and customer judgement

Production engineering
Full-stack and data skills, integration with legacy systems and owns reliability after go-live

Applied AI
Works with model APIs, retrieval, evaluations and guardrails — and knows when not to use a model

Customer judgement
Scopes problems with domain experts, explains trade-offs and says no to low-value requests

Source: Burning Glass, The Search Science Group, AI in Business 2025 Study 2025, What is a Forward Deployed Engineer? 2025, The Forward Deployed Engineer - Burning 2025 - 02

05 The profile combines production engineering, applied AI and customer judgement

Strategy and platform are usually ready; staff placement and skills are not

STRATEGY: What's the company's goal?

STRUCTURE: At least one AI FDE for the business

WALLS: Playbooks and steps and standard work

SHARED VALUES: What are the company's values?

SYSTEMS: Integration and model training

SKILLS: A team of people with AI skills

Fix staff and skills first — that's exactly what an FDE pilot tests

Source: Burning Glass, The Search Science Group, AI in Business 2025 Study 2025, What is a Forward Deployed Engineer? 2025, The Forward Deployed Engineer - Burning 2025 - 02

06 Strategy and platform are usually ready; staff placement and skills are not

The pilot targets 40 weekly users and a third of tasks automated by week 12

Weekly active users, and share of tasks handled and its cost, %

Weekly active users: 10%, 20%, 30%, 40%

Share of tasks handled: 10%, 20%, 30%, 40%

Two numbers decide whether to scale

- Users show adoption; automation shows value
- Review both with the business owner every week

Source: Burning Glass, The Search Science Group, AI in Business 2025 Study 2025, What is a Forward Deployed Engineer? 2025, The Forward Deployed Engineer - Burning 2025 - 02

07 The pilot targets 40 weekly users and a third of tasks automated by week 12

A one-quarter pilot costs about \$206k, two-thirds of it the engineer

Item	Month 1	Month 2	Month 3	Total
Forward Deployed Engineer	\$65k	\$65k	\$65k	\$195k
Model and platform usage	\$5k	\$15k	\$15k	\$35k
Business owner time	\$5k	\$5k	\$5k	\$15k
Documentation and security review	\$10k	\$5k	\$5k	\$20k
Total	\$85k	\$90k	\$90k	\$265k

Source: Burning Glass, The Search Science Group, AI in Business 2025 Study 2025, What is a Forward Deployed Engineer? 2025, The Forward Deployed Engineer - Burning 2025 - 02

08 A one-quarter pilot costs about \$206k, two-thirds of it the engineer

Approve one FDE on your highest-value AI workflow for one quarter

RECOMMENDATIONS

Approve a one-quarter pilot, about \$206k, with one Forward Deployed Engineer on one production workflow

- Pick one workflow with a measurable business metric (Nov 2024 - Mar 2025)
- Assign or hire one engineer with production and AI experience (Oct - Nov 2024)
- Embed the engineer with the team that owns the workflow (Nov 2024 - Mar 2025)
- Ship to production and review users and automation weekly (Nov 2024 - Mar 2025)
- Decide: scale, turn into product, or stop (Mar 2025 - Apr 2025)

Source: Burning Glass, The Search Science Group, AI in Business 2025 Study 2025, What is a Forward Deployed Engineer? 2025, The Forward Deployed Engineer - Burning 2025 - 02

09 Approve one FDE on your highest-value AI workflow for one quarter