

BRIEFING · 2026

Forward Deployed Engineers turn AI pilots into working products

What the role is, why AI companies are hiring for it, and how to start with one

October 2026



AI companies hire FDEs because most AI pilots stall before production

800%+

Growth in FDE job postings

▲ Jan–Sep 2025

Financial Times data reported by Fast Company

~95%

Generative AI pilots with no measurable P&L impact

— 2025 study

MIT NANDA, The GenAI Divide

2010s

Decade the role was created at Palantir

Engineers placed with government and enterprise customers

Source: Postings for this AI job are up 800% (2025); The GenAI Divide: State of AI in Business 2025 (Aug 2025); What is a Forward Deployed AI Engineer? (2026)

An FDE ships production software inside the customer's workflow

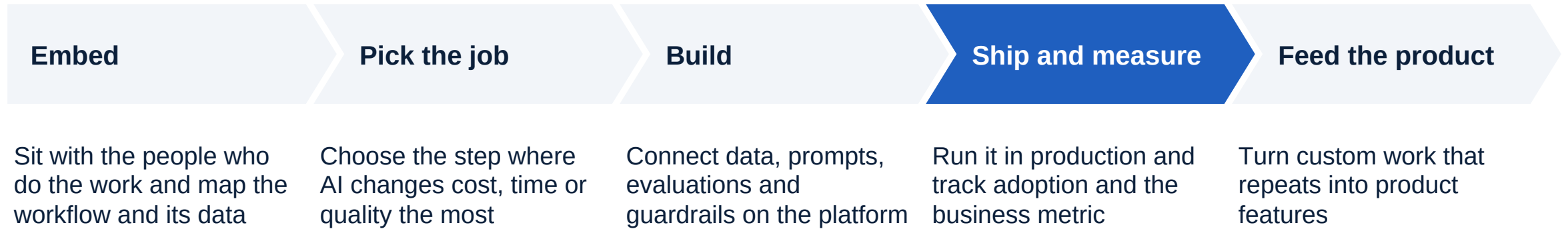
Role	Works	Delivers	Judged by
Forward Deployed Engineer	With the customer's team	Working software in production	Adoption and business value
Software engineer	In the product team	Features for many customers	Releases and quality
Solutions engineer	In the sales cycle	Demos and proofs of concept	Deals closed
Consultant	Next to the client	Analysis and recommendations	Decisions taken

The FDE owns the outcome, not the demo

- Writes production code, not slides
- Stays until the workflow runs without them
- Brings repeated needs back to the product

Source: What is a Forward Deployed AI Engineer? (2026)

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; integrates 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

Start with one FDE on your highest-value AI use case

DECISION REQUESTED

**Pilot one Forward
Deployed Engineer for
one quarter on a single
production workflow**

- 1 Pick one workflow with a measurable business metric**
Head of AI · Month 1
- 2 Assign or hire one engineer with production and AI experience**
CTO · Month 1
- 3 Embed the engineer with the team that owns the workflow**
Business owner · Month 1–2
- 4 Ship to production and review the metric every week**
FDE · Month 2–3
- 5 Decide: scale, turn into product, or stop**
Leadership team · End of quarter