



IRELAND'S PROJECT ECONOMY 2026

A Barometer of Independent Professionals,
Contractors and Solo Self-Employed in Ireland.

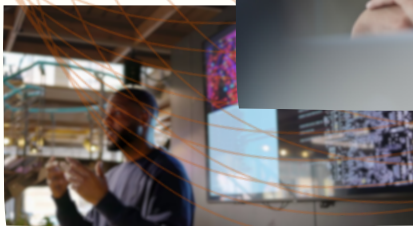


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A WORD FROM THE PROJECT LEADERS



WELCOME TO IRELAND'S PROJECT ECONOMY 2026, THIS LONGITUDINAL STUDY IS NOW IN ITS SIXTH YEAR. THE REPORT PROFILES IRISH HIGH-SKILLED INDEPENDENT PROFESSIONALS, ALSO KNOWN AS PROFESSIONAL CONTRACTORS, FREELANCERS AND SOLO-SELF EMPLOYED WORKERS.

Trinity College Dublin and Contracting PLUS are delighted to collaborate on this unique study, which examines the contribution this key cohort have to employment and the economy in Ireland. This is the only report of its kind completed in Ireland and this report has been produced entirely digitally, in line with both companies strong commitment to sustainability.

The focus of our research is to explore the extent and nature of the Independent Professional sector in Ireland and the key challenges it faces. This is the sixth report in the series. Survey responses were collected in December 2025. For consistency across the series, all findings are referenced as 2026 data, this reflects the year of publication, not the fieldwork period. This dating convention is used for consistency across the series. It aligns with the methodology applied in the previous six reports.

There were 1,952 respondents comprising the main stakeholders of the project economy eco-system including, high skilled independent contractors both full time and part-time, organisations who hire high-skilled independent contractors, as well as some employees, unemployed and retired individuals. In terms of data focused on the independent contractors themselves, for consistency our analysis focused only on full time independent contractors with some further filtering of the sample to remove cases with incomplete and erroneous data, leading to a sample of 1,416 independent contractors.

We hope you find these insights as interesting as we did.

To cite this report: Burke, A., Fu, N., Sheehan, J., Penney, G., & Kapoor, H. (2026). Ireland's Project Economy 2026: A Barometer of Independent Professionals, Contractors and Solo Self-Employed. Trinity College Dublin. <https://doi.org/10.25546/112702> ISBN: 978-1-911566-65-6

FOREWORD

AS MANAGING DIRECTOR OF CONTRACTING PLUS, I AM PROUD TO INTRODUCE IRELAND'S PROJECT ECONOMY 2026. THIS IS THE SIXTH YEAR OF THIS RESEARCH, AND IT HAS BEEN CARRIED OUT INDEPENDENTLY BY TRINITY COLLEGE DUBLIN. WE COMMISSIONED IT BECAUSE EVIDENCE MATTERS. SO DO INDEPENDENT VOICES.

At Contracting PLUS, we work with Independent Professionals every day.

We see first-hand the value they bring. They deliver critical projects. They bring scarce skills. They give organisations flexibility and momentum. They are a cornerstone of Ireland's modern economy.

This research reflects that reality.

Over six years, Ireland's Project Economy has consistently shown that contracting is not a fringe activity. It is a deliberate, professional choice. It supports innovation, delivery, and competitiveness across sectors. The 2026 findings reinforce this again. But they also surface concerns that cannot be ignored.

Contractors continue to highlight challenges around recognition, fairness, and security.

They highlight differences in how risk and reward are experienced across employment models. Many note that while independent work can offer higher earning potential, it also involves taking on greater personal risk. Some describe challenges where their income history is not always assessed in the same way it is for permanent employees. There are also calls for greater clarity and consistency in guidance, reflecting a desire for systems that better align with the realities of project-based and independent work.

What stands out most strongly this year is that these are not just technical issues. They are signals. Signals about whether independent work is truly understood. Signals about whether Independent Professionals are seen, valued, and respected for their contribution to Ireland's strong economic position.

At Contracting PLUS, we fundamentally reject the idea that Independent Professionals are somehow peripheral. We recognise them as professionals. As contributors. As people who take on risk so organisations and the wider economy can move faster and further. This belief underpins our continued investment in independent research and in advocacy on your behalf.

This report is a call to listen. A call to policymakers to engage directly with Independent Professionals, a call for better understanding. A call to ensure policy reflects how work is actually done in Ireland today. Recognition must move beyond rhetoric. It must be visible in systems, supports, and outcomes. We remain committed to amplifying your voices. To working with researchers, industry, and government. And to pushing for an environment where independent professionals can thrive with confidence and dignity.



- Jimmy Sheehan

Managing Director, Contracting PLUS

This research, conducted by Trinity College Dublin and sponsored by Contracting PLUS, reflects our commitment to supporting self-employed professionals in Ireland and our belief that self-employment is a valid and rewarding career choice. If you find value in these insights, we encourage you to share them with your network. Change is possible, but only if we work together to make it happen.

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY



WE ARE DELIGHTED TO PUBLISH THE 6TH YEAR OF OUR ANNUAL IRELAND'S PROJECT ECONOMY REPORT.

If there is one main finding that has emerged over this period it is that the self-employed independent contractor workforce – which comprises workers with career paths with more risk and uncertainty than employees – transposes into a dynamic, robust and high performance economy. While being dynamic and entrepreneurial, the project economy has in fact stable and enduring characteristics that place it at the top tier of Irish economic performance.

Independent contractors that comprise the project economy are highly skilled and high impact. They are consistently a deeply educated workforce with well over 90% having a university degree or professional equivalent qualification. They derive the highest economic value added from work experience. In fact, so much so, that they are capable of confining the once assumed general stylised fact of an inverse U-shaped relationship between age and earnings to be an employed-sector phenomenon. Our research over the last six years has shown that this relationship doesn't hold true for self-employed independent contractors in the project economy, where it is replaced by an increasing monotonic relationship so that older more experienced workers always earn more than younger and less experienced counterparts. This result holds true across all age groups. Indeed, regardless of the rapidly changing technologies and business practices in recent years where one might imagine that the value of work experience quickly depreciates, independent contractors have proven themselves to be exemplars of a growth mindset, using new work experience to constantly evolve and enable a productivity and pay premium for more experienced workers. So our latest survey finds that the over 60 year olds – who have the most work experience – earn the largest premium over equivalent employees with 72% more in annual earnings

However, regardless of age and experience our research consistently finds that the project economy generates the highest quality jobs. High-skilled independent contractors continue to manifest the high pay and job satisfaction levels compared to other forms of work. In our latest survey they earn €34,344 more than equivalent (managers, directors and professional) employees giving rise to a 41% independent contractors pay premium over employees. However, this has narrowed this year as the pay increases in the employed sector have not been matched by independent contractors.

Likewise, while job and life satisfaction levels remain very high compared to employees, we observe an uptick in burnout and loneliness amongst independent professionals mostly concentrated in the younger age groups. We don't have contemporaneous well-being data for employees in Ireland so are not able to ascertain if this is unique to independent professionals or a general labour market feature.

Confidence in the Irish economy is still positive but close to zero (+6) indicating only a slight majority of independent professionals who expect economic conditions to improve further in 2026.

Independent professionals are more upbeat about the prospects for the economy but this confidence is not as high as in previous years indicating a weakening in an albeit positive business outlook. This would tally with a more demanding business environment, not only supported by the well-being scores above but also in an increase of 17% in time spent looking for a new contract – up from 12 days last year to 14 days in the latest survey. This too corroborates with the fact the day rates while constant in nominal terms have fallen in real terms and the ability for the high skilled gig economy to close some of the pay gap with the project economy (a sector which is over 6 times larger and dominates our survey results).

Finally, given the high value added and impact of work in the project economy, we decided to expand our study this year by asking independent professionals about the role of leadership in their work. This was also motivated by the fact that nearly all studies on business leadership focus on employees and given the heterogeneity in the workforce we felt that one cannot assume that the lessons from employed sector automatically carry over to the high skilled self-employed. And it turns out this was a good guess! Independent contractors are generally quite impressed with the leaders guiding work in the project economy. They tell us that their leaders are effective in driving organisational performance and are satisfied with the manner in which their leaders work with them. In achieving this performance, independent contractors observe their leaders adopting a blend of directive and collaborative leadership styles – not one or the other. This ambidextrous leadership capability also manifests through a combination of clear direction but which then gives contractors autonomy and an opportunity to collaborate with a leadership characterised by good teamwork, transparency, inclusivity and authenticity. The message for leaders of independent contractors seems clear. If you want to get the best out of independent contractors, make performance objectives clear but then trust them to collaborate with the rest of the team with a leadership culture where people have the confidence and freedom to be themselves in order to let their talents shine in an inclusive, open/transparent and authentic manner.



Professor Andrew Burke

Chair Of Business Studies At Trinity College Dublin



Professor Na Fu

Chair of Responsible Leadership at Trinity College Dublin

THE KEY HIGHLIGHTS



CONTRACTOR PAY AND SATISFACTION TRENDS IN 2026

In 2026 earnings remain stable compared with 2025, and as before command a pay premium over equivalent employment; albeit losing some ground this year. Contractor earnings in 2026 remained resilient in nominal terms compared with 2025. However, they did not keep up with inflation and so declined in real terms. The average daily rate increased slightly from €552 (2025) to €556 (2026), while the median rate held at €500. Average annual earnings also improved marginally from €117,978 in 2025 to €118,177 in 2026, with median earnings rising to €114,000 from €108,500 in 2025, suggesting increased earnings for a larger share of contractors. The high-skilled Independent contractors in our survey earn €34,344 more than equivalent (managers, directors and professional) employees giving rise to 41% independent contractors pay premium over employees. This has narrowed on previous years indicating the cost of income increases in the employed sector not being matched by independent contractors.

PARTICIPATION IN THE WORKFORCE

Contracting enables greater workforce participation and retention, allowing individuals to access and remain active in the workforce beyond traditional employment. While most respondents moved to contracting from employee roles, 21% entered contracting from outside traditional employment, including unemployment, career breaks, education, and caring responsibilities. This highlights the value of contracting as a re-entry mechanism and as a model that supports continuity of participation in the workforce across life stages. Without access to independent work, nearly one in five respondents indicate they would exit or partially exit the workforce through unemployment, retirement, emigration, or unpaid activity. Contracting helps retain experienced and skilled individuals in productive work who might otherwise disengage, delivering both economic and social value.

AI

Contractors' views on AI in 2026 are balanced but cautiously optimistic, with 43% seeing a positive impact and 22% a negative one, indicating that AI is viewed more as an enabler than a threat. Optimism is strongest in IT, Finance, and Engineering, where AI directly supports knowledge work and productivity, while Medical Locum and Pharma roles remain largely neutral due to regulation, risk, and the people-centred nature of the work.

Contractors recognise the need to upskill technically but also stress the importance of ethics and compliance, showing strong awareness that AI carries responsibility as well as opportunity. Commitment to AI upskilling appears weak, 63% are concerned they do not know enough about AI. There is a call for greater government support for AI training for the self-employed. In practice, current AI use is pragmatic and controlled.

The most significant concern relates to job security, with fears that AI may reduce contract opportunities, particularly at junior and entry levels, and gradually replace specialist roles. There is also strong concern about over-reliance and deskilling, with contractors warning that unquestioned trust in AI outputs may erode critical thinking, professional judgement, and human expertise. Accuracy and trust are viewed as major risks, especially in safety-critical and regulated environments. Data privacy and confidentiality limit adoption in sectors governed by strict client and GDPR requirements. Contractors express frustration with weak governance and rushed implementation, where AI is adopted as a trend rather than a carefully managed tool. Wider concerns include loss of creativity, authenticity, human connection, and the environmental cost of AI. Contractors' concerns centre on misuse, insufficient oversight, and lack of support, rather than opposition to AI itself.

FINANCIAL GOALS AND RETIREMENT FUNDING

Retirement planning is now the dominant financial goal for independent professionals, with 58% prioritising saving for retirement in 2026, up sharply from 37% in 2025.

Retirement funding plans show a largely proactive but uneven picture. Most contractors rely on a private pension, while more than a third expect the State pension to form part of their retirement income. Property also plays a role, with some planning to use rental income and others considering downsizing or equity release. Nearly one in five contractors are concerned they will not have enough for retirement, and 9% have not yet considered how they will fund it. Independent professionals are engaged in financial planning, but there are disparities in security, resilience, and confidence about the future.

THE PROJECT ECONOMY

Project-based work remains the largest (6.5 times more than gig-based work) and highest-value segment of independent work, it is associated with innovation, technology adoption, and business transformation. It delivers higher earnings and stronger satisfaction levels.

Annual earnings saw a narrowing of the gap between project-based and task or gig-based work. Project-based contractors earned an average of €122,586, down slightly from €124,823 in 2025, while gig-based contractors earned €108,046, up strongly from €94,498. The earnings premium attached to project work fell from 32% in 2025 to 13% in 2026. This change was driven primarily by rising gig earnings. Hybrid workers sat between the two models, with average earnings of €98,331.

However, confidence indicators signal a more cautious outlook. In 2025, confidence in the contracting sector stood at +28 among project-based contractors and +16 among gig-based contractors. In 2026, project-based confidence fell to +21, while gig-based confidence increased to +22, marking the first time gig confidence exceeded project confidence. Confidence in the Irish economy weakened for both groups, falling from +18 to +8 for project-based contractors and from +12 to -3 for gig-based contractors. The project economy remains strong, but 2026 sees wellbeing decreasing, earnings converging, confidence in economic outlook reducing, and uncertainty rising. Independent professionals continue to adapt, but the outlook points to a more cautious phase for the project economy in the year ahead.



WOMEN IN CONTRACTING

The most significant change in 2026 was the reversal of women's pay advantage seen in 2025. After outperforming men in 2025, women's average daily rates and annual earnings declined in 2026, while men's increased. Women's mean day rate fell from €565 to €540 (-4.4%), while men's increased from €548 to €563 (+2.7%). In 2025 women earned approximately €17 /day more than men, a gender pay gap of 3.1% in favour of women, in 2026 this has reversed, where women now earn on average €23 less than men /day.

As a result, the gender pay gap widened to 7.6%, reversing progress made in 2025 where the reported gap was just 4% and exceeding the reported Irish labour market gap of 7%. The widening gap reflects not just lower female earnings, but stronger earnings momentum among men in their 30s and 40s.

Despite weaker financial outcomes, contracting continues to be a deliberate choice for women. In 2026, 81% of women entered contracting voluntarily, and their intention to remain contracting held steady at 76%. Reported satisfaction levels remain high. Women continue to value flexibility, work-life balance, and quality of life. However, satisfaction levels with rate of pay fell and wellbeing indicators also weakened. Women remain highly motivated and committed to contracting, but 2026 shows greater financial pressure and emotional strain, particularly at mid-career stages.

LEADERSHIP IN CONTRACTING

Contractors report very positive experiences of leadership. Just over three quarters (76%) of contractor think that their leaders were effective in achieving the organisation's performance objectives. Similar proportions felt the same way about being satisfied working with their leadership. The recipe for this effective leadership performance is revealed to some extent with that the vast majority of respondents agreeing that their leaders are: authentic, transparent, inclusive and encourage good teamwork.

The survey results also reveal that contractors indicate that their leaders typically adopt a blended rather than binary dominant leadership style. A total of 75% of respondents agree that their leadership uses a collaborative leadership approach with only 8% disagreeing. However, for most respondents this is blended with a directive leadership style as 58% of contractors agree that their leadership manifests this style with 17% disagreeing. Strong direction but then giving contractors autonomy and an opportunity to collaborate with the leadership to deliver results seems to be the prevalent formula for effective leadership in this sector.

THE VALUE OF AGE

Older contractors continue to deliver the strongest outcomes across the contracting workforce, reinforcing the value of age and experience. Contractors aged 60+ now make up 17% of the total and command a 72% pay premium on equivalent employees. More accumulated expertise gives older professionals a knowledge advantage, while their longer track record reduces perceived risk for clients. These advantages translate directly into stronger financial outcomes, with average daily rates rising from €657 to €705 and average annual earnings reaching €143,968, the highest of any age group. Contractors aged 50 and above maintain an earnings premium of around 31% compared with those under 50, underlining the market value placed on judgement, reliability, and specialist expertise. Importantly, 8% of respondents indicated they would retire if not self-employed, highlighting the sector's critical role in enabling older professionals to work longer and continue contributing meaningfully to the economy. Beyond earnings, older contractors report the highest wellbeing and job satisfaction, with the lowest levels of loneliness and burnout.

WELLBEING

In 2026, contractor wellbeing shows a deterioration compared with the previous year. Reports of loneliness increased to 29% and burnout rose to 17%, both up from 22% and 13% respectively in 2025. This marks a reversal of the improving wellbeing trend seen in 2025, when indicators had eased slightly from 2024. The 2026 data suggest that pressures associated with independent work are intensifying, even as overall job satisfaction and flexibility remain high.

THE CONFIDENCE INDEX

The 2026 confidence index results point to a reduction in expectations rather than a loss of confidence. Across all groups, views on the performance of the Irish economy decrease significantly compared with 2025. The overall economic confidence score falls from +17 to +6, with a consistent decline by gender and across all major industries. This alignment suggests a shared expectation of slower economic conditions rather than sector-specific concern.

Medical Locum contractors remain the most positive about the economy at +9, while ICT reports the lowest confidence at +0.3, followed by Engineering at +5. Pharma and Finance both remain modestly positive at +7.

Views on the Irish economy decline across every generation in 2026. Boomers and Gen X both fall from +15 to +6, while Millennials decline from +18 to +5. Gen Z remains the most positive about economic performance at +9, although this also represents a year-on-year fall.

Confidence in the contracting sector over the next three to five years remains positive in every industry, but at lower levels than last year. The overall confidence index declines from +26 in 2025 to +21 in 2026, signalling a more cautious but still resilient outlook.

The largest year-on-year reductions appear in ICT and Engineering, with ICT falling from +31 to +20 and Engineering from +29 to +18. Medical Locum is the only sector to show an improvement, rising from +4 to +11, although it continues to record the lowest confidence overall. Both male and female contractors report lower confidence in 2026 across both the Irish economic performance and the contracting outlook. Female contractors remain slightly more positive than male contractors.

Confidence in the contracting sector remains positive across all generations. Boomers become more confident in 2026, increasing from +22 to +24, reflecting continued belief in demand for experience-led skills. Gen X and Millennials report lower confidence than in 2025, suggesting increased caution in mid-career cohorts. Gen Z stands out, with confidence rising sharply from +23 to +30, indicating strong belief in long-term contracting opportunities despite wider economic uncertainty.

Recruiters continue to report positive expectations for the contracting market, but with reduced momentum. Their confidence in the number of contract roles over the next 12 months declines from +37 in 2025 to +31 in 2026. Confidence in the Irish economy also eases slightly, from +19 to +17, indicating sustained demand alongside increased caution. Client organisations present a contrasting picture. Their confidence in demand for contract roles rises sharply from +27 in 2025 to +59 in 2026, signalling a strong expectation of increased reliance on contractors. Confidence in the Irish economy among clients also strengthens to +43, exceeding both recruiter expectations and last year's levels.

The 2026 findings show confidence remains intact but more restrained among contractors and recruiters, while client organisations signal strong and growing demand for contract talent.

CONTRACTOR DEMAND

In 2026, contractor demand remains stable, 26% of organisations expect contractor numbers to increase by more than 10% in the next 12 months, however 60% anticipate levels remaining close to current numbers. Demand continues to be driven primarily by the need for organisational agility, reflecting the growing reliance on flexible workforce models. Access to scarce skills remains a key driver, reinforcing persistent capability gaps across key sectors. Cost saving and headcount controls are also influential, suggesting contractors are being used to sustain output under permanent hiring constraints. Candidate choice is playing a larger role than in 2025, pointing to stronger preference for independent work.

FUTURE SKILLS

Client companies identify that future value lies in blended skillsets. Technical and digital capability must be matched with experience, adaptability and strong delivery and communication skills to meet evolving organisational needs.

1. Advanced digital expertise dominates, with strong demand for applied AI, data, cloud and cybersecurity skills that solve real business problems and support safe, effective decision-making.
2. Project, product and change management remain essential, reflecting the need to translate strategy into delivery in complex and regulated environments.
3. Senior technical and engineering expertise, with a clear preference for experienced specialists who bring depth, credibility and compliance awareness.
4. Human capability with leadership, communication and stakeholder skills seen as essential for working effectively across teams and influencing outcomes.
5. Regulatory, quality and operational excellence skills, reflecting tighter governance, ESG and sustainability requirements.

CONTRACTOR PROFILE



QUOTE FROM RESPONDENT

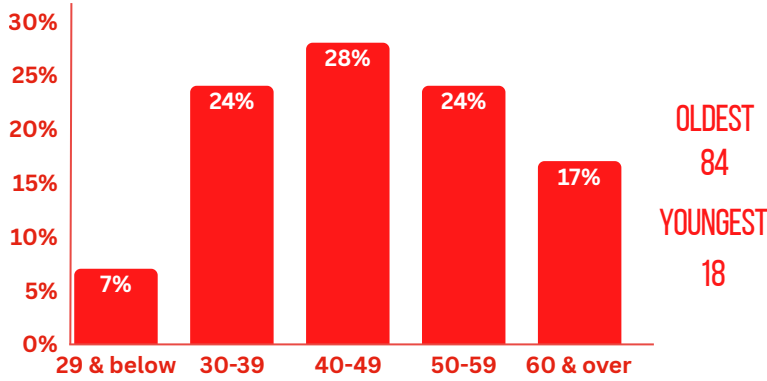
“What I find most fulfilling about working independently is the ability to take ownership of my tasks and manage my time effectively. It allows me to focus deeply, be proactive in solving problems, and deliver results without unnecessary interruptions. I enjoy the sense of responsibility, autonomy, and personal accountability that independent work provides, as it helps me stay motivated and continuously improve my skills.”

Ireland’s Project Economy describes highly skilled independent professionals who actively choose self-employment and operate across a wide range of industries. In 2026, concentration remains strongest in Pharma, ICT, Finance, Engineering, and Medical Locum sectors, reflecting continued demand for specialist expertise in these sectors. Most respondents are engaged in project-based work, with 78% working on fixed term projects for agreed daily rates, 12% work in gig/task roles, and 10% are working in hybrid models that blend both approaches.

Independent professionals remain highly educated with 96% of respondents having attained third level qualifications of level 6 or higher on the National Framework of Qualifications. Ninety-one per cent of respondents are in managerial, professional, high-tech and associated professional occupations, or categorized as Standard Occupational Classifications (SOCs) 1-3 highlighting the knowledge-intensive nature of the work. The average age of professionals in the Project Economy is 47 years, which reflects the time required to build experience, knowledge and a valuable specialist skills.

AGE

The 2026 age profile points to a stable yet ageing contractor base, with minimal changes across some of the key age segments. As usual 10% or less of respondents are 29 years old and younger, with roughly three quarters of independent contractors being aged 30 to 59 with a significant cohort (17% in 2026) being 60 years old and over. This pattern continues to reflect a sector where experience matters.



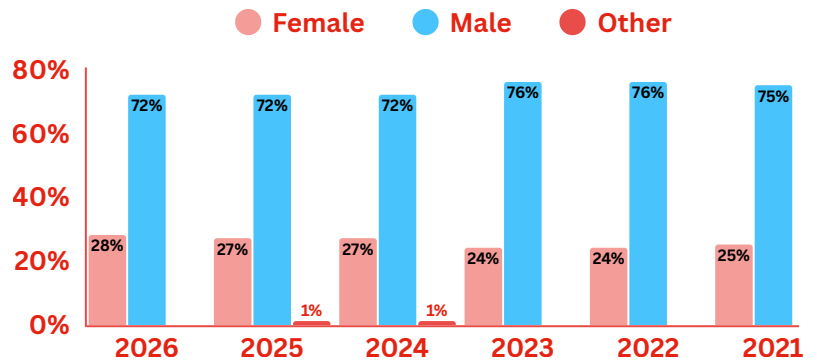
The mean age increased from 45 years in 2025 to 47 years in 2026. The median moved from 45 years to 47 years. The oldest respondent was 84 years, while the youngest was 18 years old. The average age of 47 years reflects the fact that it takes time to build up the knowledge and experience required to work independently however the wide range of ages of respondents shows that contracting can be a viable career choice regardless of age.

AVERAGE AGE



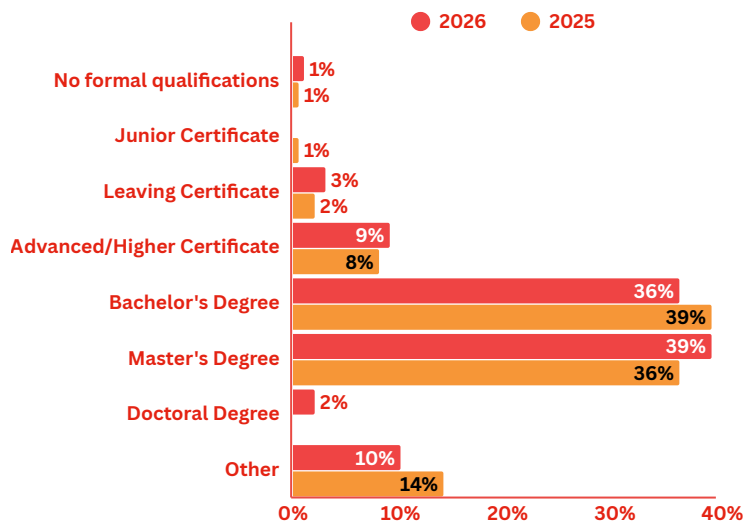
GENDER SPLIT

The 2026 data confirms that men continue to dominate the independent working space. In 2026, 72% of respondents are male, unchanged from 2025 but roughly three percentage points down from the earlier in the 2020s. Overall, the data highlights a persistent gender imbalance in professional contracting. While there are signs of incremental rebalancing, the pace of change remains slow, and mirrors skewed gender patterns in the entrepreneurial economy more generally.



EDUCATION

Independent professionals remain highly educated with 96% of respondents having attained third level qualifications of level 6 or higher on the National Framework of Qualifications. In 2026, 77% hold a bachelor's degree or higher, up from 75% in 2025. Master's degree holders increased from 36% to 39% perhaps indicating a reversion to the mean levels experienced earlier in the 2020s. Over time, the pattern is clear: degree-level education dominates.

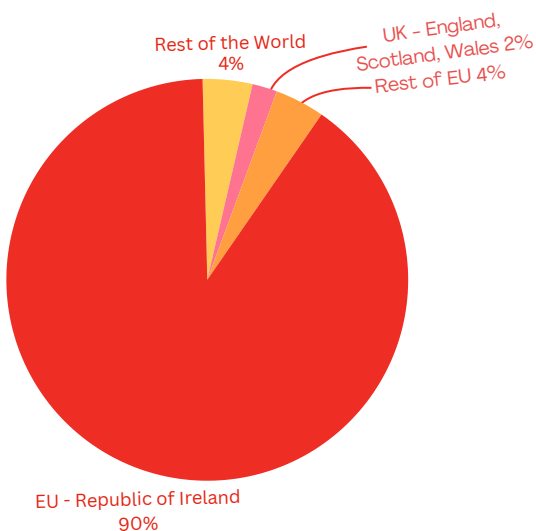
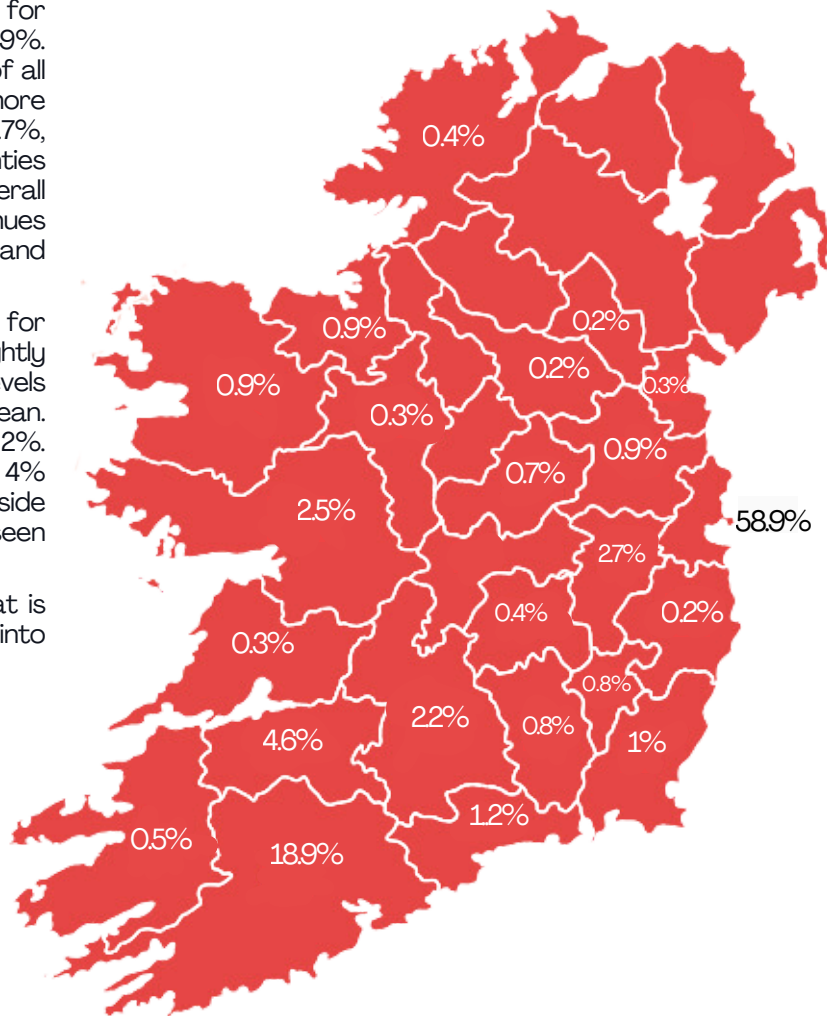


WHERE THE WORK HAPPENS

Work in 2026 remains highly concentrated in urban centres. Dublin continues to dominate, accounting for 58.9% of where work happens. Cork follows at 18.9%. Together, Dublin and Cork represent almost 78% of all work activity. Outside these hubs, activity is more dispersed. Limerick accounts for 4.6%, Kildare 2.7%, Galway 2.5%, and Tipperary 2.2%. All other counties individually account for 1.2% or less. The overall pattern is clear, high value contracting work continues to cluster where large employers, infrastructure, and international firms are based.

2026 shows 90% of respondents are working for clients in the Republic of Ireland. This is down slightly from 93% in 2025, but above 2024 and 2023 levels perhaps indicating reversion to a long-term mean. Work linked to the UK remains stable at 2%. Engagement with the rest of the EU increased to 4% in 2026, up from 2% in 2025. Work for clients outside the EU also increased to 4%, reversing the decline seen last year.

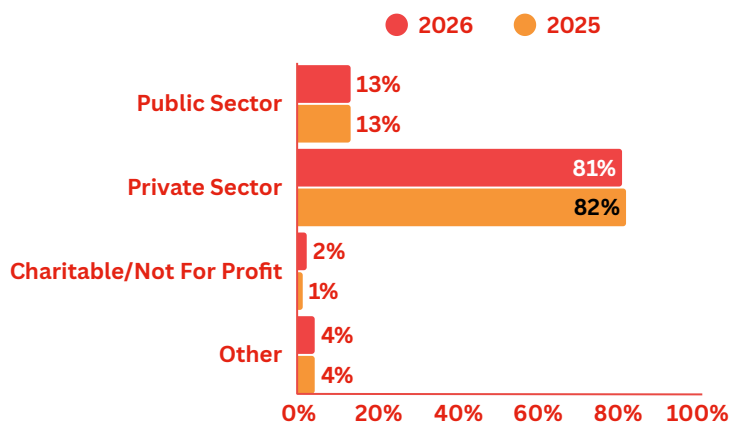
The 2026 data confirm, a contracting market that is firmly rooted in Ireland, with modest re-expansion into international markets after a dip in 2025.



CLIENT INDUSTRY

Contractors in 2026 continue to operate across diverse industries, with the largest concentrations in Pharma, ICT, Engineering and Finance. Most (81%) work in the private and public sector participation remains steady at 13%, while charitable and not-for-profit work continues to account for a small share of activity.

In 2026, 76% of contractors work with one client at a time, up from 73% in 2025 and 70% in 2024. Meanwhile, 24% maintain multiple clients, showing that portfolio working remains relevant for a significant minority.



ONE CLIENT/CONTRACT AT A TIME

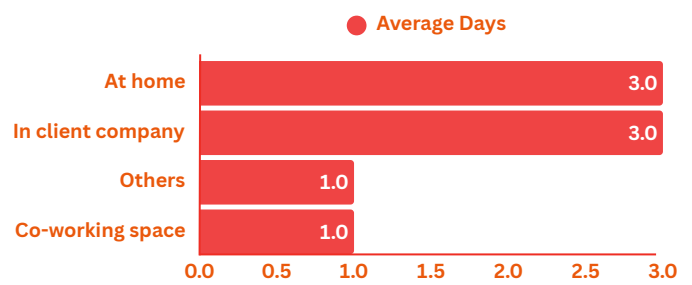


MULTIPLE CLIENTS AT A TIME



MY OFFICE IS

In 2026, respondents show a well-established hybrid working pattern. Home remains the primary location, averaging 3 days per week. Time spent on client sites averages 3 days. Other locations, including shared offices, account for less than 2 days per week combined, indicating a preference for a simple two-location model: home and client site. Overall, the data points to a stable hybrid approach rather than a full return to office or fully remote model.



PRODUCTIVITY

Contractors were asked an open question about how does the location of work affect your productivity?

Contractors reported that productivity is strongly influenced by work location, but no single setting suits all tasks. Working from home consistently supports deep, focused work such as writing, analysis, coding and planning. Fewer interruptions, a quieter environment and the removal of commuting fatigue allows people to concentrate for longer and produce more. However, home working can blur boundaries, often leading to longer hours and potential burnout if not managed carefully. Some also struggle with distractions or lack of structure at home.

The office, by contrast, is less effective for individual focus but far better for collaboration. Face-to-face interaction enables faster decisions, informal problem solving, stronger relationships and more efficient communication. Open-plan layouts and constant interruptions can reduce time for concentrated work, but the office remains valuable for teamwork, onboarding, mentoring and complex discussions.

Most respondents favour a hybrid approach (this is supported by the quantitative data) where location matches the task. Focused work is done at home. Collaborative work is done in the office. Certain roles, such as healthcare, engineering and site-based work, depend on physical presence and see less benefit from flexibility. A small group report that location makes little difference due to experience and self-discipline. Overall, flexibility aligned to task type is seen as the most productive model.

CONTRACTING AS A CAREER

In 2026, contracting remains largely a deliberate and positive choice, with 79% of respondents choosing to contract voluntarily, with just 21% doing so involuntarily. Over half 53% actively secure their own work, similar to previous years. A further 24% rely mainly on third parties, and 15% use a blended approach, combining personal effort with agency support.

VOLUNTARY

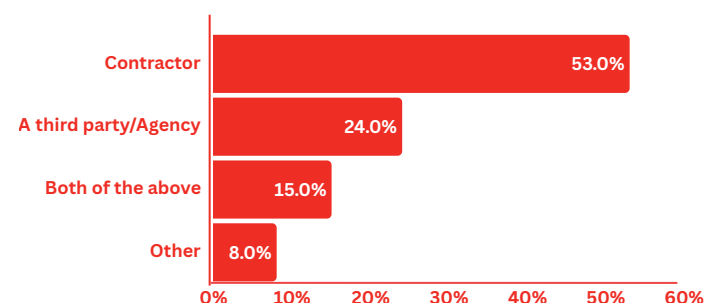


INVOLUNTARY



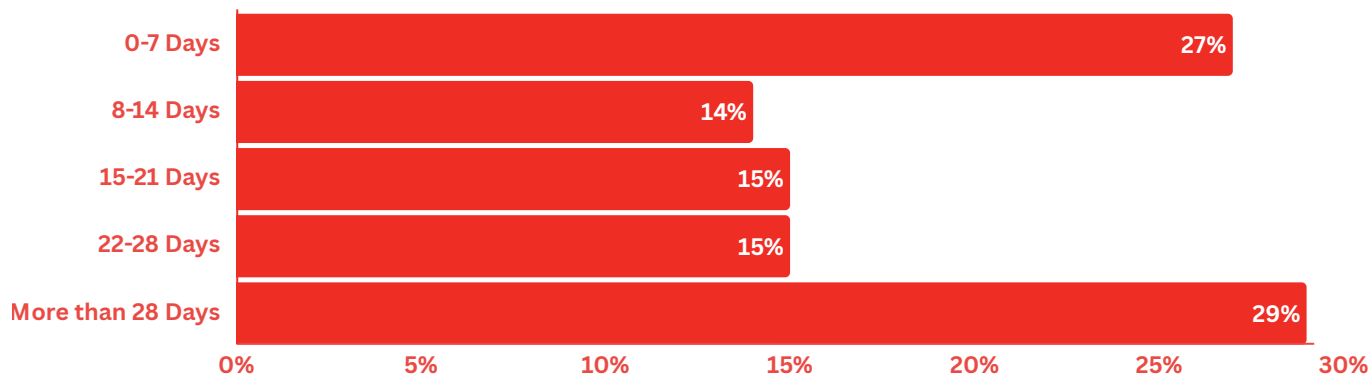
In finding contracts, 42% said they used their personal network and referrals to find new work. 40% rely solely on third parties (such as contract recruiters). 31% found new work via social media, e.g. LinkedIn and Indeed. 14% reported using online job platforms such as Upwork etc.

WHO TAKES THE LEAD IN FINDING NEW WORK



DAYS TO FIND NEW CONTRACT

Respondents are exerting more effort to find work with average days looking for work increasing from 12 to 14 since last year. The share of respondents securing work within 0–7 days fell, from 29% to 27%. Short search periods of up to two weeks also declined. At the same time, the proportion taking more than 28 days to find a new contract increased from 26% to 29%. The middle ranges remain stable, indicating that most contractors still secure work within one month. While the number of days searching for work has ratcheted up since 2023 it is still less than the time exerted earlier in the 2020s.



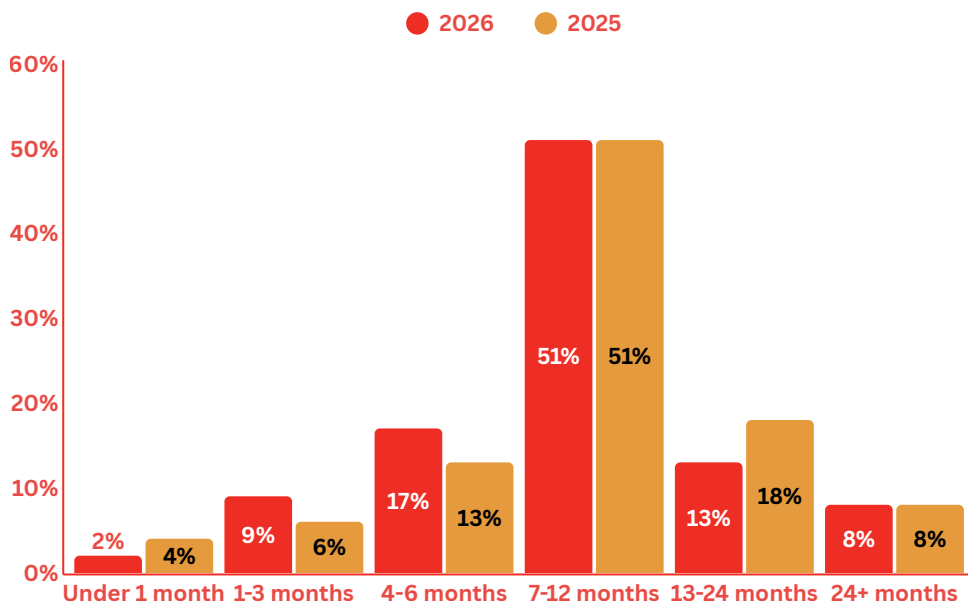
AVERAGE DAYS TO FIND WORK



CONTRACT LENGTH

Contract lengths in 2026 remain similar to 2025. Half of all respondents report contracts lasting 7–12 months, unchanged year on year and reinforcing this as common practice. Shorter contracts under three months remain limited, although 1–3 month contracts increased from 6% in 2025 to 9% in 2026.

Longer contracts show some softening in 2026. Contracts of 13–24 months declined from 18% to 13%, while those of 24 months or more remained stable at 8%. Looking across 2021 to 2026, the overall pattern is consistent. The average contract length remains close to 14 months, pointing to a contracting market that favours medium length assignments.



AVERAGE CONTRACT LENGTHS



KEY MOTIVATORS

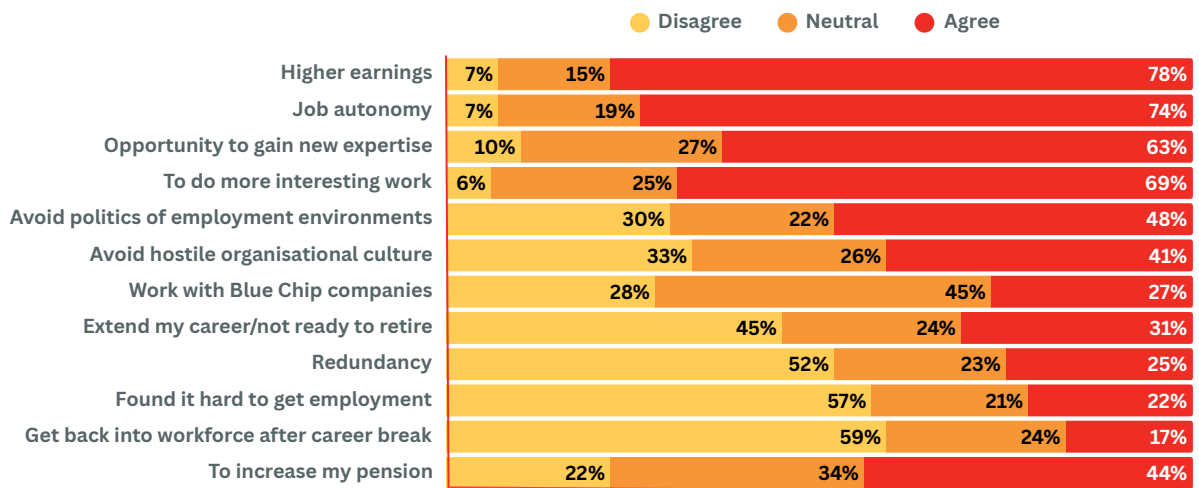
The survey results for 2026 indicate that higher income and job autonomy remain the primary motivations for contracting. Both are identified by more than three quarters of respondents as factors that caused them to become contractors. Job autonomy increased in importance with a rise from 69% to 74% since last year.

Opportunities for growth and engagement also remain significant motivations. In both 2025 and 2026, 63% of respondents agreed that contracting offers the chance to gain new expertise, and 'doing more interesting work' also remained high, increasing from 65% in 2025 to 69% in 2026. This highlights that contractors are not only motivated by pay and flexibility, but also by learning, variety, and fulfilling project work.

Other motivating factors also increased in 2026 compared to 2025, the 'ability to increase pension' up from 42% to 44%, 'avoiding workplace politics' up from 43% to 48%, and 'avoiding a hostile culture' up from 37% to 41%. These increases point to an improving positive work environment. Interest in 'extending careers or delaying retirement' increased from 26% to 31%, confirming contracting's appeal as a later career option.

Turning to push factors, motivation due to redundancy increased from 23% to 25%, difficulty finding employment increased from 16% to 22% and as a route to get back into the workplace after a career break grew from 11% to 17%. These increases indicate a hardening of labour market conditions where contracting is proving a re entry route to get back into work. Motivational factors in 2026 are dominated by pull factors - choice, opportunity, and long term career control - more than push factors based on necessity and needs.

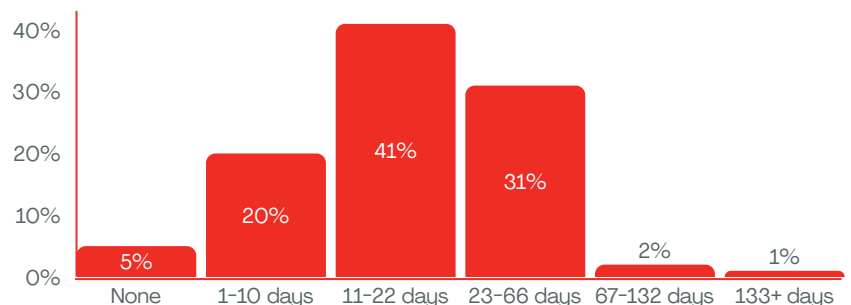
WHAT MOTIVATES CONTRACTORS



HOLIDAYS

In 2026, respondents report taking an average of 22 holiday days, up one day from 2025 and in line with 2024. Most contractors continue to take relatively limited time off. 66% report taking fewer than 23 days in the year, broadly unchanged from 2025. While 34% take longer breaks of 23 days or more, extended holidays remain uncommon. The data highlights a cautious approach to time off, perhaps a reflection of the opportunity cost of time off and associated financial risks of independent work.

PERCENTAGE OF HOLIDAY DAYS TAKEN



AVERAGE HOLIDAY DAYS

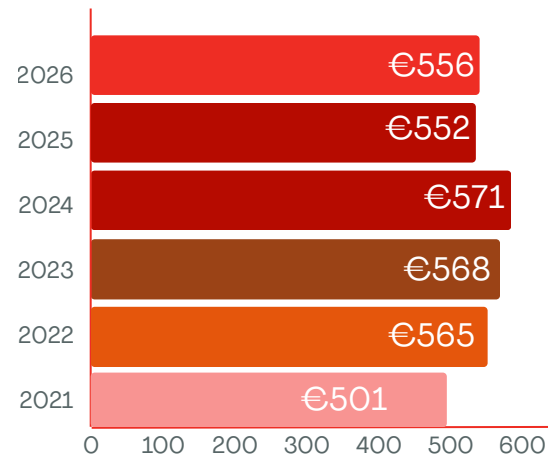


DAILY RATES

On average contractors earn more than permanent employees in comparable roles. In part this is because contractors seek to be compensated for the higher risk and the absence of benefits such as sick pay, paid holidays, and social welfare support when compared to employees. But contractors' earnings premium over employees indicates that they must also be bringing some additional productivity benefits which some of our research on blended workforces has shown are linked to greater organisational innovation, flexibility, agility, and risk management.

The mean contracting daily rate in 2026 increased slightly from €552 in 2025 to €556 in 2026. The median remained unchanged at €500, consistent across recent years, which suggests core market rates have declined in real terms as they have not kept up with inflation.

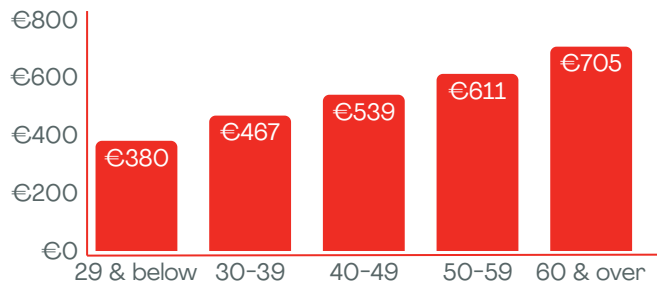
AVERAGE DAILY RATES



AVERAGE DAILY RATE BY AGE GROUP

The average day rate increased at the tails of the age distribution and declined for all other age groups. The average daily rate for contractors aged 29 and below increased from €359 to €380 while contractors aged 60 experienced their daily rates increasing significantly from €656 to €705. Daily rates fell from €480 to €467 for the 30–39 group while those for the 40–49 dropped from €587 to €539. Contractors aged 50–59 experienced a more modest decrease from €618 to €611 but remain well above the mean. The upward monotonic relationship between age and day rates highlights the high value organisations place on experienced and proven contractors.

AVERAGE DAILY RATE BY AGE



AVERAGE ANNUAL EARNINGS



ANNUAL EARNINGS

Annual earnings in 2026 remain stable. Mean earnings increased slightly from €117,978 in 2025 to €118,177 in 2026. The median increased from €108,500 in 2025 to €114,000 in 2026. The survey for our 2026 report occurs during the final quarter of 2025 when the CSO estimates that the weekly earnings of employees has risen to €1,012 equivalent to €52,624 per annum. Therefore, high skilled independent contractors are earning two and quarter times average employee earnings.

INDUSTRY DAILY RATES

Industry daily rates for 2026 show declines rather than increases, across many of the major contracting sectors, however there are three important contracting sectors showing year-on-year increases. Pharma recorded a 9.1% increase, rising from €486 to €530, making it the strongest performer among the core sectors. Medical devices also increased by 8.8%, from €397 to €432, bringing it back in line with the daily rates seen in previous years. Life sciences showed a small positive rise, increasing by 3.0%, from €513 to €529.

In contrast, several other large contracting sectors saw decreases in daily rates. Information Technology fell by 9.7%, from €631 to €570, while telecommunications declined by 7.1%, from €635 to €590. Daily rates in the Finance sector experienced the largest adjustment, decreasing by 12.1%, from €695 to €611, though it still remains one of the higher-paid contracting sectors. Engineering and technical activities decreased by 7.7%, from €519 to €479, continuing a gradual downward trend since 2022. Outside these priority sectors, a small number of industries showed significant adjustments, including large increases in the daily rate for the marketing and design sector, €757 this year compared to €452 in 2025 and administrative and support services, increasing from €769 compared to €425 in 2025. Professional services and education showed significant declines in daily rates this year, down from €873 in 2025 to €613 and down from €698 in 2025 to €589 respectively.

AVERAGE DAILY RATE BY INDUSTRY

| | 2026 | 2025 | 2024 | 2023 | 2022 | 2021 |
|---|------|------|------|------|--------|------|
| ACCOMMODATION AND FOOD SERVICE | €500 | - | €375 | €275 | - | - |
| ADMINISTRATIVE AND SUPPORT SERVICE | €769 | €425 | €605 | €825 | €339 | €450 |
| AGRICULTURE, FORESTRY AND FISHING | €645 | €463 | €485 | €453 | €527 | €447 |
| CONSTRUCTION | €650 | €583 | €598 | €676 | €732 | €459 |
| CREATIVE, ART, ENTERTAINMENT AND RECREATION | €414 | €387 | €524 | €413 | €522 | €525 |
| EDUCATION | €589 | €698 | €616 | €402 | €1,186 | €515 |
| ELECTRICITY, GAS, STEAM AND AIR CONDITIONING SUPPLY | €629 | €542 | €619 | €473 | €557 | €564 |
| ENGINEERING AND TECHNICAL ACTIVITIES | €479 | €519 | €545 | €543 | €565 | €460 |
| FINANCE | €611 | €695 | €661 | €633 | €598 | €589 |
| INFORMATION TECHNOLOGY | €570 | €631 | €532 | €540 | €568 | €529 |
| INSURANCE | €586 | €632 | €767 | €620 | €591 | €544 |
| LIFE SCIENCES | €513 | €529 | €581 | €561 | €582 | €488 |
| MANUFACTURING | €593 | €585 | €599 | €516 | €638 | €510 |
| MARKETING AND DESIGN | €757 | €452 | €630 | €353 | €617 | €366 |
| MEDICAL DEVICE | €432 | €397 | €498 | €493 | €451 | €429 |
| MEDICAL LOCUM | €496 | €474 | €522 | €670 | €597 | €475 |
| MINING AND QUARRYING | €425 | €200 | €0 | €0 | €560 | €0 |
| OTHER HUMAN HEALTH AND SOCIAL WORK ACTIVITIES | €544 | €527 | €612 | €898 | €434 | €459 |
| OTHER SCIENTIFIC ACTIVITIES | €388 | €500 | €389 | €690 | €288 | €0 |
| OTHER SERVICE ACTIVITIES | €500 | €632 | €560 | €413 | €728 | €699 |
| PHARMA | €530 | €486 | €496 | €527 | €509 | €452 |
| PROFESSIONAL ACTIVITIES (E.G., LEGAL, MANAGEMENT CONSULTANCY, ADVERTISING, ETC.) | €612 | €873 | €725 | €767 | €702 | €733 |
| PUBLIC ADMINISTRATION AND DEFENCE (COMPULSORY SOCIAL SECURITY) | €657 | €611 | €654 | €586 | €762 | €615 |
| REAL ESTATE | €100 | €0 | €300 | €400 | €738 | €0 |
| TELECOMMUNICATIONS | €590 | €635 | €549 | €581 | €576 | €0 |
| TRANSPORT AND STORAGE | €719 | €596 | €606 | €625 | €552 | €559 |
| WATER SUPPLY, SEWERAGE, WASTE MANAGEMENT AND REMEDIATION | €526 | €454 | €715 | €590 | €531 | €527 |
| WHOLESALE AND RETAIL TRADE (INCLUDING SALES OF CLOTHING, FOOTWEAR AND TEXTILES, REPAIR OF MOTOR VEHICLES AND MOTORCYCLES) | €611 | €625 | €456 | €650 | €580 | €480 |

HAPPINESS: JOB & LIFE SATISFACTION

Contractors remain positive in 2026! 84% of respondents expressed satisfaction with their current life in general. Contractors also continue to report high levels of satisfaction with their work, 87% in 2026 up from 84% in 2025. In the survey, contractors were asked about their level of satisfaction with other key elements of their job and working life.

In 2026, flexibility of hours remains the strongest driver of satisfaction at 85%. Satisfaction with job location was down marginally from 84% to 83%. Satisfaction with pay also fell this year from 84% in 2025 to 81% in 2026. Satisfaction levels with remote working options increased to 76%, compared with 74% last year, while work-life balance also shows an increase this year 77% up from 75% in 2025.

CAREER SATISFACTION

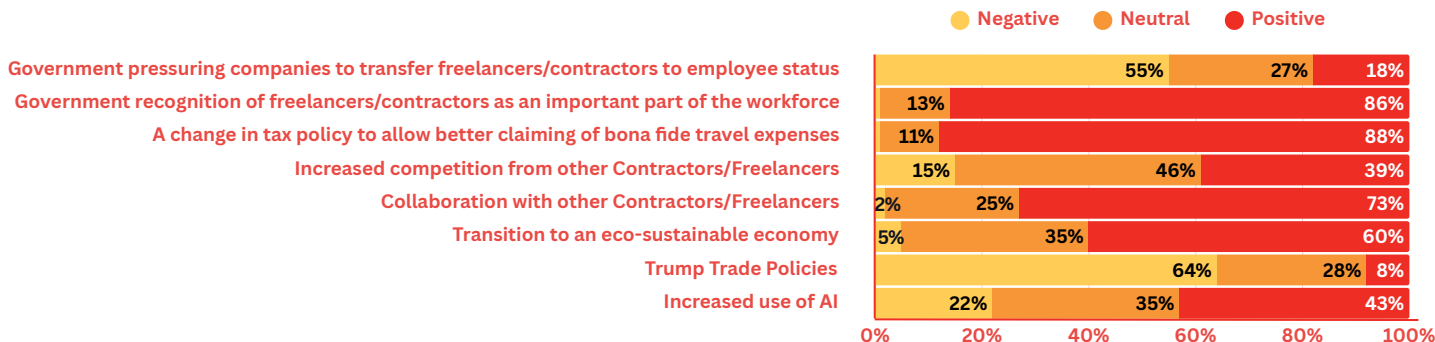


Satisfaction with career success fell from 89% in 2025 to 84% in 2026. Satisfaction with progress towards overall career goals also declined, from 84% to 79%, however both remain high in absolute terms. In 2026, contractor wellbeing indicators dropped, 29% of contractors report loneliness and 17% report burnout. Both are higher than in 2025, perhaps signalling increased pressure even as overall work satisfaction and flexibility remain strong.

FACTORS INFLUENCING CONTRACT WORK

Contractors continue to express clear views on how economic, political and technological factors shape their work. They were asked to indicate whether these factors impacts were positive, negative, or neutral. In 2026 the majority (86%) of respondents believe that greater recognition of contractors as an important part of the workforce would positively affect their contract work, along with 88% who believe that changes to tax policy relating to the claiming of travel expenses would also have a positive impact.

Collaboration with other contractors remains a strong positive factor. Contractors continue to see collaboration as beneficial. Competition itself is still not viewed as a threat. In 2026, 85% see competition as neutral or positive, with a shift from neutral to positive compared with 2025. Concerns about pressure to transfer contractors to employee status persist. With over half 55% of respondents still seeing this as harmful to contract work. Views on the transition to an eco-sustainable economy became more positive with 51% agreeing in 2025 increasing to 60% agreeing it would have positive impact in 2026.

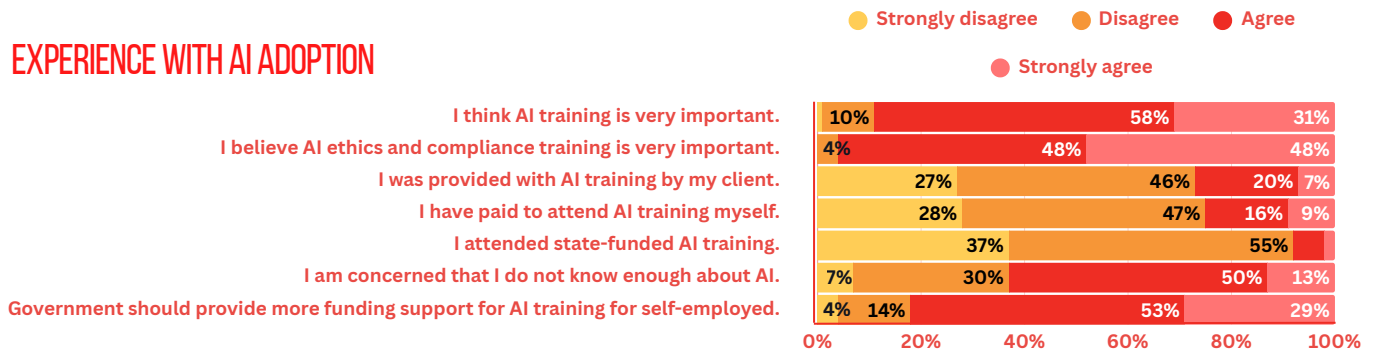


TRUMP POLICIES AND CONTRACT WORK

Concern about the impact of the Trump presidency intensified sharply in 2026. Negative sentiment increased from 48% in 2025, when respondents were reacting to a forthcoming presidency, to 64% in 2026, when trade policies are clearer. Positive views fell from 12% to 8%. This shift suggests contractors are moving from uncertainty to concern about the economic impact of the Trump Administration's policies.

| YEAR | TRUMP FACTOR | NEGATIVE | NEUTRAL | POSITIVE |
|------|-------------------------------------|----------|---------|----------|
| 2025 | The forthcoming Trump US Presidency | 48% | 40% | 12% |
| 2026 | Trump Trade Policies | 64% | 28% | 8% |

EXPERIENCE WITH AI ADOPTION



CHALLENGES FACED AS AI ADOPTION INCREASES

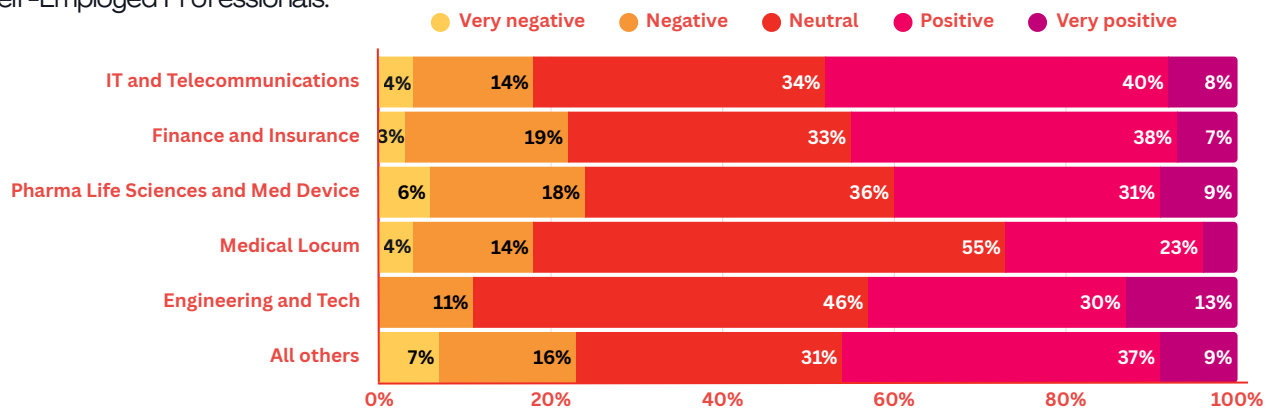
Contractors were asked an open question about the concerns or challenges they face as AI adoption increases. Contractors' responses show caution and realism rather than resistance to AI.

- Job security.** Many fear reduced contract opportunities, fewer junior roles, and the long-term replacement of specialist expertise. As one respondent put it, "Biggest concern is job losses", while another stated, "My role will ultimately be replaced by AI." There is a clear sense that AI could shrink the pipeline of work particularly at entry-level and weaken the value placed on human experience.
- Fear of over-reliance and deskilling.** There is a worry that people are beginning to trust AI outputs without applying their own judgement. Comments such as "People generate content that looks good but hasn't been thought through" and "It's making me think less, which will make me stupid in the long run" highlight anxiety that critical thinking is being eroded across sectors including education, engineering, healthcare and leadership.
- Trust and accuracy.** Many contractors have seen incorrect or fabricated outputs accepted as fact. "Hallucinations that go undetected" and "False information being published" were common warnings. This is viewed as particularly dangerous in regulated, safety-critical and compliance-heavy environments where mistakes carry serious consequences.
- Skills gaps and access to training.** Contractors want to use AI well but feel they lack time, exposure and quality education. "Risk of becoming outdated" and "Being left behind because of lack of exposure" were frequently expressed.
- Data privacy and confidentiality:** These are major barriers to adoption in client-sensitive sectors. "I cannot use a public LLM" and "Data security is a huge issue" reflect the practical constraints many face, particularly in healthcare, finance and GDPR-regulated environments.
- Weak governance and rushed adoption.** Many believe leaders overestimate AI's capabilities and underestimate the need for human oversight. "We are in serious need of directives" and "People want AI because it's a buzzword" show frustration with poor strategy and leadership misunderstanding AI's limits. Contractors see AI as a tool, not a solution.
- Concerns around creativity, authenticity, environmental cost and loss of human connection.** "Soulless output passed off as work" captures the worry that originality and human value may be diluted.

Contractors are not anti-AI. They are concerned about misuse, poor oversight and lack of support. They want training, governance, realism and responsible adoption so that AI enhances work rather than undermines it.

IMPACT OF INCREASED USE OF AI

"In your opinion what impact if any, would the increased use of AI have on the performance of the work of Self-Employed Professionals."



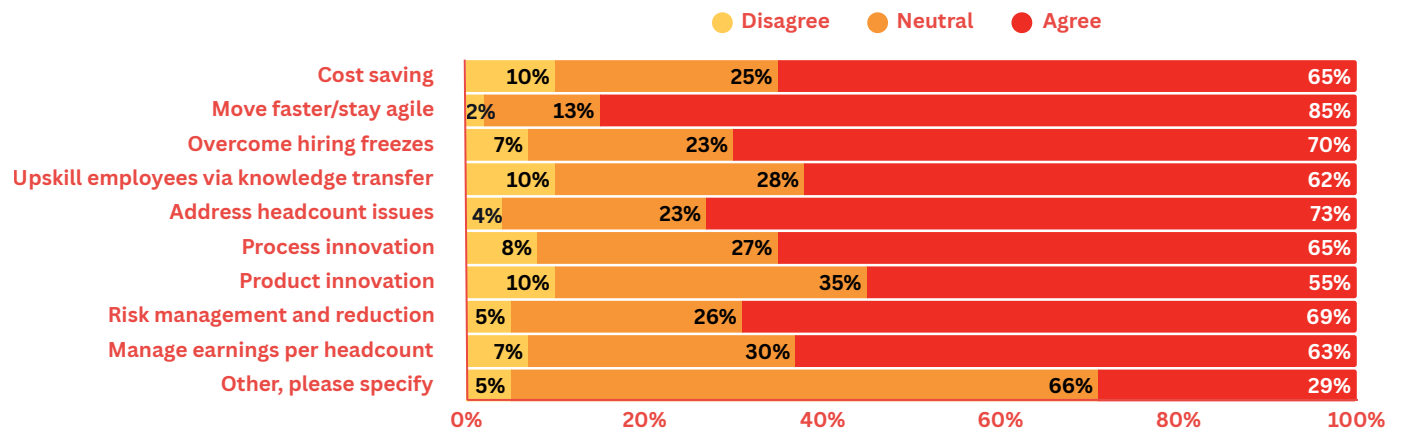
BENEFITS OF HIRING CONTRACTORS FOR CLIENT COMPANIES

Contractors identify channels through which they add value to client organisations. They feel the most frequent means is by helping firms move faster and stay agile (85%), followed by the ability to address headcount issues (73%) and overcome hiring freezes (70%). A significant majority also believe they contribute to risk management and reduction (69%), cost saving (65%), and process innovation (65%). Contractors also recognise their ability to assist with knowledge transfer, with 62% say they help to upskill employees and 55% stating that they assist with product innovation.

When asked about 'other' benefits clients get from engaging contractors, contractors describe their value to client organisations in four distinct categories, flexibility, specialist expertise, speed, and capability uplift.

- **Flexible resourcing.** Helping firms “handle peaks and troughs in capacity need” with the “flexibility to reduce headcount quickly when required.” This is viewed as a way to respond to changing workloads without the delay or expense of permanent hiring.
- **Access to scarce skills.** Contractors believe they enable clients to “avail of expertise they don’t have,” “fill skills gaps their team would take time to learn,” and bring “rare expertise” with the ability to “hit the ground running.” Many frame this as senior, ready-made capability that would be costly or slow to build internally.
- **Speed and delivery focused.** They say they are brought in to “meet project timelines,” ensure work “remains on track re deadlines,” and provide “speed of delivery” through a clear, outcome-driven role.
- **Capability uplift.** They describe offering “strong mentoring for younger teams,” an “independent view,” improved governance and risk management, and in some sectors, simply enabling services to operate: “they can’t open without a pharmacist.”

Contractors see themselves as a flexible solution to workforce challenges, enabling agility, stability, and operational improvement within client companies.

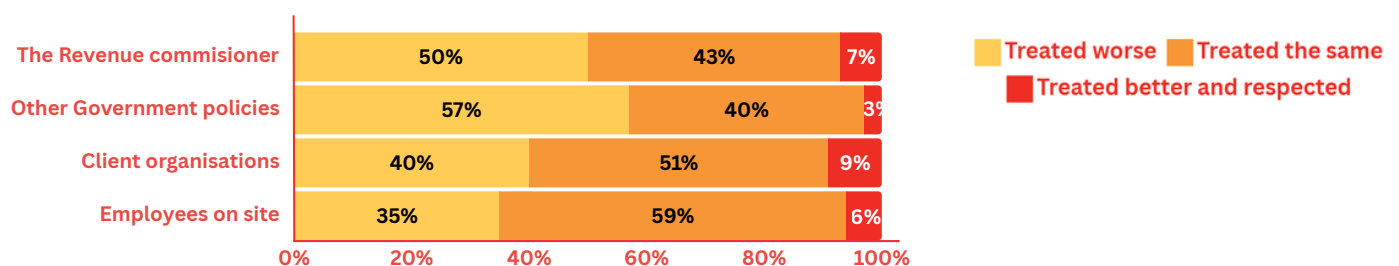


HOW ARE CONTRACTORS TREATED COMPARED TO EMPLOYEES

Contractors were asked how they believe self-employed people are treated compared to employees by Revenue, Government, client organisations, and employees on-site. 2026 results show a clear divide with respondents most negative when it comes to how they are treated by the State, their views are more positive, when it comes to their treatment by client organisations and employees.

In 2026, half of contractors 50%, believe the self-employed are treated worse than employees by the Revenue Commissioners an increase from 43% in 2025. Only 7% believe treatment by Revenue is better, down from 8% last year. Views on how Government policy treats contractors have also worsened. In 2026, 57% feel the self-employed are treated worse under Government policies, up from 51% in 2025. Perceptions of equal treatment declined, suggesting growing frustrations. In contrast, treatment by client organisations remain positive with 60% of contractors believe organisations treat the self-employed the same or better than employees, down slightly from 65% in 2025. This year 65% of contractors feel they are treated the same or better by employees on site, compared with 70% in 2025. The gap between the treatment contractors experience from Revenue and Government and the treatment they receive from organisations and colleagues continues to widen.

HOW DO YOU BELIEVE SELF-EMPLOYED PEOPLE ARE TREATED BY...



FINANCIAL GOALS IN THE NEXT 5 YEARS

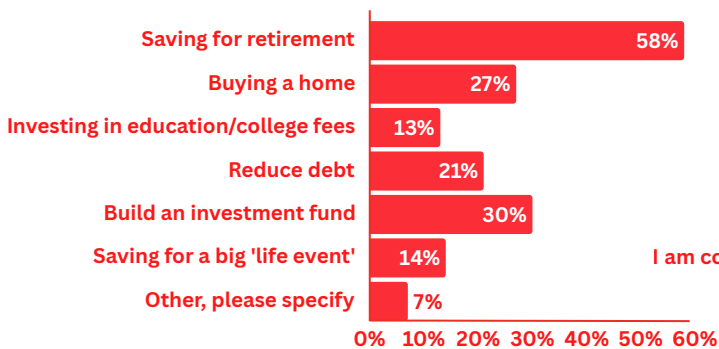
The 2026 dataset shows a clear re-prioritisation of financial goals compared with 2025. Retirement planning dominates. Saving for retirement increased significantly from 37% in 2025 to 58% in 2026. The focus is now on long-term planning and reflects an ageing contractor base and higher concern about future income security. Asset accumulation also accelerated. Building an investment fund increased from 14% to 30%. Reducing debt increased from 12% to 21%. Other goals mentioned;

1. **Retirement planning and pension protection** - Many contractors are either approaching retirement or actively managing the transition. There is a focus on timing, control, and avoiding premature pension depletion. Contracting is being used as a bridge into retirement rather than a long-term growth strategy.
2. **Family and children-related financial responsibilities** - Family support is a dominant driver of financial goals. Education costs and intergenerational support weigh heavily. Financial planning is about responsibility rather than personal wealth.
3. **Housing, mortgages, and home improvement** - The focus is less on first-time buying and more on managing existing housing commitments. Rising costs are reshaping expectations.
4. **Covering living costs and financial survival** - For this group, financial planning is short-term and reactive. Rising living costs are crowding out longer-term goals. This highlights uneven financial resilience within the contractor population.
5. **Quality of life, enjoyment, and time autonomy** - Many contractors prioritise lifestyle over accumulation. Once core needs are met, motivation changes. Financial success is defined by autonomy and enjoyment rather than growth.
6. **Business building and self-employment growth** - A small number of responses highlight entrepreneurial goals. Income stability matters, but growth and independence remain key.
7. **Maintaining activity, purpose, and flexibility** - For many, financial goals are secondary to purpose. Contracting supports mental engagement and flexibility rather than income maximisation.

The contractor population is largely proactive and self-directed in retirement planning, but others are experiencing uncertainty and concern about long-term financial security. The 2026 data shows that retirement funding among contractors is primarily achieved by private pension provision, with 73% stating they have a private pension. The State pension will fund retirement for 34% of respondents. 12% expect to fund their retirement with income from a property portfolio and 7% are planning to downsize or release equity from their home.

However, nearly one in five contractors, 18%, report concern that they will not have enough for retirement. A further 9% have not yet thought about how they will fund retirement, suggesting delayed engagement among a minority.

CONTRACTORS' FINANCIAL GOALS IN NEXT 5 YEAR



HOW DO YOU INTEND TO FUND YOUR RETIREMENT?



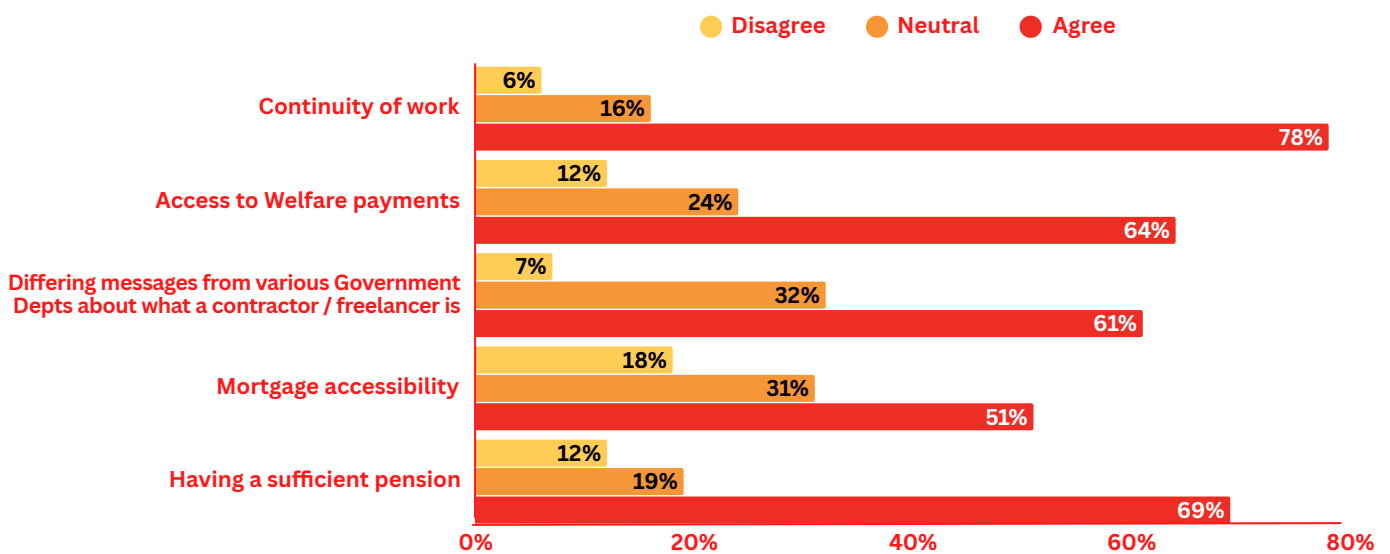
CONTRACTORS GREATEST CONCERNS ABOUT INDEPENDENT WORKING

Contractors were asked about the concerns listed in the table below, they were also asked an open question to expand on the concerns and challenges they have.

In 2026, contractors describe a model of work that can be financially and professionally rewarding, but fragile at its transition points. While many accept uncertainty as part of independent work, the data shows that the moments between contracts are where concern is most acute.

- **Continuity of work** dominates the narrative, not because demand is absent, but because income can stop abruptly with limited notice, creating pressure around cash flow, tax planning, and personal wellbeing.
- **These transition periods** expose the risk and uncertainty of contracting work, which contractors feel is unfair as they have limited access to supports despite paying comparable levels of tax.
- **Longer-term planning** is also disrupted at these points, particularly around pensions and mortgage access, where irregular income or short contract durations make it difficult to contribute consistently or meet lending criteria. Underpinning these challenges is uncertainty caused by inconsistent government definitions and guidance, which becomes most problematic precisely when contractors need clarity most.

The open responses suggest that contractors are not primarily concerned about the work itself, but about what happens when work pauses, ends, or changes, and the lack of structural support at those transition moments.



LOOKING TO THE FUTURE

82% of independent contractors expect the availability of contract work over the next 12 months to stay the same or increase, 96% expect their daily rate to increase or stay the same and 92% of respondents expect their working days for the next 12 months to remain the same or increase. Contractors are expressing caution in their expectation about the performance of the Irish economy in 2026. The percentage of contractors who expect the Irish economy to perform better than it performed in 2025 is 37% while 26% expect the performance of the Irish economy to be worse than in 2025. The longer-term outlook for the contracting sector is more positive with 83% of respondents expecting it to remain the same or increase in the next 3 to 5 years.



CONFIDENCE INDEX

Throughout this report, you will see references to the ‘Confidence Index’. This index measures participants’ confidence across several areas based on their responses to multiple key questions. These questions were similar in nature but presented in different ways to ensure accuracy. The average of these responses is used to calculate the Confidence Index. A score of zero reflects a completely neutral outlook. A positive score (up to a maximum of 100) indicates a positive outlook, while a negative score signals unfavourable or pessimistic views about the economic or business future.

CONFIDENCE IN THE IRISH ECONOMY

When asked about the performance of the Irish economy in 2026, 37% (46% in 2025) of contractors believed it would increase compared to 2025, 37% (37% in 2025) believed that it would stay the same and 26% (17% in 2025) believed it would decrease. The confidence index was +6 down significantly on confidence index of +17 reported in 2025.

The Irish Economy Confidence Index

| | |
|-------------|-----------|
| 2026 | +6 |
| 2025 | +17 |
| 2024 | +16 |
| 2023 | +10 |
| 2022 | +38 |
| 2021 | +7 |

THE PERFORMANCE OF THE CONTRACTING SECTOR

When asked about the performance of the contracting sector in Ireland over the next 3 to 5 years, just over half 51% of contractors believed the it would increase, 32% believed it would stay the same and 17% thought that it would decrease. The confidence index was +21 down slightly on the 2025 index reported of +26.

The Contracting Sector Confidence Index

| | |
|-------------|------------|
| 2026 | +21 |
| 2025 | +26 |
| 2024 | +30 |
| 2023 | +31 |
| 2022 | +37 |
| 2021 | +30 |

PROJECT ECONOMY



QUOTE FROM RESPONDENT

“Project work with defined period provides valuable varied experience. Great opportunity to find next interesting projects. All the while I’m advancing my career.”

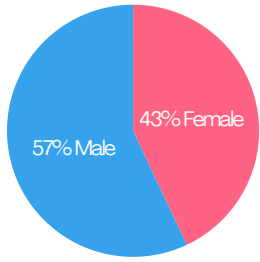
Independent contractors typically operate in either gig or in project-based work. Gig work is short-term and task-focused, with limited integration into the wider organisation. By contrast, project-based work is longer-term and collaborative, with contractors working alongside employees to deliver wider outcomes such as transformation, innovation, and business change. Negative perceptions of gig work are largely linked to low-skilled and low-paid roles and do not reflect the high-skilled project economy contractors represented in this survey. In 2026, the project economy continues to account for the higher-value segment of independent contract work and remains closely associated with innovation, technology adoption, and organisational change across enterprises and SMEs.

Ninety-one per cent of high skilled contractors are in managerial, professional, high-tech and associated professional occupations, or categorized as Standard Occupational Classifications (SOCs) 1-3. Most respondents are engaged in project-based work, with 78% working on projects, 12% in gig roles, and 10% in hybrid arrangements. Compared with 2025, project-based participation increased slightly, while gig-only engagement declined.

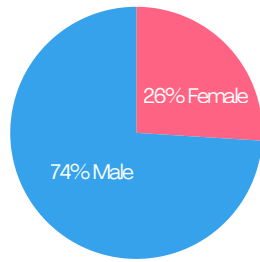
Gig workers saw a bounce back in earnings from 2025, while project workers experienced a slight decline in overall earnings. Gig-based contractors reported an average daily rate of €520, up from €442, while project-based contractors reported an average daily rate of €574, down from €587 in 2025. Annual earnings followed a similar pattern. Gig-based contractors earned an average of €108,046 in 2026, up from €94,498, while project-based contractors earned €122,586, slightly below the 2025 level of €124,823. As a result, the earnings gap between gig and project workers reduced significantly in 2026, down from 32% in 2025 to 13% in 2026. This was driven by stronger gig income rather than weaker project earnings. Hybrid contractors earned €98,331 on average, sitting between the two models.

Project-based work remains the highest-value model of independent work, delivering stronger earnings, stability, and satisfaction. However, project workers confidence in the contracting sector fell below that of gig-based workers for the first time. Confidence index scores for the Irish economy weakened for both groups, and well-being declined across both groups.

TASK/GIG-BASED CONTRACTOR



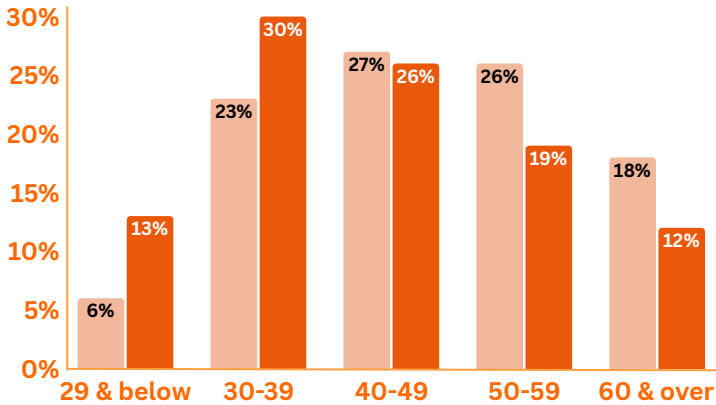
PROJECT-BASED CONTRACTOR



GENDER

Gender patterns remain distinct between the work types. In 2026, project-based contracting remains predominantly male, with 74% male and 26% female participation. Gig-based work shows greater female participation, with 43% female and 57% male. Compared with 2025, female participation increased significantly in gig roles, while the project-based gender split remained largely unchanged. This suggests gig work continues to be a more accessible entry point and/or the less continuous work commitment associated with gig work may be more appealing for women who prioritise work-life flexibility (often necessitated by child-minding and carer responsibilities).

AGE



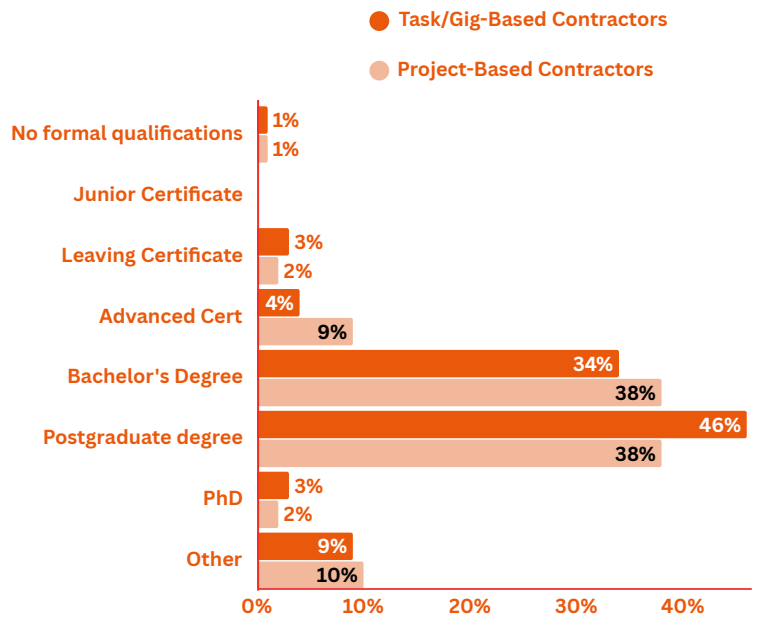
AGE

The age profiles also differ by work type. Project-based contractors continue to be older on average. In 2026, 44% of project-based contractors were aged 50 or over, compared with 31% of gig-based contractors. After declining in 2025 for both groups, the average age increased slightly for both groups in 2026, increasing to 47 for project-based workers and to 43 for gig workers.

EDUCATION

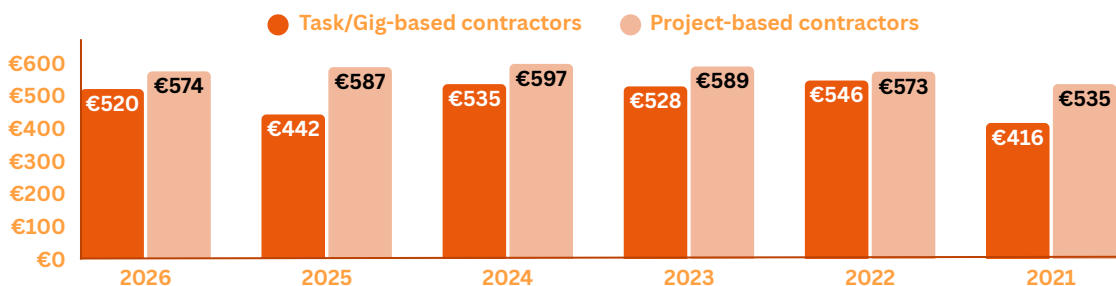
Education levels remain very high across both groups. In 2026, 87% of gig-based contractors and 78% of project-based contractors held a bachelor's degree or higher. Postgraduate qualifications were common, particularly among gig contractors, where 46% reported postgraduate education compared with 38% of project-based contractors.

Doctoral qualifications were present in both groups and slightly more prevalent among gig workers in 2026. There was a significant reduction in the number of gig based workers holding other professional qualifications, down from 22% in 2025 to just 9% in 2026, this coupled with the increase in the numbers holding both bachelor's and postgraduate degrees indicates a move to more formal education routes. Overall, education levels increased marginally compared with 2025, especially within gig-based work.



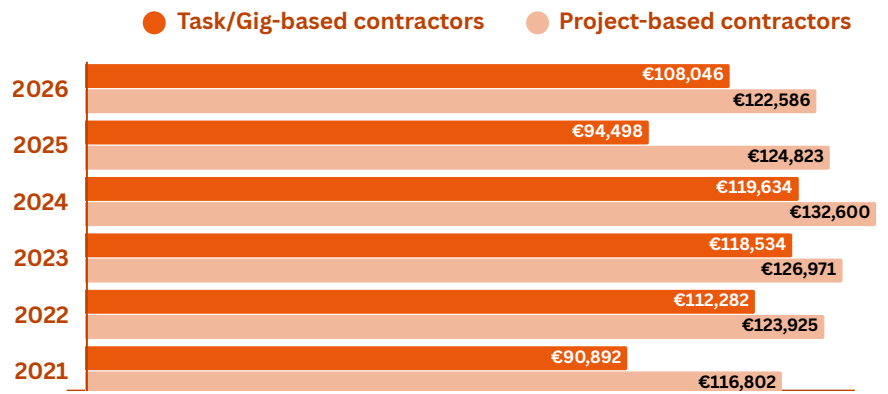
WHAT PROFESSIONAL CONTRACTORS ARE EARNING

DAILY RATES



ANNUAL EARNINGS

In terms of annual earnings, independent professionals working in the Project - based roles earned an average of €122,586 per annum, 13% more than similarly skilled professionals working on an ad-hoc task or gig basis whose average earnings came in at €108,046 per annum in 2026. The difference in average annual earnings has dropped significantly since 2025 when the reported differential was 32%. Project workers average annual earnings were €30,325 higher than gig workers in 2025, this has now reduced to €14,540 higher.



JOB SATISFACTION

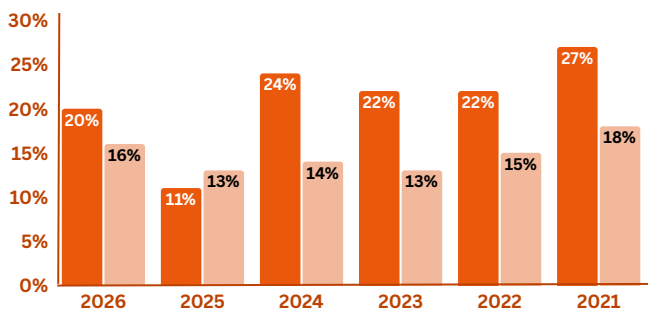
Job satisfaction remains higher among project-based contractors across all measures, although the gap narrowed slightly in 2026. Satisfaction with career success stood at 87% for project-based contractors compared with 76% for gig workers. Pay satisfaction was reported by 83% of project contractors and 72% of gig contractors. Remote working satisfaction remained high among project workers at 81% but was much lower among gig workers at 53%, despite improving slightly compared with 2025. Overall satisfaction levels decreased across both groups in 2026, however project-based workers satisfaction levels still remained consistently strong.



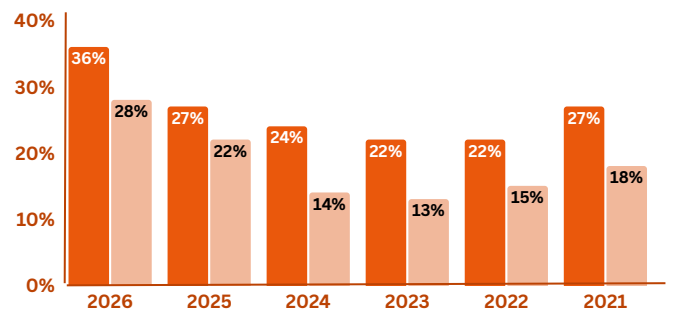
WELLBEING

Well-being indicators showed decline in 2026. Loneliness increased for both groups, rising to 36% among gig-based contractors and to 28% among project-based contractors. Loneliness levels are now at the highest for both groups since the research began in 2021. Burnout also increased, reaching 20% among gig workers and 16% among project workers. This marks a clear reversal of the improvement seen in 2025 and points to growing pressure across independent work.

EXPERIENCE BURNOUT



EXPERIENCE LONELINESS



CONFIDENCE INDEX

CONTRACTING SECTOR

Confidence in the contracting sector over the next three to five years declined to +21 for project-based contractors, down from +28, while task/ gig-based confidence increased slightly to +22 from +16. This is the first time gig-based confidence index score for the contracting sector has exceeded project-based confidence and perhaps reflects improved gig earnings.

LOOKING TO THE FUTURE - IRISH ECONOMY 2026

Project-based work typically focuses on innovation and business transformation, key drivers of economic growth. As a result, independent professional contractors involved in this high-skilled, project-driven work gain early insight into business expansion and emerging trends. This makes their perspective on the economy particularly valuable.

In 2026, confidence in the Irish economy declined sharply for both groups, falling to +8 among project-based contractors. Task and gig-based contractors are more pessimistic in their outlook for the performance of the Irish economy this year with a negative score of -3, down from +12 in 2025.

THE CONTRACTING SECTOR CONFIDENCE INDEX

| | 2026 | 2025 | 2024 | 2023 | 2022 | 2021 |
|----------------------------|------|------|------|------|------|------|
| Project-Based Contractors | +21 | +28 | +33 | +34 | +34 | +33 |
| Task/Gig-Based Contractors | +22 | +16 | +17 | +22 | +38 | +20 |

THE IRISH ECONOMY CONFIDENCE INDEX

| | 2026 | 2025 | 2024 | 2023 | 2022 | 2021 |
|----------------------------|------|------|------|------|------|------|
| Project-Based Contractors | +8 | +18 | +19 | +13 | +31 | +12 |
| Task/Gig-Based Contractors | -3 | +12 | +7 | -9 | +40 | -14 |

WOMEN IN CONTRACTING



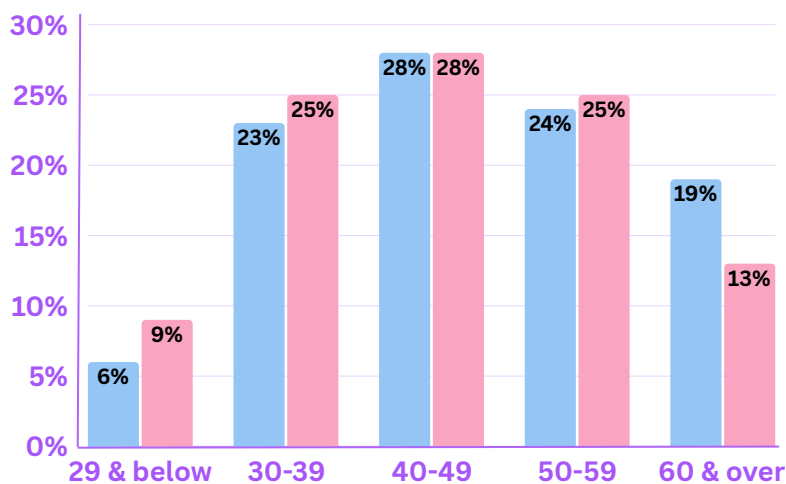
QUOTE FROM RESPONDENT

“Independent working gives you confidence in your own abilities. If you're good clients will hear about your work and be happy to work with you... Freedom to choose when and with whom you work...”

Professional contracting in Ireland remains male dominated, with women accounting for 28% and men for 72% of contractors. While women maintain a meaningful presence in contracting, progress is uneven and increasingly concentrated in specific industries rather than broad-based across the sector. Gender representation remains highly uneven across industries. Women are overrepresented in at 60% in the Medical Locum sector and 34% in the Finance sector. In contrast, women remain underrepresented in most other large contracting sectors, including Technology (25%), Pharma, Med Device and Life Science (21%), and Engineering and Technical Activities (19%). The percentage of female contractors over 50 increased from 32% in 2025 to 38% in 2026, while those under 50 fell from 68% to 62%. Female contractors 29 years and under also decreased from 12% in 2025 to 9% in 2026.

In terms of education, female contractors holding a Master's degree increased to 45% compared with men where 37% hold a Master's. Women with other professional qualifications fell to 8%. Women's average annual earnings fell while men's earnings increased, doubling the gender pay gap from 3.6% to 7.6%. Women's average annual earnings are down 2.7% to €111,624, while men's average earnings increased by 1.4% to €120,755. The earnings gap widened with men earning on average €9,131 per annum more than women. Women's financial position weakened in 2026, with earnings pressure concentrated in mid-career stages that typically represent peak earning years for contractors. Earnings for women aged 30–39 dropped 10.2% to €96,279 and dropped 4.9% for those aged 40–49 to €113,484. Earnings remained largely unchanged for the 50–59 group and increased by 3.7% for those aged 60 and over.

Women's motivations and satisfaction levels remain positive. 81% entered contracting voluntarily, and 76% expressed their intention to remain contracting. Women's satisfaction levels with contracting as a career remained high but pay satisfaction declined down 9% year on year to 78%. 79% expressed satisfaction with career progress, 84% were satisfied with the success achieved in their careers. Satisfaction with flexibility (87%), work-life balance (81%), and life in general (85%) all remained strong. However, women are reporting a decrease in wellbeing factors with 29% experiencing loneliness and 15% experiencing burnout. Women's confidence in the contracting sector in the next 3–5 years fell from +27 to +23, while confidence in the performance of the Irish economy dropped from +13 to +7. Although women remained slightly more confident than men, the decrease in the confidence index score reflects increased uncertainty particularly in Ireland's economic performance in 2026. Women in contracting remain highly qualified and strongly motivated, but experienced weaker pay outcomes, reduced confidence, and higher loneliness. The year marks a move away from the financial advantages women held last year, despite a profile that would typically support stronger earnings.



AGE BY GENDER

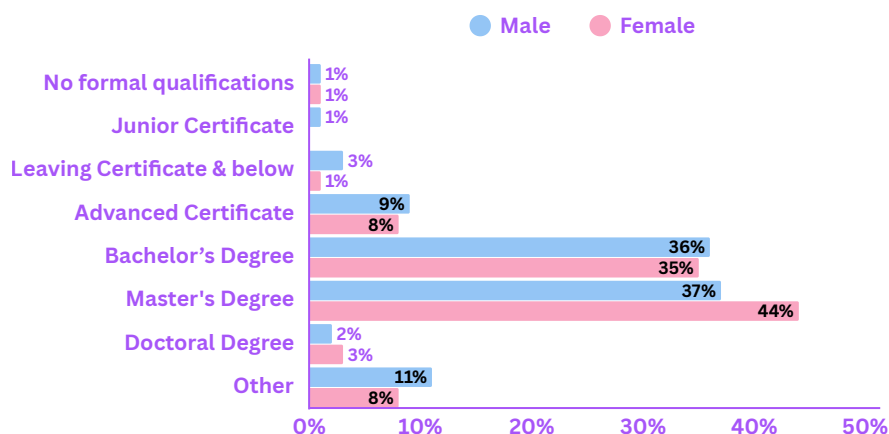
The age profile of female contractors changed in 2026. The average age of female contractors has increased from 44 years to 45 years. The share of women aged 60+ increased from 9% in 2025 to 13% in 2026 while those 29 & below fell from 12% in 2025 to 9% in 2026. Women aged 40–49 declined from 32% to 28%, while the percentage of those aged between 50–59 years increased from 23% to 25% in 2026. The percentage of older male contractors also increased, with those aged 60+ increasing from 16% in 2025 to 19% in 2026.

EDUCATION

Both male and female contractors are highly educated with 98% of females and 96% of males having a third level education or equivalent professional qualification. Women hold a higher percentage of master’s degree qualification compared to men 45% females, 37% of males. Women with other professional qualifications fell from 14% in 2025 to 8% in 2026 suggesting a shift towards formal academic credentials. Women contractors in 2026 were more academically qualified than in 2025 and more qualified than their men counterparts.

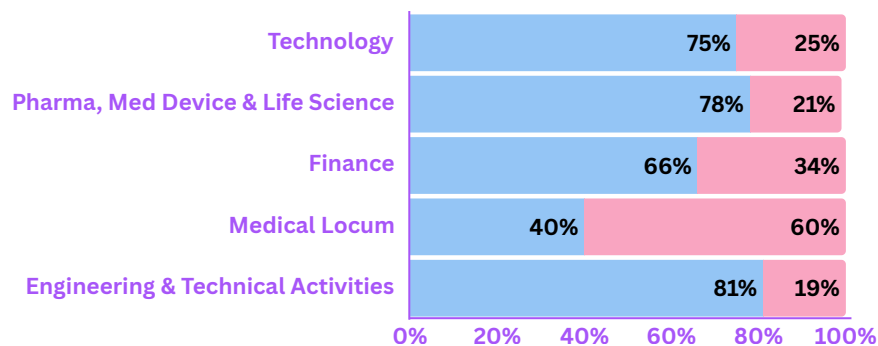
AVERAGE AGE BY YEAR

| Year | Male (YRS) | Female (YRS) |
|------|------------|--------------|
| 2026 | 47 YRS | 45 YRS |
| 2025 | 45 YRS | 44 YRS |
| 2024 | 49 YRS | 46 YRS |



INDUSTRY SPLIT BY GENDER

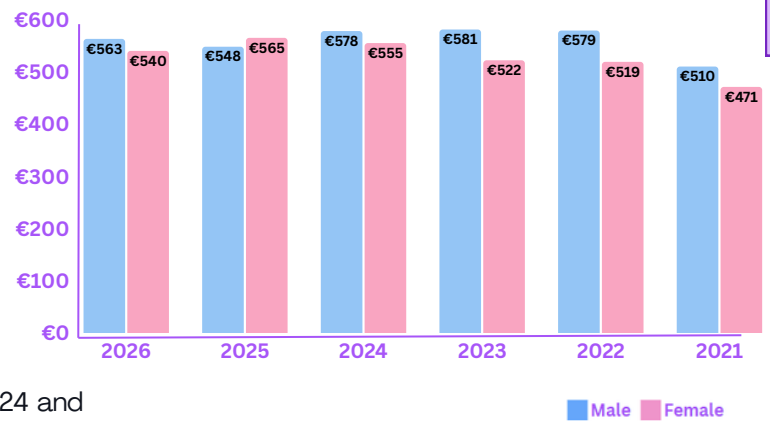
Women’s sector participation changed in 2026 compared to 2025, there was higher participation in Finance and Medical Locum sectors while there was a reduction in Technology, Pharma and Engineering. Women in Finance increased from 23% in 2025 to 34% in 2026 and in Medical Locum from 44% in 2025 to 60% in 2026. Meanwhile, women’s share fell in Pharma/Med Device/Life Science from 26% to 21% in 2026, Engineering from 22% to 19% and dropped slightly in Technology from 26% to 25%.



CONTRACTOR EARNINGS

Women’s average daily rate position weakened in 2026 despite stronger qualifications and an older profile. Women’s mean day rate fell from €565 to €540 (-4.4%), while men’s increased from €548 to €563 (+2.7%). In 2025 women earned approximately €17 /day more than men, a gender pay gap of 3.1% in favour of women, in 2026 this has reversed, where women now earn on average €23 less than men /day.

AVERAGE DAILY RATE BY GENDER



ANNUAL EARNINGS

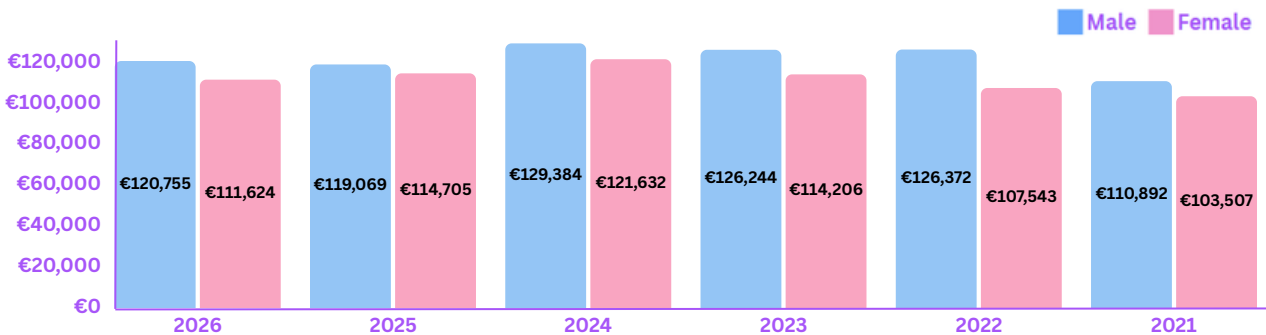
Female average annual earnings in 2026 were at €111,624 and male average annual earnings were at €120,755. This reflects a drop in average annual earnings of 2.7% for female contractors and an increase of 1.4% for male contractors since 2025 report.

In terms of average annual earnings this year’s survey findings show a reversal in the progress that had been made in the reduction of the gender pay gap in the contracting sector in 2025. The gender pay gap had reduced to 3.6% in 2025 but has increased this year to 7.6%. According to the [CSO 2024 data, Ireland’s labour market gender pay gap](#) was 6.9%. It is important to note that the gender pay gap has increased and efforts need to continue to bring about gender pay equality.

AVERAGE FEMALE ANNUAL EARNINGS **€111,624**

AVERAGE MALE ANNUAL EARNINGS **€120,755**

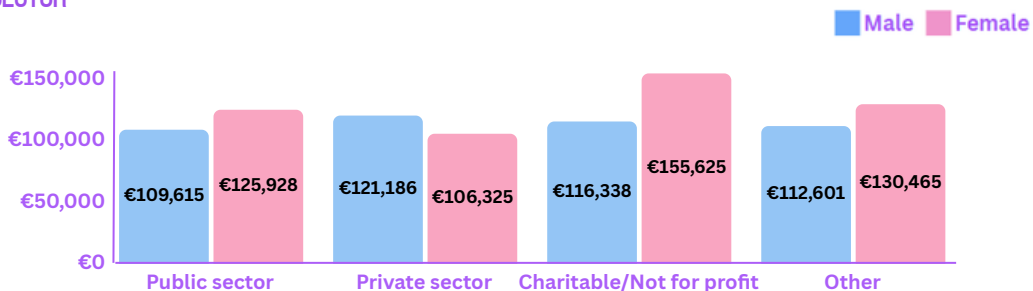
ANNUAL EARNINGS BY GENDER



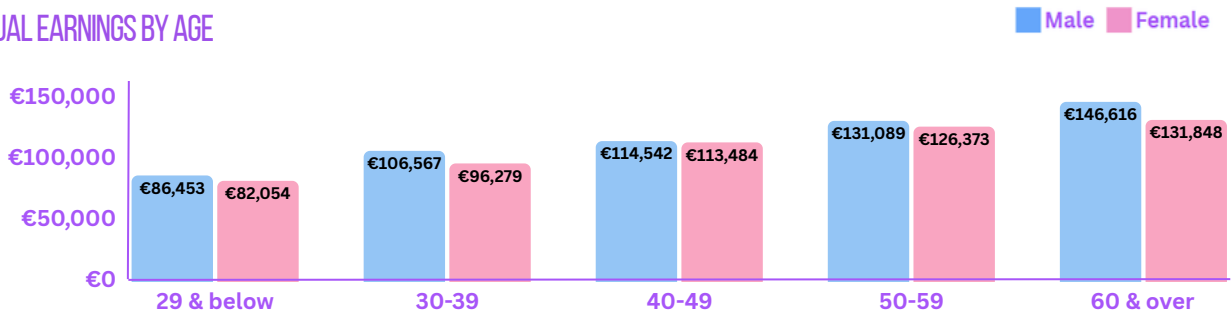
AVERAGE EARNINGS BY SECTOR

In the Private sector, women’s earnings fell from €123,486 to €106,325 and the daily rate fell from €566 to €507. In contrast, annual earnings in the Public sector increased from €109,776 to €125,928 and Charitable/Not for profit sector increased significantly from €115,200 to €155,625 with the daily rate rising €527 to €797. Male contractors experienced declines across all sectors.

AVERAGE EARNINGS BY SECTOR



ANNUAL EARNINGS BY AGE



Annual earnings changes in 2026 are most pronounced in the mid-career age groups for women, while men's earnings generally improved or held steady.

For contractors aged 29 & below, male earnings increased from €77,231 in 2025 to €86,453 in 2026 an increase of +11.9%. Female earnings increased from €79,594 to €82,054 (+3.1%).

The largest shift in annual earnings occurred in the 30–39 age category. Men's earnings increased from €101,526 to €106,567 (+5.0%), while women's earnings fell sharply from €107,156 to €96,279 (-10.2%). In the 40–49 age group, earnings declined for both genders. Men's earnings decreased from €124,511 to €114,542 (-8.0%), while women's decreased from €119,324 to €113,484 (-4.9%).

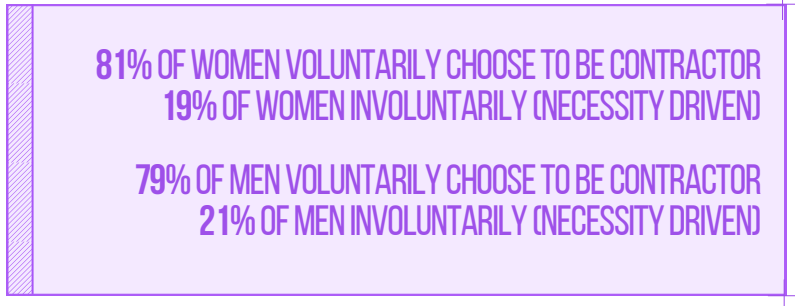
In the 50–59 category, men's earnings declined from €136,709 to €131,089 (-4.1%), while women's earnings remained stable €126,578 to €126,373, (-0.2).

For contractors aged 60 & over, both annual earnings figures increased. Men's rose from €139,758 to €146,616 (+4.9%) and women's from €127,087 to €131,848 (+3.7%).

Overall, women in the 30–39 and, to a lesser extent, 40–49 age groups lost meaningful earnings ground in the age bands that typically deliver peak contracting income. At the same time, men's earnings strengthened in the youngest and oldest categories. As a result, the gender pay gap widened from 3.7% in 2025 to 7.6% in 2026.

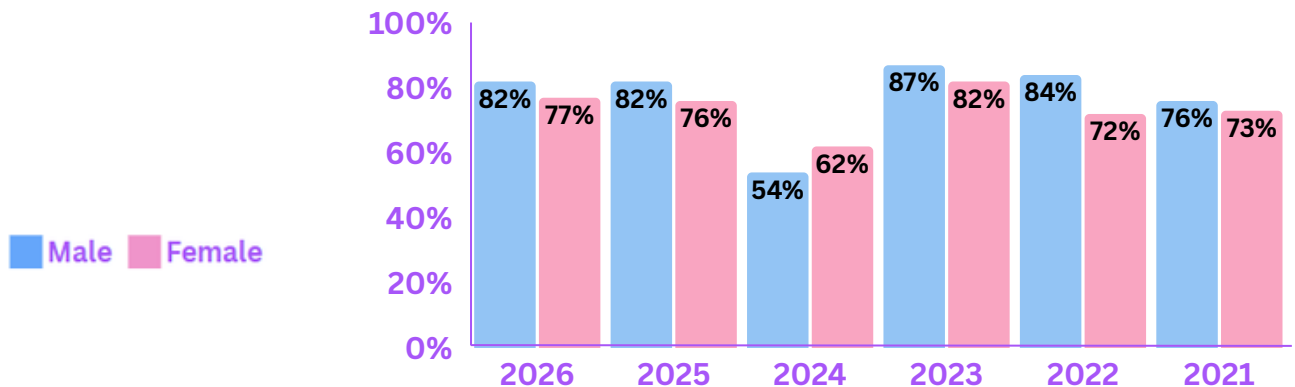
REASON TO BECOME SELF-EMPLOYED

Women's motivations to become self-employed remained consistently positive and unchanged. Women stayed at 81% voluntary and 19% involuntary entry in both years, while men improved slightly.

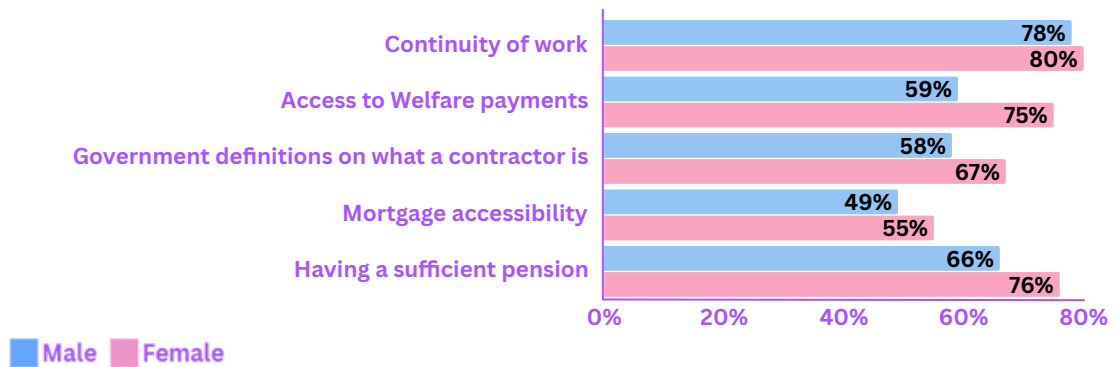


INTENTION TO STAY CONTRACTING

Women's intention to stay has increased to 77% from 76% in 2025 but is still lower than men's at 82%.



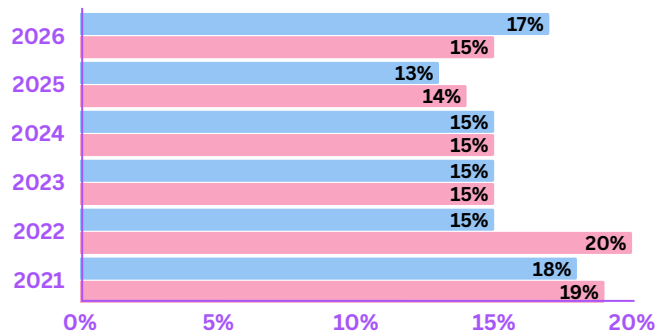
CONTRACTORS GREATEST CONCERNS ABOUT INDEPENDENT WORKING



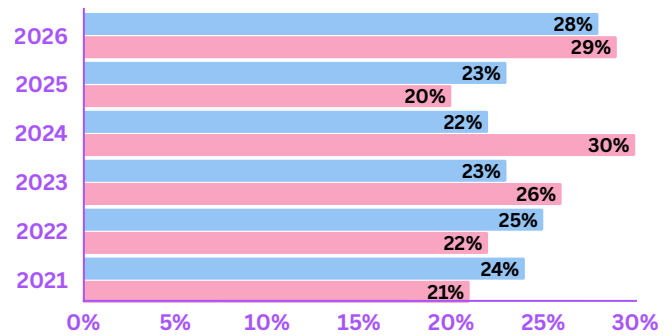
WELLBEING

Loneliness among women contractors increased sharply in 2026. Women reporting loneliness increased from 20% to 29%, overtaking men 28%. Burnout increased slightly for women increasing from 14% in 2025 to 15% in 2026. Men experiencing burnout in 2026 has risen from 13% in 2025 to 17% in 2026.

EXPERIENCE BURNOUT

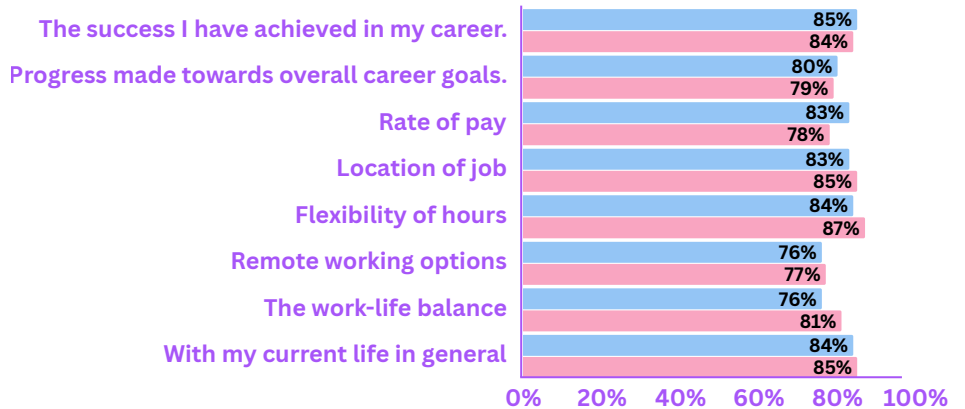


EXPERIENCE LONELINESS



CAREER SATISFACTION

Women's satisfaction with rate of pay dropped significantly, while lifestyle satisfaction remained strong. This year satisfaction with rate of pay fell from 86% to 78%. Satisfaction with progress made towards meeting overall career goals fell from 82% in 2025 to 79% in 2026, and success achieved in career fell from 87% to 84%. However, women remained highly satisfied with flexibility of hours 87%, work-life balance 81%, and life in general 85%. This shows women still value the lifestyle benefits of contracting but feel less rewarded financially.



CONFIDENCE INDEX

Women’s confidence index scores declined in 2026, particularly regarding the performance of the Irish economy. Confidence in the contracting sector fell from +27 to +23 and confidence in the performance of the Irish economy fell from +13 to +7. Women remained more optimistic than men about the future of the contracting sector and just slightly more optimistic than men about the performance of the Irish economy in 2026 compared to 2025.

THE CONTRACTING SECTOR CONFIDENCE INDEX

| | 2026 | 2025 | 2024 | 2023 | 2022 | 2021 |
|--------|------|------|------|------|------|------|
| Male | +20 | +25 | +28 | +30 | +38 | +30 |
| Female | +23 | +27 | +33 | +32 | +37 | +30 |

THE IRISH ECONOMY CONFIDENCE INDEX

| | 2026 | 2025 | 2024 | 2023 | 2022 | 2021 |
|--------|------|------|------|------|------|------|
| Male | +6 | +18 | +15 | +12 | +39 | +10 |
| Female | +7 | +13 | +20 | +3 | +37 | -87 |

HUMAN CAPITAL



QUOTE FROM RESPONDENT

"I enjoy using the full breadth of my skill set and the satisfaction I get from choosing meaningful projects. I enjoy having autonomy over how I work and being able to make my own decisions."

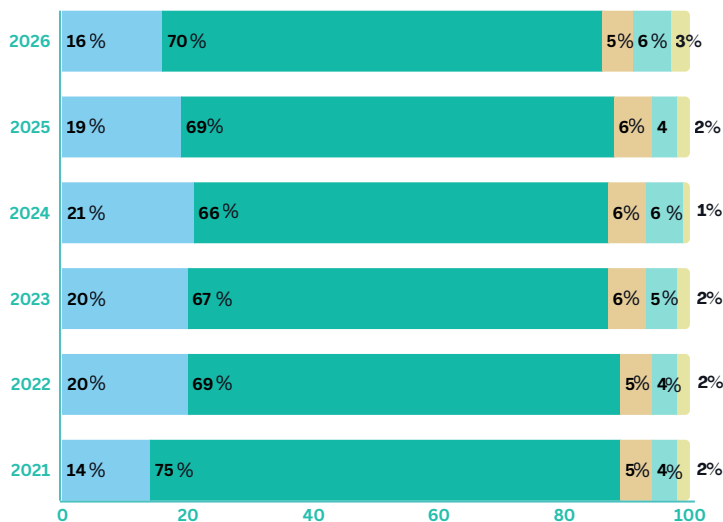
Human capital refers to the skills, knowledge, experience, and abilities that drive productivity and economic value. It includes education, training, wellbeing, and talent, all of which shape an individual's and an organisation's capacity to achieve economic goals. Overall, the 2026 findings show that the contracting sector continues to be defined by a highly skilled and well-educated workforce, with very strong levels of human capital.

Occupational data confirms this profile. In 2026, 91% of contractors were in high-skilled roles. Managers, directors and senior officials (SOC1) accounted for 16%, professionals (SOC2) for 70%, and associate professionals and technicians (SOC3) for 5%. Contractors continue to work mainly in professional and knowledge-intensive sectors. The largest segment remains pharma, medical device and life sciences (36%), followed by technology (14%), finance (12%), engineering and technical activities (5%), and medical locum roles (2%). Perceptions of employability remain strong in 2026. 82% of contractors believe their experience is in demand, and 55% feel it would be easy to secure another contract. Independent working allows for greater participation in the workforce. It supports re-entry into the labour market, continuity of participation, reduces the need for emigration, and allows people to remain economically active across diverse circumstances, benefiting both individuals and the wider economy. Contractors report very positive experiences of leadership. Their experience is of leadership that is effective, human, and inclusive rather than purely task-driven. They are highly satisfied working with leaders who are collaborative, authentic, and outcome-focused. Clear direction still matters. Control does not.

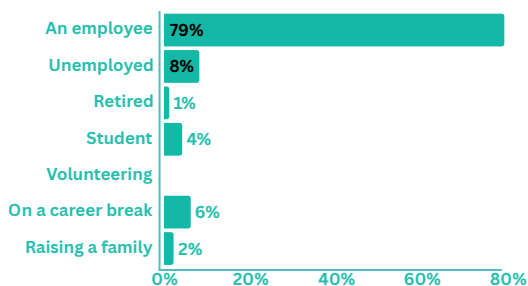
Independent working plays a significant role in supporting workforce participation. In 2026, 82% of respondents state that independent working has allowed them to take part in the workforce, indicating that contracting functions as more than a lifestyle choice. It acts as a practical route into employment, particularly for those who may face constraints linked to life stage, flexibility needs, or changing personal circumstances. This is reinforced by what people were doing immediately before becoming self-employed. While the majority transitioned from employee roles 79%, a proportion of respondents entered contracting from outside traditional employment. This includes those who were unemployed 8%, on a career break 6%, raising a family 2%, or studying 4%. This highlights the value of independent work as a re-entry pathway, enabling continued or renewed participation for people moving between career and life phases. The counterfactual data further underlines this impact. If independent working were not available, 80% indicate they would work as employees. However, a combined 18% would likely leave or partially leave the workforce, with 5% of respondents saying they would be unemployed, 8% would retire, 5% would emigrate, and a further 5% would take unpaid activity such as volunteering. This suggests that contracting helps retain individuals in economic activity who might otherwise disengage.

OCCUPATION

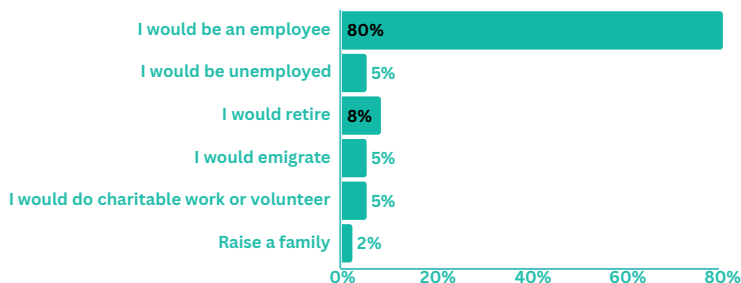
The occupational profile of professional contractors remained high-skilled in 2026. The share of Managers, directors and senior officials (SOC1) fell from 19% in 2025 to 16% in 2026. Professionals (SOC2) edged up from 69% to 70%, showing continued concentration in specialist roles. Associate professionals and technicians (SOC3) dipped from 6% to 5%. Skilled trades increased from 2% to 3% and others increased from 4% to 5%. 2026 shows a continued move away from senior leadership classification towards professional and mixed role types, without changing the sector's core high-skill make-up.



WHAT WERE YOU DOING IMMEDIATELY BEFORE YOU BECAME A CONTRACTOR/SELF-EMPLOYED?

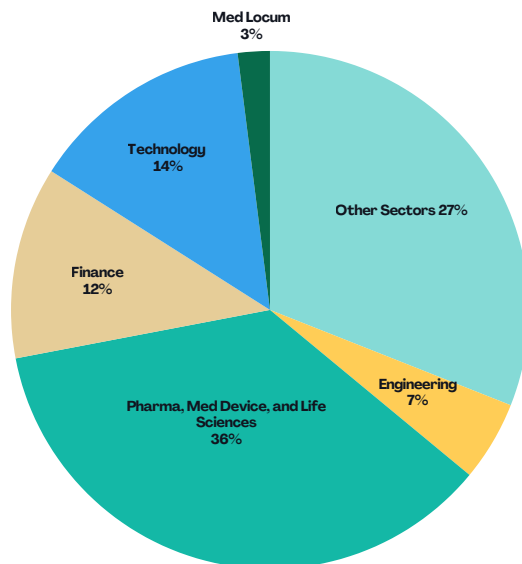


WHAT WOULD YOU DO IF YOU WERE NOT CONTRACTING/SELF-EMPLOYED?



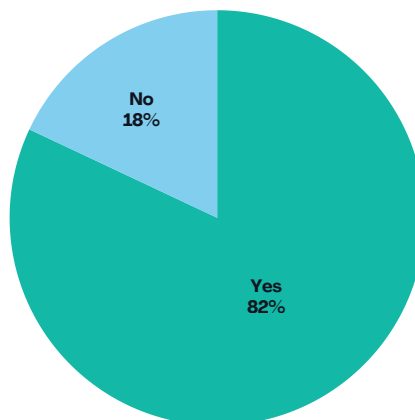
INDUSTRY BREAKDOWN

In 2026, professional contractors continued to work across the same key sectors. Pharma, Medical Device, and Life Sciences remained the largest sector at 36%. Technology (ICT and Telecommunications) increased from 12% to 14%, indicating renewed momentum following the sector's 2025 consolidation. Engineering and technical activities accounted for 5%, and Medical Locum for 2%, while Finance remained steady at 12%. The increase in "Other" sectors, from 27% to 31%, reflects diversification of contracting opportunities in 2026.



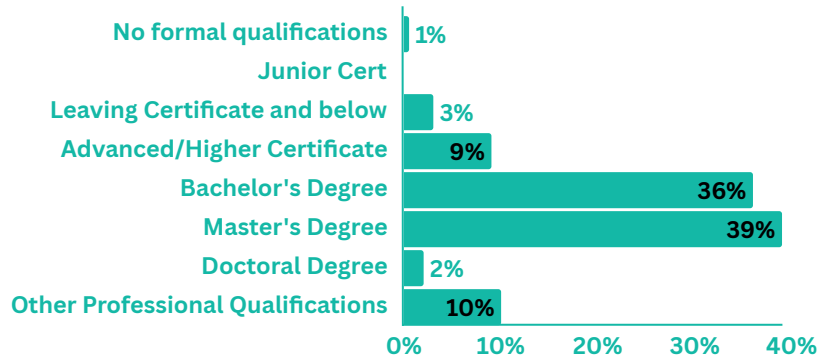
- Other Sectors
- Engineering and Technical Activities
- Pharma, Med Device and Life Sciences
- Finance
- Technology (ICT, Telecommunications)
- Medical Locum

INDEPENDENT WORKING HAS ALLOWED ME TO TAKE PART IN THE WORKFORCE...



EDUCATION

More than half (56%) of people aged 25-64 years old in Ireland have a third level qualification according to the “Educational Attainment Thematic Report 2024” from the CSO . The education level of the professional contracting sector remains higher than the average levels in Ireland where 96% have a third level qualification. Master’s degree holders increased from 36% in 2025 to 39% in 2026, while Bachelor’s degrees decreased from 39% to 36%, suggesting a small move towards higher postgraduate qualification. Other professional qualifications reduced from 14% to 10% and may indicate respondents moving to more formal postgraduate routes. At the lower end of the education spectrum, there were slight increases however the base remains small. Doctoral degrees appear in 2026 at 2%.



WORKING EXPERIENCE

Average working experience increased slightly, with mean time spent in the workforce now 24 years, the maximum time spent in the workforce increased from 58 to 60 years. Contractors have positive outlook in 2026 with 82% of respondents agreeing that their experience is in demand on the labour market. The results show 55% of respondents feel it will be easy for them to find another contracting role, reflecting continued confidence in the strength of the contracting sector.

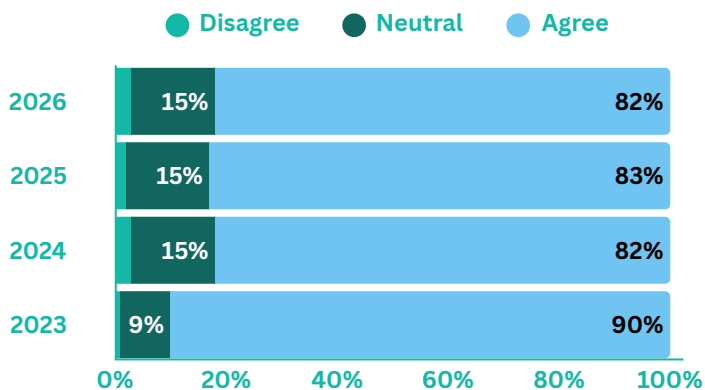
AVERAGE WORK EXPERIENCE BY YEARS



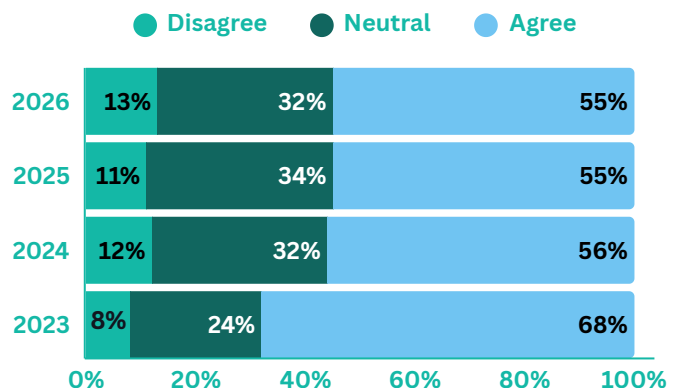
AVERAGE WORK EXPERIENCE



MY EXPERIENCE IS IN DEMAND ON THE LABOUR MARKET



IT IS EASY FOR ME TO FIND ANOTHER CONTRACT



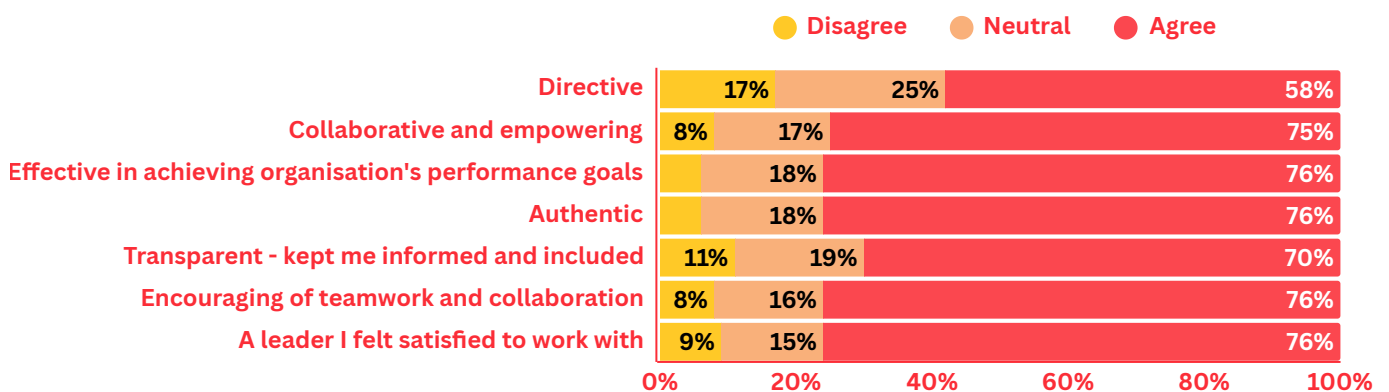
LEADERSHIP



Contractors report very positive experiences of leadership. Just over three quarters (76%) of contractor think that their leaders were effective in achieving the organisation’s performance objectives. Only 6% disagreed. Furthermore, similar proportions felt the same way about being satisfied working with their leadership. So overall, a strong vote of confidence and support for organisations’ leadership of the independent contractor workforce. The recipe for this effective leadership performance is revealed to some extent with that the vast majority of respondents agreeing that their leaders are: authentic, transparent, inclusive and encourage good teamwork.

It is also interesting to note that contractors indicate that their leaders typically adopt a blended rather than binary dominant leadership style. A total of 75% of respondents agree that their leadership uses a collaborative leadership approach with only 8% disagreeing. However, for most respondents this is blended with a directive leadership style as 58% of contractors agree that their leadership manifests this style with 17% disagreeing. Strong direction but then giving contractors autonomy and an opportunity to collaborate with the leadership with good teamwork in a transparent, inclusive and authentic manner seems to be the recipe for effective leadership of the independent contractor workforce.

MY PRIMARY LEADER WAS...



VALUE OF AGE



QUOTE FROM RESPONDENT

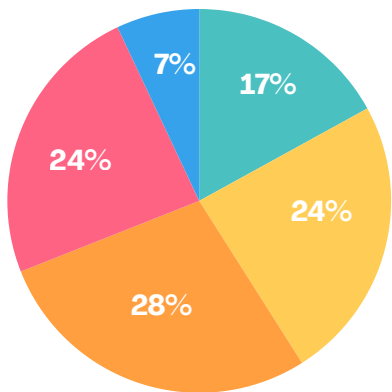
“As an experienced consultant I am often the wisdom worker in the room so my knowledge is used and valuable”

In professional contracting, age continues to be highly valued in 2026. Experience is rewarded in ways that are often not seen in traditional employment, where ageism can limit opportunities. Contracting on the other hand provides a work opportunity where expertise, judgement, and reliability are actively valued. The age profile of the sector has moved older this year, with contractors aged 60 and over now accounting for 17% of the market, up from 14% in 2025. Highlighting a growing cohort of contractors who choose to remain economically active later in life, often well beyond the point at which employees typically exit the workforce.

The financial value of age remains evident. Daily rates rise monotonically with experience, and the highest daily rate of all age groups in 2026 is again those aged 60 and over, where the average daily rate earned is €705. This reinforces the premium placed on experience, expertise and skillset. However, the benefits of age extend beyond earnings. In 2026, 92% of contractors aged 60 and above report the highest satisfaction with their life and job where 93% are satisfied with the success they have achieved in their career. They also report the highest wellbeing outcomes, with the lowest levels of loneliness and burnout at just 14% and 12% respectively, significantly lower than all younger age groups.

The data highlights the potential of many professionals over 60, who continue to contribute not just meaningfully - but at a career lifecycle best - to the economy at a time when many in traditional forms of employment are being pushed towards retirement. Contracting allows the over 60's an opportunity to work longer, on flexible terms, while maintaining high satisfaction levels with work and life in general.

Taken together, the 2026 findings show that older professionals in self-employment are not just a social good but an economic gain. Independent contracting, by enabling experienced individuals to remain active on their own terms, means Ireland can harness otherwise wasted critical expertise and intergenerational knowledge transfer while improving the resilience of its professional workforce.



CONTRACTOR AGE BREAKDOWN

The age profile was slightly older in 2026 versus 2025. The share aged 29 and below decreased from 10% to 7%, reflecting fewer early career entrants this year. Those aged 30–39 decreased from 26% to 24%. The 40–49 group held steady at 28% in both years. Increases were seen in older cohorts. The 50–59 increased from 22% to 24% and the 60 and over increased from 14% to 17%; notably, still below the 20–22% range experienced in 2022–23.



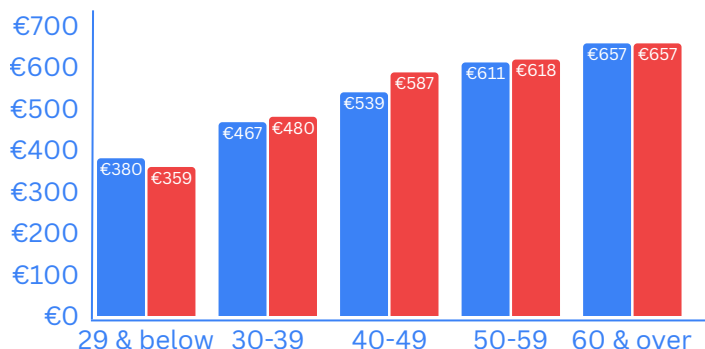
CONTRACTOR EARNINGS

Average daily rates increased for the oldest and youngest contractors in 2026, while other groups experienced decreases. Age continues to command a clear premium, and the 2026 data shows increased pressure on mid-career rates compared with 2025. Contractors aged 60 and over saw average daily rates increase from €657 to €705. Daily rates also increased for those aged 29 and below, from €359 to €380. In contrast, mid-career daily rates all decreased. The largest decline was among those aged 40–49, where rates dropped from €587 to €539.

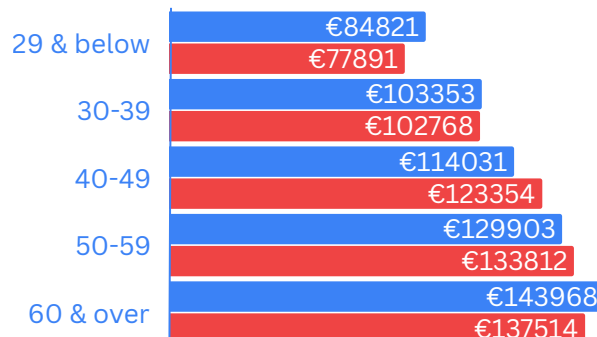
This is particularly significant as this cohort represents the largest segment of contractors, at 28% in both 2025 and 2026. Rates for those aged 30–39 decreased from €480 to €467, while the 50–59 group saw a smaller reduction from €618 to €611. Overall, the age-experience premium remains strong. In 2026, contractors aged 50 and over earned an average daily rate of around €649, compared with approximately €496 for those aged 49 and below. This represents a 31% premium for older contractors, highlighting the ongoing value placed on their experience.



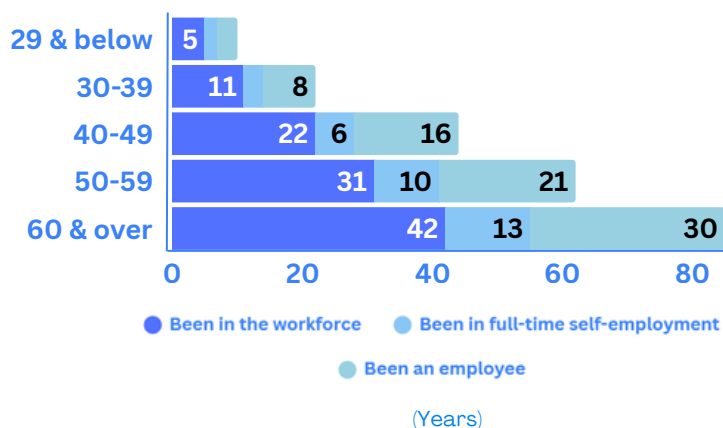
AVERAGE DAILY RATE BY AGE



AVERAGE ANNUAL EARNINGS BY AGE



WORK EXPERIENCE BY AGE IN YEARS



Work experience is not surprisingly increasing in age but importantly this occurs for both time in self-employment and employment. As we noted earlier this experience is closely associated with higher day rates indicating a relationship with worker productivity. This further translates into higher annual earnings with earnings increasingly monotonically with age; a pattern observed in all but one of our previous surveys. The latest average annual employee earnings of managers, directors, and professionals in Ireland (up to Quarter 3 of 2025 so just one quarter earlier than our survey) is €83,833. This indicates that all age groups of independent contractors earn more than equivalent employees. The over 60's earn the largest premium over equivalent employees with a premium of 72%.

WELLBEING

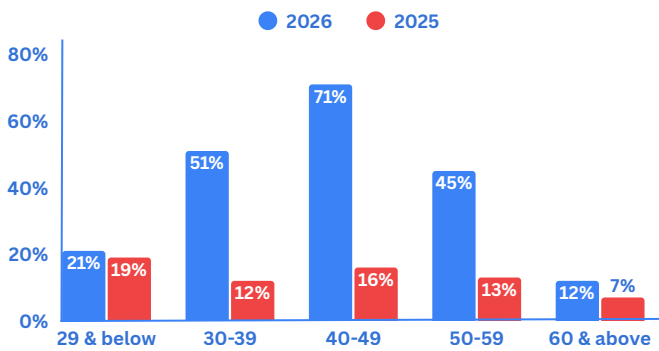
Older contractors emerge as the strongest performing group from a wellbeing perspective in 2026. Contractors aged 60 and over report the lowest levels of loneliness and burnout across all age groups. Loneliness declined from 19% in 2025 to 14% in 2026, while burnout, although slightly higher than last year, remains low at 12%.

In contrast, wellbeing challenges are far more pronounced among mid-career contractors. Reported loneliness increased sharply among those aged 30–39, rising from 22% to 60%, and among 40–49, increasing from 19% to 50%. A similar pattern is seen for 50–59, where loneliness increased from 24% to 50%. Burnout followed the same trend. Burnout rates increased substantially for 30–39 (from 12% to 51%), 40–49 (from 16% to 71%), and 50–59 (from 13% to 45%), indicating strain during the busiest and most pressured career stages.

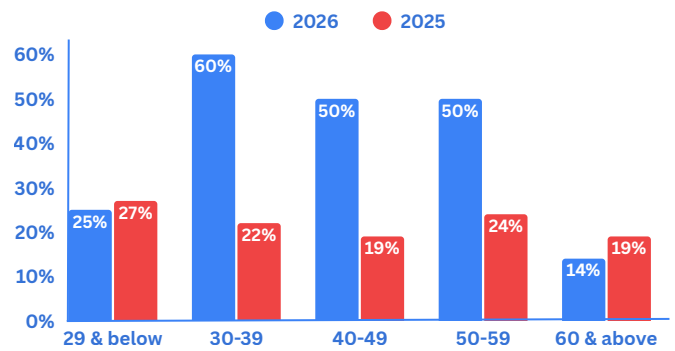
Younger contractors show a more stable picture. Those aged 29 and below reported a slight reduction in loneliness, from 27% to 25%, while burnout increased marginally from 19% to 21%, remaining well below the levels seen in mid-career groups.

Overall, the 2026 wellbeing findings highlight a clear difference based on age. Older contractors appear more resilient and settled, while mid-career professionals face significantly higher wellbeing pressures.

EXPERIENCE BURNOUT

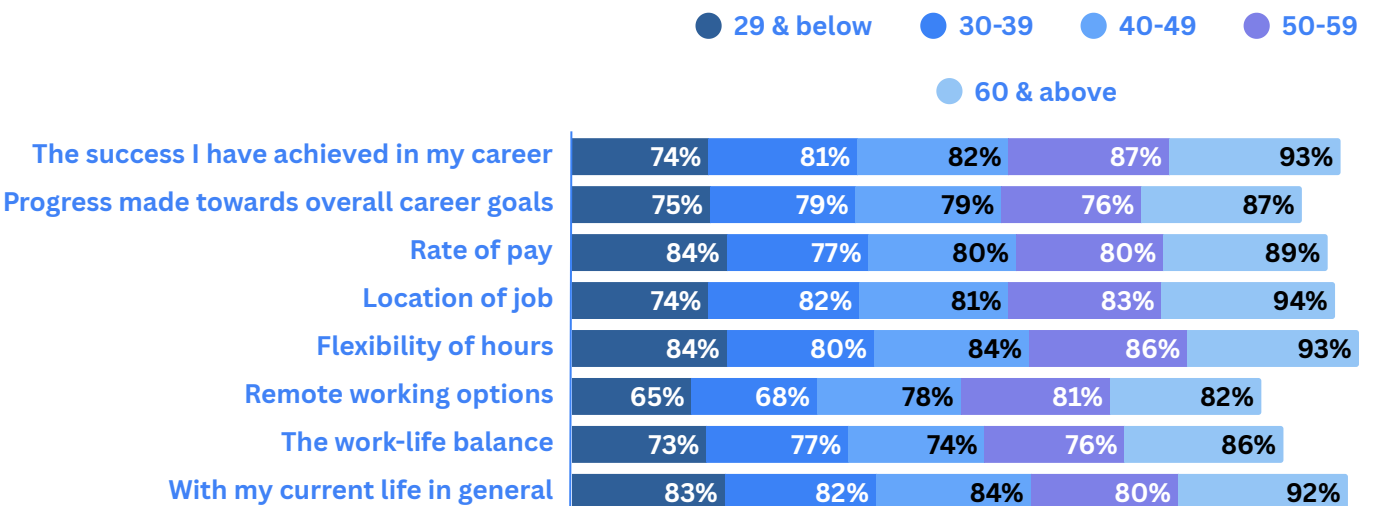


EXPERIENCE LONELINESS



CAREER SATISFACTION

Older contractors report the highest and most consistent levels of job satisfaction in 2026. Contractors aged 60 and over record the highest satisfaction across all the criteria. 93% are satisfied with the success they have achieved in their career, 87% with progress toward their career goals, 89% with their rate of pay, 94% with the location of their job, 93% with the flexibility of their hours, 82% with remote working options, 86% with their work–life balance, and 92% with their life in general. This reflects a cohort that is well aligned with the contracting model, benefiting from experience, autonomy, and the ability to select roles that suit their priorities.



CONFIDENCE INDEX

Contractors aged 60 and over remain positive about the future of contracting in the next 3-5 years. Their confidence index score is +24 up from a score of +23 in 2025, indicating that they have a positive outlook about long-term opportunities.

Confidence in the Irish economy in 2026 is more cautious, with a confidence index score of +6 down from +15 in 2025. While the score is still positive, the decrease reflects a more cautious outlook on the performance of the Irish economy in 2026 compared to 2025.

THE CONTRACTING SECTOR CONFIDENCE INDEX

| | 29 & BELOW | 30 – 39 | 40 – 49 | 50 – 59 | 60 & ABOVE |
|-------------|------------|------------|------------|------------|------------|
| 2026 | +29 | +22 | +19 | +16 | +24 |
| 2025 | +23 | +27 | +28 | +24 | +23 |
| 2024 | +42 | +30 | +34 | 26 | +26 |
| 2023 | +50 | +29 | +30 | 31 | +29 |
| 2022 | +38 | +41 | +41 | +38 | +32 |
| 2021 | +27 | +29 | +30 | +30 | +32 |

THE IRISH ECONOMY CONFIDENCE INDEX

| | 29 & BELOW | 30 – 39 | 40 – 49 | 50 – 59 | 60 & ABOVE |
|-------------|------------|-----------|-----------|-----------|------------|
| 2026 | +15 | +5 | +4 | +6 | +6 |
| 2025 | +18 | +17 | +19 | +14 | +15 |
| 2024 | +29 | +19 | +14 | +14 | +17 |
| 2023 | +20 | +5 | +6 | +11 | +13 |
| 2022 | +26 | +34 | +38 | +41 | +41 |
| 2021 | +3 | +4 | +1 | +11 | +21 |

CONTRACTOR HAPPINESS



QUOTE FROM RESPONDENT

'I absolutely love contracting. I love the flexibility. I love being able to bring the expertise I gained over a long career to a new setting. I love the intellectual stimulation. I find my contract very rewarding personally.'

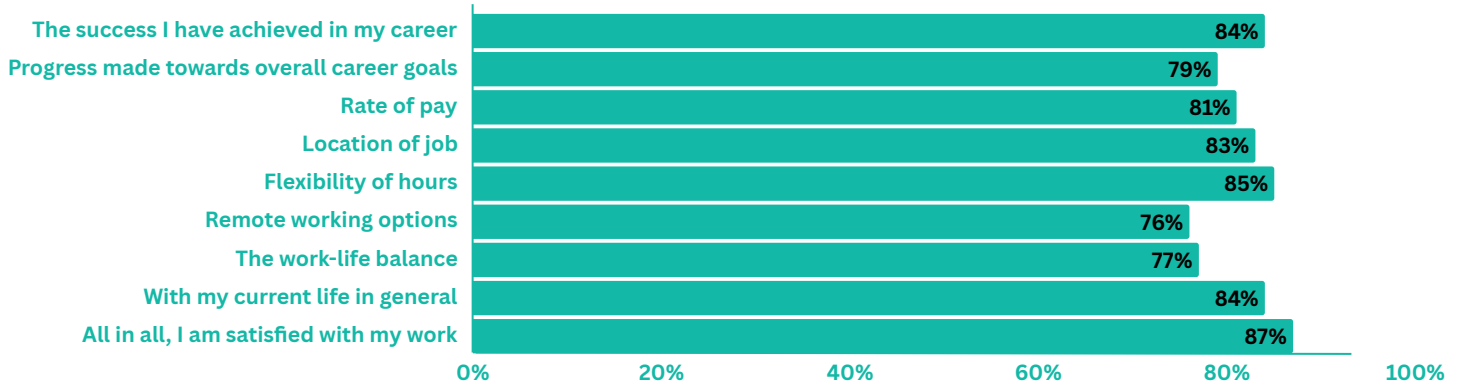
Contractors remain positive in 2026, general work satisfaction increased to 87% in 2026 from 84% in 2025, highlighting that day to day contractors are very happy with the work they are doing. Satisfaction levels with longer-term criteria fell, success achieved in career and progress made towards meeting overall career goals both declined by 5% to 84% and 79% respectively, although they still remain high in absolute terms. Contractors report increased loneliness and burnout numbers this year with loneliness up from 22% to 29% and burnout up from 13% to 17%.

In answer to open questions about what respondents find most fulfilling about independent work? the overall picture is clear. Independent working creates happiness and is most fulfilling when, it offers control over money, time, and work choices, freedom from corporate noise, provides recognition of expertise and where there is a visible link between results, and reward.

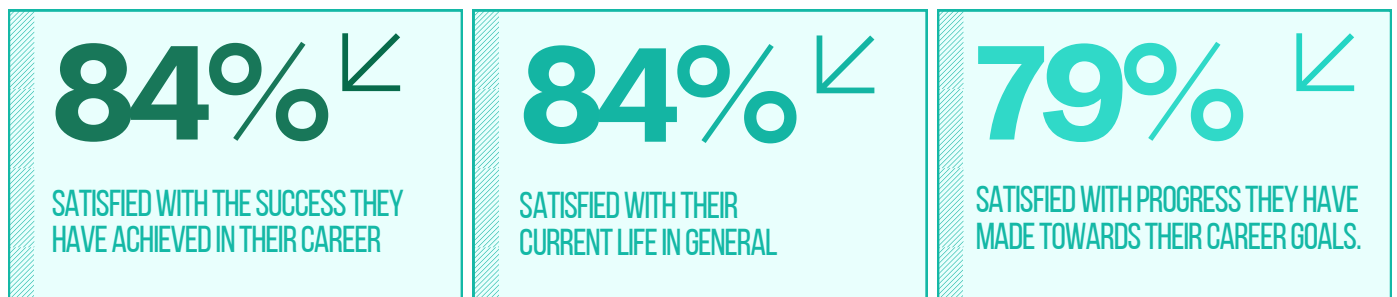
HOW CONTRACTORS FEEL ABOUT THEIR WORK

Similar findings between 2026 and 2025 in terms of satisfaction with location (84% in 2026; 83% in 2025), flexibility of hours (86% in 2026; 85% in 2025); and life in general (84% in 2026; 85% in 2025). Remote working options increased from 74% in 2025 to 76% in 2026, and work-life balance rose from 75% in 2025 to 77% in 2026. Taken together, 2026 looks like a year where contractors felt slightly less positive about pay and some practicalities, while seeing positive gains in flexibility and work life balance.

CAREER SATISFACTION



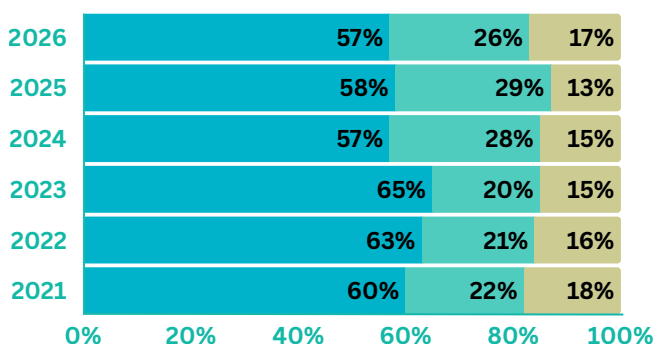
Career satisfaction shows a year-on-year drop. Satisfaction with career success declined to 84% in 2026 from 89% in 2025. Satisfaction with progress towards career goals also fell to 79% from 84%. This points to a reduction in confidence in overall career trajectory.



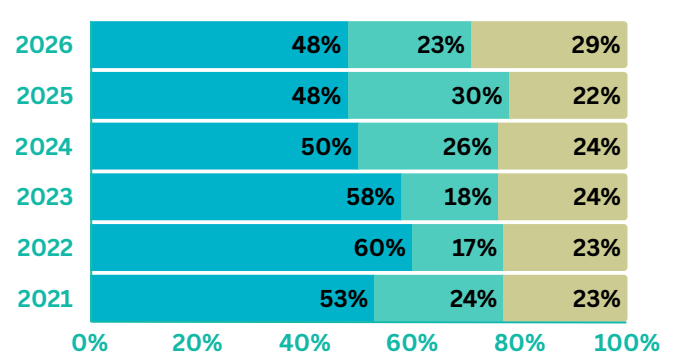
CONTRACTORS WELL-BEING

The share of contractors who agree they feel lonely increased to 29% in 2026 from 22% in 2025. Burnout also increased. The share who agree they feel burned out rose to 17% from 13%. The percentage of contractors who are experiencing loneliness is the highest level since the report began.

EXPERIENCE BURNOUT



EXPERIENCE LONELINESS



Disagree Neutral Agree

CONTRACTORS WERE ASKED AN OPEN QUESTION ABOUT WHAT IS IT ABOUT WORKING INDEPENDENTLY THAT THEY FIND MOST FULFILLING? THIS GAVE GREATER INSIGHTS INTO OTHER FACTORS THAT MADE THEM HAPPY AND CAN BE GROUPED AS FOLLOWS:

- 1. Financial reward and control:** Many contractors highlight the appeal of being “paid for all hours worked” and having “the opportunity to maximise my income.” Others value the autonomy of managing their own business finances, from expensing work costs to deciding “how much to pay myself, put into pension etc.” For some, this control connects directly to long-term security, “pension contributions can mean an earlier retirement
- 2. Autonomy and flexibility:** Contractors describe satisfaction in being their “own boss,” feeling that “my time is my own,” and appreciating the “autonomy of time and ownership of schedule.” This control extends to both daily routines “control over my working hours” and to their work life balance “the ability to fit work around my life as opposed to fitting my life around work”, including the option to “walk away” from situations and roles they find unhealthy or don't enjoy.
- 3. Freedom from corporate politics and bureaucracy:** Respondents spoke of “avoiding workplace politics and toxic people,” enjoying “no corporate BS, more flexibility,” and relief from “annual performance reviews” or “faceless corporate re-orgs.” For some, this improves focus, “I can just do the work without office drama”, while others see it as essential for wellbeing and boundaries: “No expectation of unpaid overtime.”
- 4. Choice, variety, and continuous learning:** Contractors enjoy the ability to “choose projects to work on,” “freely move between projects,” and experience “a new project every time.” Many frame this as energising and developmental, “a great opportunity to gain more knowledge, expertise, and experience.”
- 5. Recognition and visible impact:** Independent working provides greater appreciation of their expertise, “you are valued for your work” and “the recognition of the skills I bring to the table.” Several mention the close connection between their efforts and results, “seeing the difference it makes to clients first-hand,” and “proving to myself that I am an expert in my field.”

GENERATIONS OF CONTRACTORS



QUOTE FROM RESPONDENT

“Control over my working hours allows me a better work life balance, also get to work with many different teams which allows me to gain expertise from a variety of places.”

Ireland’s workforce in 2026 is firmly multi-generational. There were 2,980,900 persons aged 15–89 years in the labour force in Q3 2025, using standard International Labour Organisation (ILO) criteria. (Central Statistics Office). These four generations work side by side: Baby Boomers, Generation X, Millennials and Generation Z, reflecting longer working lives, later retirement, and labour-market participation across age groups.

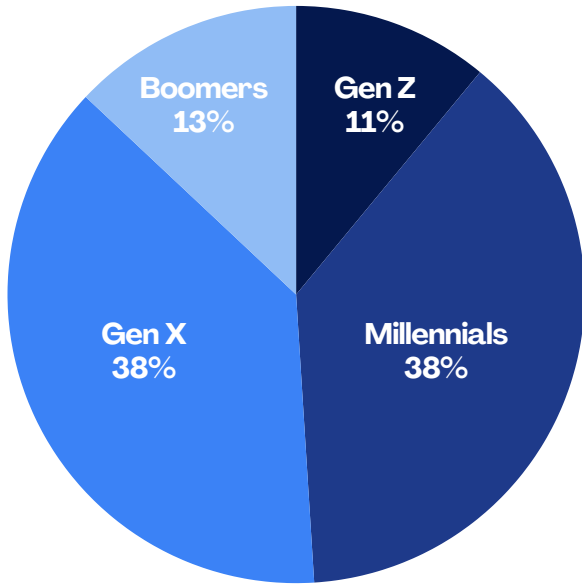
Baby Boomers (now broadly aged 62–80) are moving later into retirement, with many choosing to remain economically active through project and advisory roles. This reflects both longer life expectancy and the value organisations place on deep experience and institutional knowledge (OECD). Generation X (47–61) increasingly occupies senior leadership, transformation, and consulting positions, often seeking autonomy and control over workload. Millennials (32–46) are now the largest cohort in the Irish workforce, carrying much of the responsibility for delivery, management, and growth. Generation Z (16–31) is becoming more established, bringing strong digital capability and a clear focus on purpose, learning & development, and wellbeing.

While these generations sit at different life stages, recent research shows their priorities overlap more than stereotypes suggest. McKinsey finds that workers of all ages value fair pay, learning & development opportunities, and meaningful work, with flexibility now seen as a baseline expectation. Differences emerge mainly in the degree to which these priorities matter.

This priority of needs creates pressure on traditional employment. Contracting offers a faster and more adaptable response. It allows people to align work with life stage priorities. Autonomy. Choice of projects. Learning and development opportunities. Control over time and income.

Deloitte’s latest Global Gen Z and Millennial research show both groups prioritise work-life balance, flexible working, and personal fulfilment over linear career paths (Deloitte). Contracting delivers on these priorities earlier than traditional employment by design, not by exception.

As Ireland’s workforce continues to age and diversify, contracting is increasingly viewed as a structural solution. It supports participation at every life stage. It enables organisations to access skills quickly. And it creates space for different generations to contribute on terms that reflect what they value most.



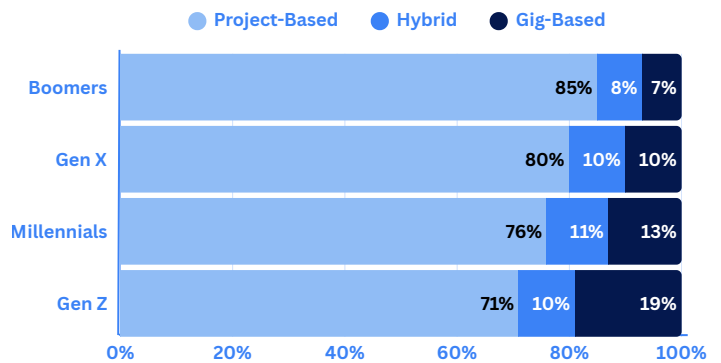
BREAKDOWN OF CONTRACTORS BY GENERATION

Contractors historically tend to be older as it takes time to build a valuable skill set and gather experience. In 2026 Boomers, are continuing to transition out of the contracting sector and into retirement and have decreased from 14% to 13% in 2026. Gen X grew from 36% to 38%. Millennials fell from 40% to 38%. Gen Z increased from 10% to 11% continuing to make their way into the labour market.

- Boomers: 1946 – 1964
- Gen X: 1965 – 1979
- Millennials: 1980 – 1994
- Gen Z: 1995 – 2010

PROJECT/GIG ECONOMY SPLIT

In 2026, most generations were doing more project-based work than in 2025, especially Gen Z. Gen Z moved from 56% project-based in 2025 to 71% in 2026, with hybrid dropping from 23% to 10%. The percentage of Millennials doing project-based work also increased in 2026, rising from 70% to 76%, while gig-based work fell from 15% to 13%. Gen X saw project-based work ease from 83% to 80%, with gig-based work increasing from 7% to 10%. Boomers stayed at 85% project-based work, but gig-based increased from 5% to 7% as hybrid fell from 10% to 8%.



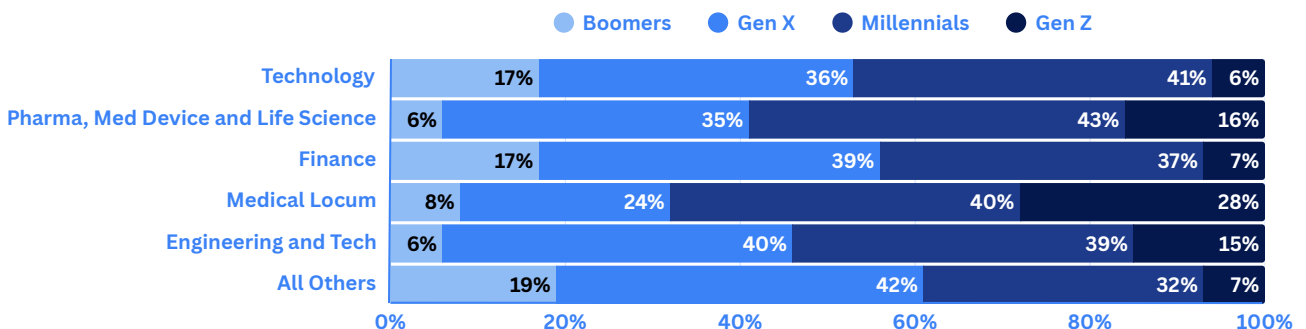
INDUSTRY BREAKDOWN BY GENERATION

In 2026, Boomers are most represented in All Other sectors at 19%, they make up 17% of both Technology and Finance. Their presence is lower in Pharma and Engineering at 6% and remains limited in Medical Locum at 8%.

Gen X is the most consistently represented generation across all industries in 2026. They make up the largest share of contractors in a number of sectors: 'All Others' category at 42%, Engineering and Technical Activities at 40%, and Finance 39%. They have a strong presence in Technology 36%, and Pharma 35%.

Millennials are the largest cohort in several key industries. They dominate Technology 41%, Pharma, Life Sciences and Medical Devices 43%, and Medical Locum 40%. They are also strongly represented in Engineering 39% and Finance 37%.

Gen Z has its strongest industry presence in Medical Locum 28% and Pharma 16%, followed by Engineering 15%. Representation remains lower in Technology 6% and Finance 7%.

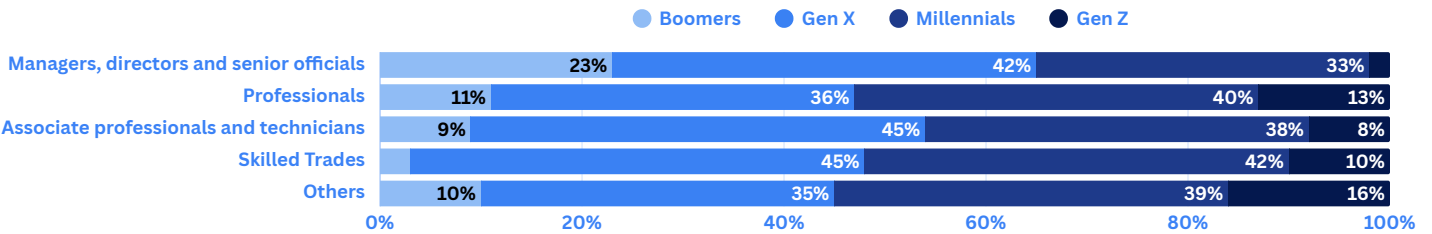


OCCUPATION BY GENERATION

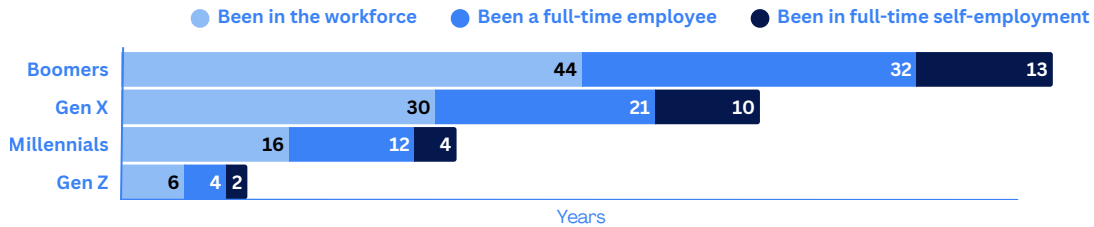
Boomers are strongly concentrated in senior leadership roles. They account for 23% of managers, directors and senior officials, well above their share in most industries. They hold 11% of Professionals roles. Their representation is small in skilled trades (3%) and associate professional roles (9%). The pattern confirms Boomers' role as experience-holders rather than delivery-focused specialists. Gen X leads in associate professionals and technicians (45%) and skilled trades (45%). They account for 42% of senior management roles, the largest share of any generation. They also hold the second largest percentage share of Professional roles at 36%. This shows Gen X combining leadership with hands-on delivery, making them structurally critical across sectors.

Millennials lead in professional roles, accounting for 40% of specialists such as IT professionals, engineers, analysts, and clinicians, and 38% of Associate professionals and technicians. They hold 33% of senior managers up from 29% in 2025, signalling continued progression into leadership. Their strong presence across both professional and senior roles indicates a cohort moving from execution into responsibility. Gen Z is concentrated in professional roles (13%) and skilled trades (10%), with minimal presence in senior management (2%). This is expected given their early career stage.

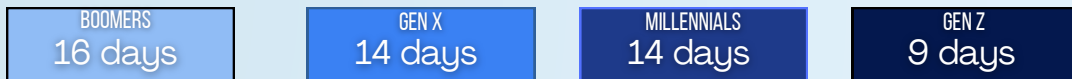
Overall findings: The 2026 data shows a clear generational structure. Boomers anchor leadership. Gen X spans leadership and execution across most industries. Millennials dominate specialist and professional delivery in growth sectors. Gen Z is establishing a foothold in specialist and skills-led roles. These patterns are complementary rather than competitive. They reflect a contracting economy that relies on intergenerational balance to maintain leadership, capacity, expertise, and continuity.



WORK EXPERIENCE BY GENERATION

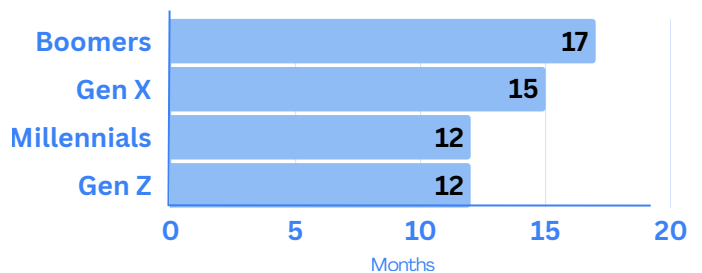


AVERAGE DAYS LOOKING FOR WORK



CONTRACT LENGTH

The average contract length is 14 months, however generational differences apply to contract length. Boomers and Gen X have longer contract lengths than the average however they both saw contract lengths shorten in 2026 compared to 2025. Boomers 18 months to 17 months, Gen X 16 months to 15 months. Millennials contract length also reduced from 13 months in 2025 to 12 months in 2026. Gen Z lengthened from 10 months in 2025 to 12 months this year.



AVERAGE HOLIDAY DAYS TAKEN

BOOMERS
32 days

GEN X
22 days

MILLENNIALS
19 days

GEN Z
22 days

In 2026 data from all respondents showed the average holidays taken was 22 days per year, up from 21 days in 2025. Boomers take the highest number of holidays across the generations at 32 days per year with millennials taking the least days at 19 days per year.

AVERAGE ANNUAL EARNINGS

Boomers
€145,320

Gen X
€125,488

Millennials
€110,301

Gen Z
€88,903

BOOMERS
AVERAGE DAILY RATE
€710

GEN X
AVERAGE DAILY RATE
€591

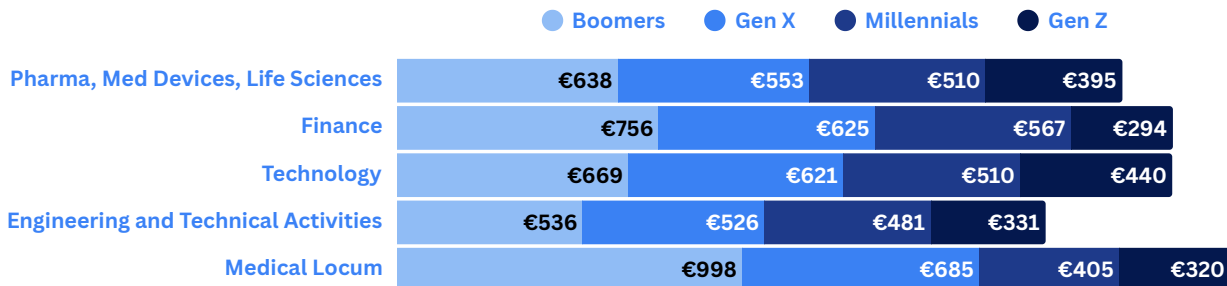
MILLENNIALS
AVERAGE DAILY RATE
€514

GEN Z
AVERAGE DAILY RATE
€397

DAILY RATES BY GENERATION

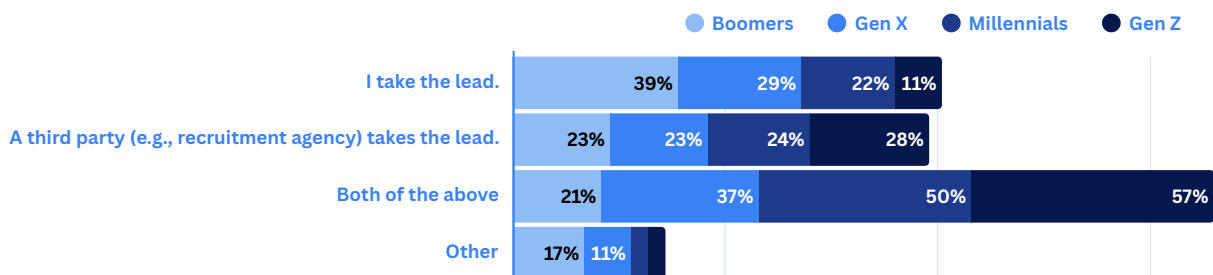
The average daily rate earned by the different generational groups varies. The value of age is evidenced where Boomers earn on average 63% more annually than Gen Z's, it should be noted that industry sector plays a role, as well as the seniority of work being done. Boomers have an average daily rate of €710, Gen X have an average of €591, Millennials average daily rate is €514, and Gen Z's is €397.

DAILY RATES BY INDUSTRY



HOW CONTRACTORS FIND THEIR WORK

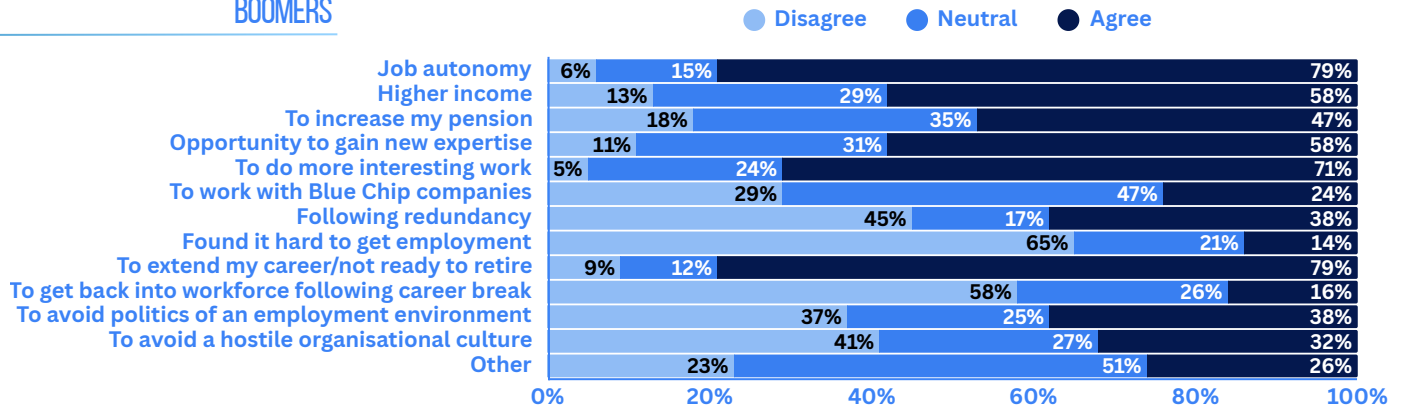
In 2026, contractors moved away from relying solely on finding work themselves towards a more blended approach that combines personal networks with agency support. This change is visible across all generations. The proportion saying "I take the lead" decreased for Boomers, Gen X, Millennials, and Gen Z, while the share using both routes increased in every group. The change is most pronounced among Millennials and Gen Z, where blended sourcing is now the dominant approach. The findings point to a more collaborative and diversified way of securing work in 2026, rather than dependence on a single channel.



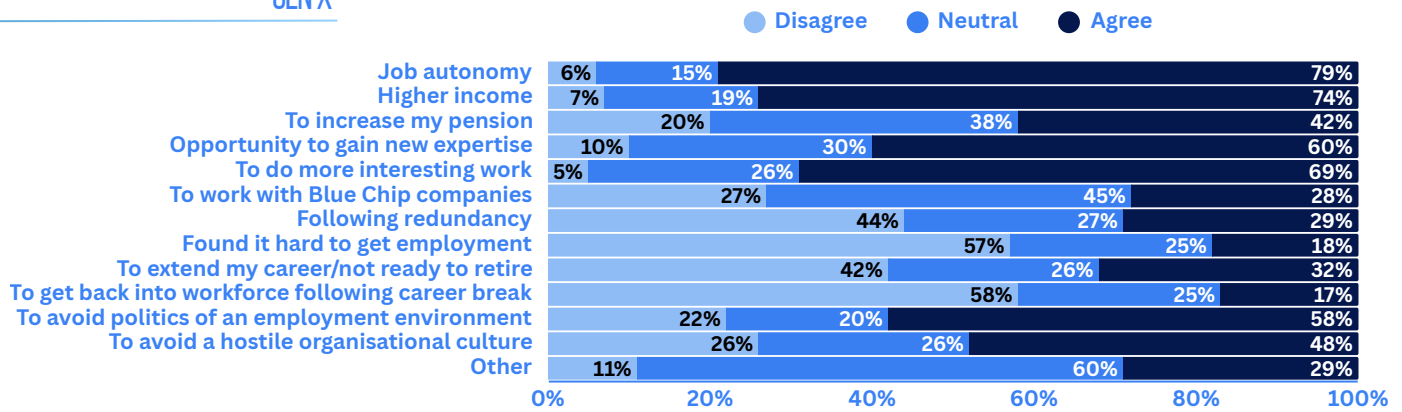
MOTIVATION BY GENERATION

The motivational factors influencing a contractor are different, or the scale of their importance is different, depending on the generational group the contractor belongs to. Boomers are motivated by job autonomy and the ability to extend their career with many of them not ready to retire. Gen X are motivated by the ability to earn higher income and by job autonomy and by the ability to earn higher income and also the opportunity to do more interesting work. Millennials are motivated by higher income, job autonomy and the opportunity to gain new experience. Gen Z report higher earnings, the opportunity to gain new experience, and the ability to do more interesting work as the highest motivational factors for choosing a contracting career.

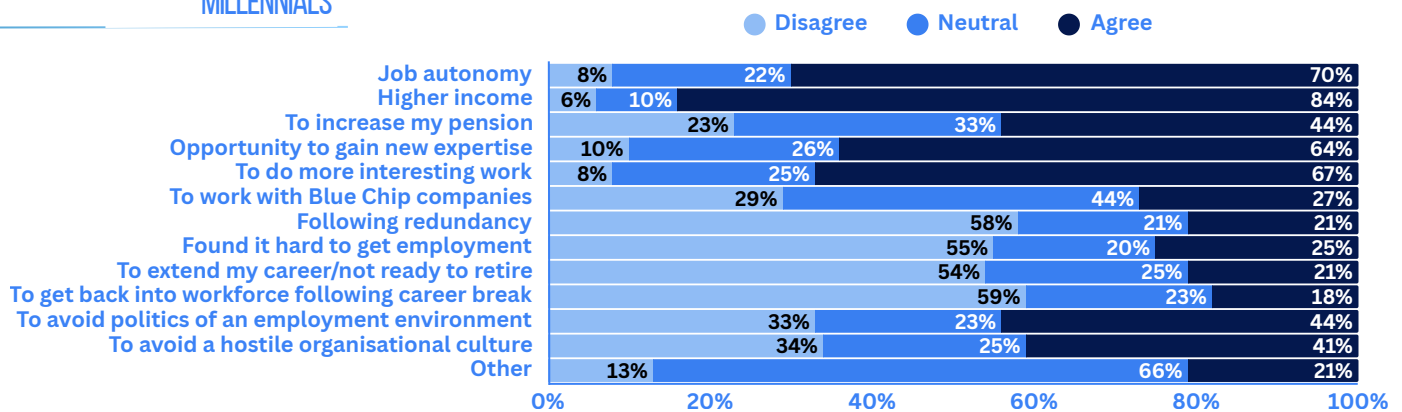
BOOMERS



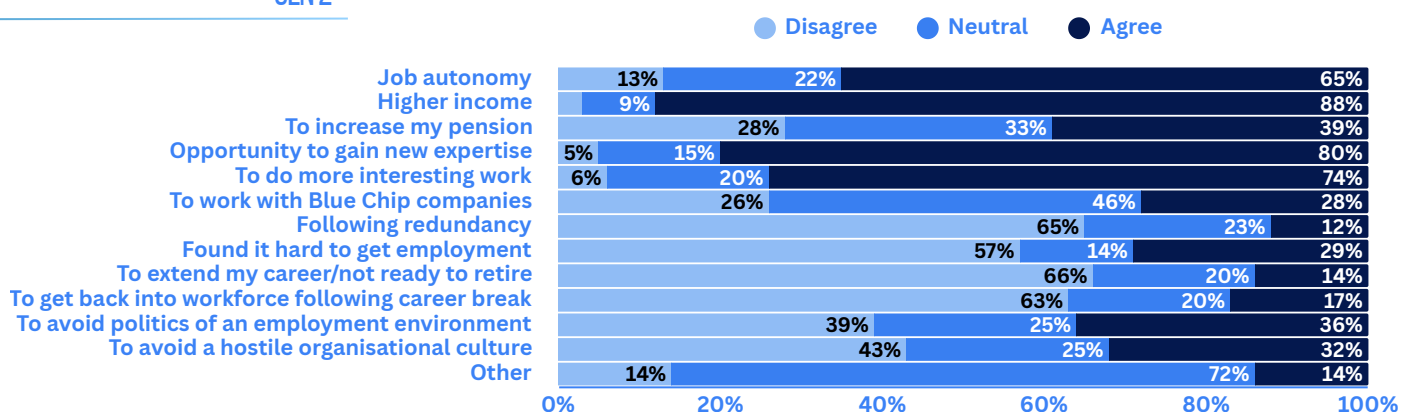
GEN X



MILLENNIALS

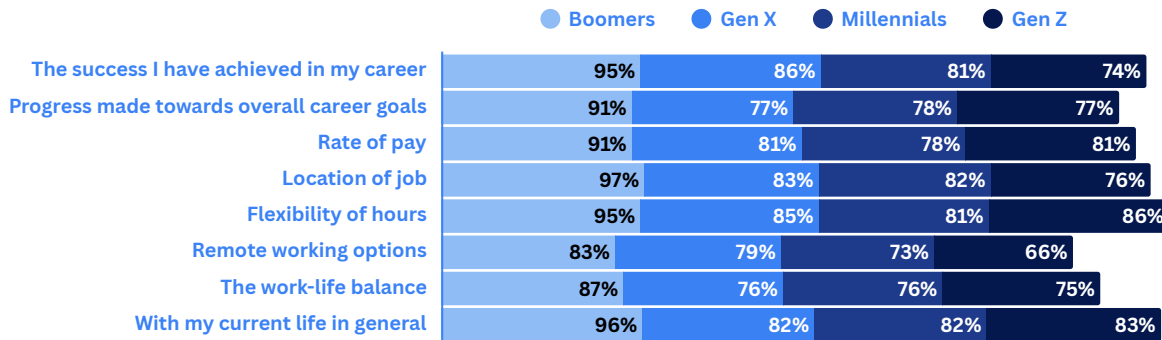


GEN Z



SATISFACTION WITH WORK BY GENERATION

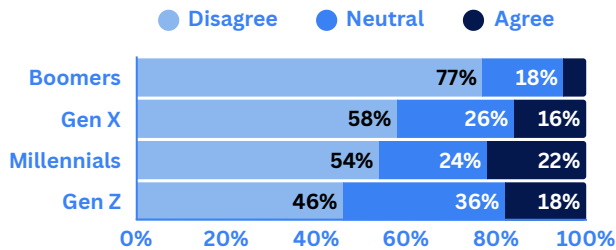
In 2026, satisfaction rises with age when it comes to career outcomes. Boomers are the most satisfied across almost all measures, especially career success, pay, location, and overall life satisfaction. Gen X remains positive but shows weaker satisfaction levels with career progress and pay. Millennials and Gen Z are more satisfied with how they work, particularly flexibility and work-life balance, but less satisfied with career success and long-term progress.



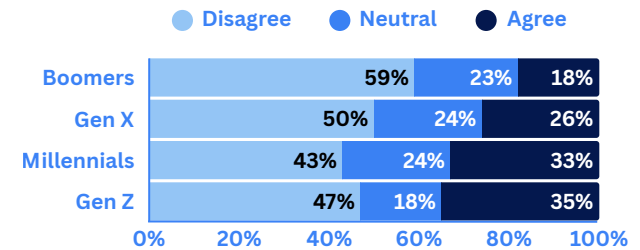
CONTRACTORS WELL-BEING

Loneliness increased in 2026 for Gen X, Millennials, and Gen Z. Millennials increased from 21% to 33%. Gen Z increased from 27% to 35%. Gen X increased from 22% to 26%. Boomers reported a slight decrease in loneliness down from 19% to 18%, the current level of loneliness they experience is significantly lower than all other groups. Burnout increased for Millennials, from 12% to 22%. Gen X also experienced a slight increase from 15% to 16%. Gen Z fell from 19% to 18%. Boomers experience the lowest levels of burnout, 2026 saw a decrease from 7% to 5%.

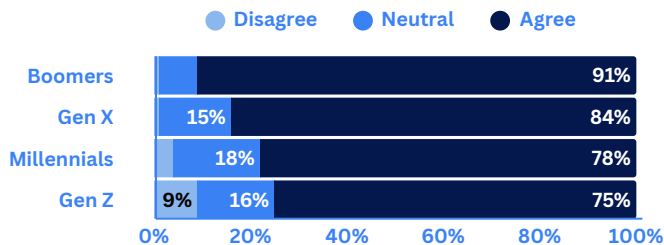
EXPERIENCE BURNOUT



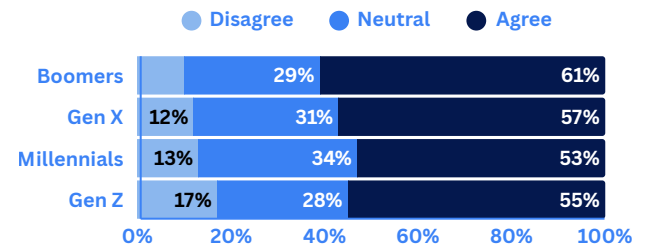
EXPERIENCE LONELINESS



CONTRACTORS EXPERIENCE IS IN DEMAND IN THE LABOUR MARKET



IT IS EASY FOR CONTRACTORS TO FIND ANOTHER CONTRACT



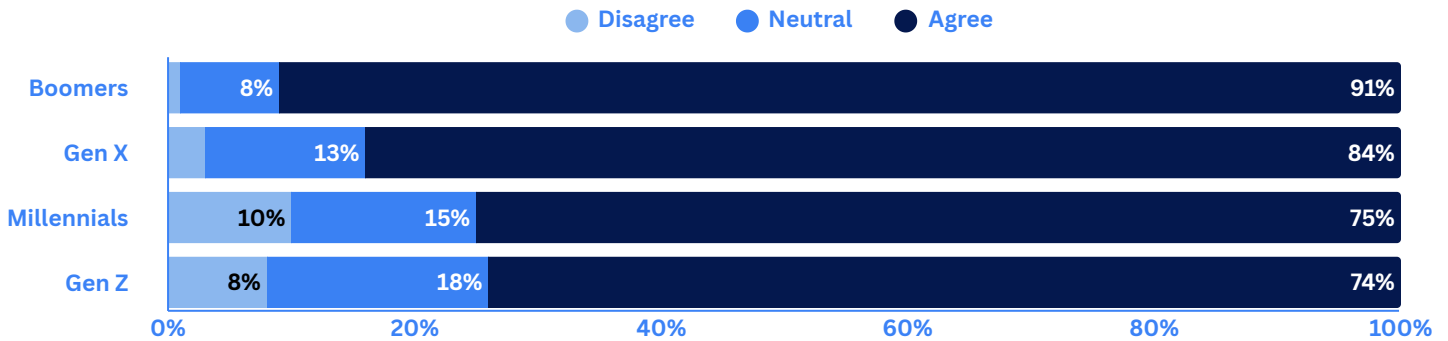
INTENTION TO STAY BY GENERATION

There is a high level of agreement across all generations that their experience is in demand on the labour market. Boomers report the highest agreement that their experience is in demand, at 91%, followed by Gen X at 84%, Millennials at 78%, and Gen Z at 75%.

Confidence in the ease of finding another contract is more mixed in 2026. Boomers are the most confident, with 61% agreeing it would be easy to secure another role. Gen X follows at 57%, while Millennials fall to 53% and Gen Z to 55%, indicating slightly more caution among younger cohorts compared with 2025.

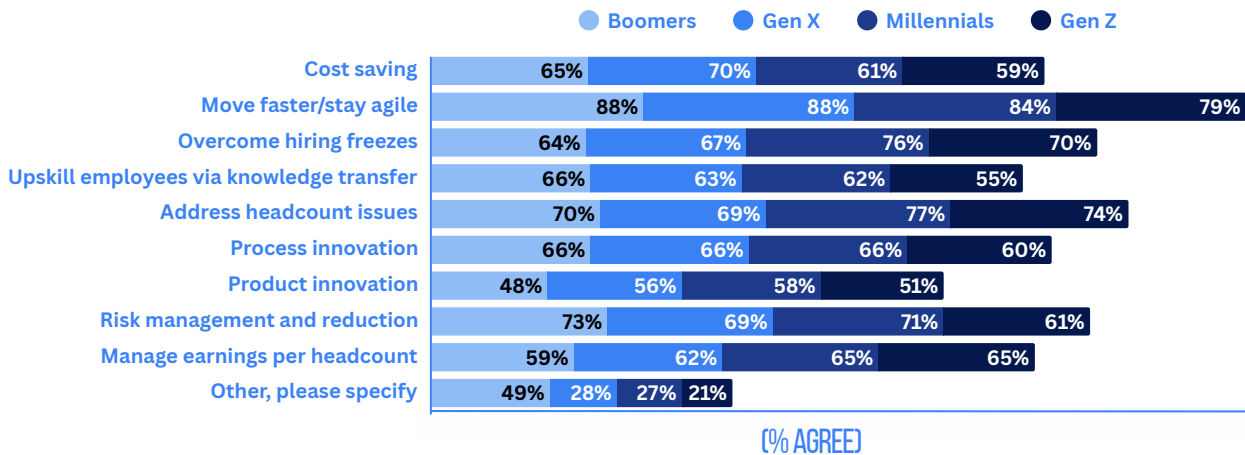
INTENTION TO STAY BY GENERATION

Intentions to remain contracting remain high in 2026. Boomers show the strongest commitment, with 91% intending to continue contracting. Gen X also remains strongly committed at 84%. Millennials intention to stay is at 75% and Gen Z records 74%, reflecting continued interest in contracting, though with greater uncertainty than older generations.



BENEFITS TO CLIENTS BY GENERATION

All generations identify that the biggest benefit they bring to client companies is increased agility. Boomers highlighted their ability assist with risk management and reduction. Gen X highlight cost savings as a benefit they bring. Millennials and Gen Z's report addressing headcount issues and hiring freezes as a benefit they bring. Product and process innovation scored much higher for all cohorts this year over last year.



CONFIDENCE INDEX

Confidence in the Irish economy fell across all generations in 2026. Boomers dropped from +15 to +6. Gen X dropped from +15 to +6. Millennials dropped from +18 to +5. Gen Z dropped from +18 to +9. Confidence in the contracting sector remained relatively strong but differed by cohort. Boomers confidence index score increased slightly on 2025 score +22 to +24. Gen Z also increased from 2025 +23 to +30. Gen X confidence index score dropped in 2026 compared to 2025 from, +25 to +18, Millennials also fell from +28 to +19.

THE IRISH ECONOMY CONFIDENCE INDEX

| | |
|-------------|----|
| BOOMERS | +6 |
| GEN X | +6 |
| MILLENNIALS | +5 |
| GEN Z | +9 |

THE CONTRACTING SECTOR CONFIDENCE INDEX

| | |
|-------------|-----|
| BOOMERS | +24 |
| GEN X | +18 |
| MILLENNIALS | +19 |
| GEN Z | +30 |

PHARMA, LIFE SCIENCES, AND MEDICAL DEVICE



QUOTE FROM RESPONDENT

'What I find most fulfilling is the job autonomy. The avoidance of performance reviews and related annual metrics that are ubiquitous in the pharmaceutical industry as an FTE. The increased financial reward gives me greater freedoms in everyday life.'

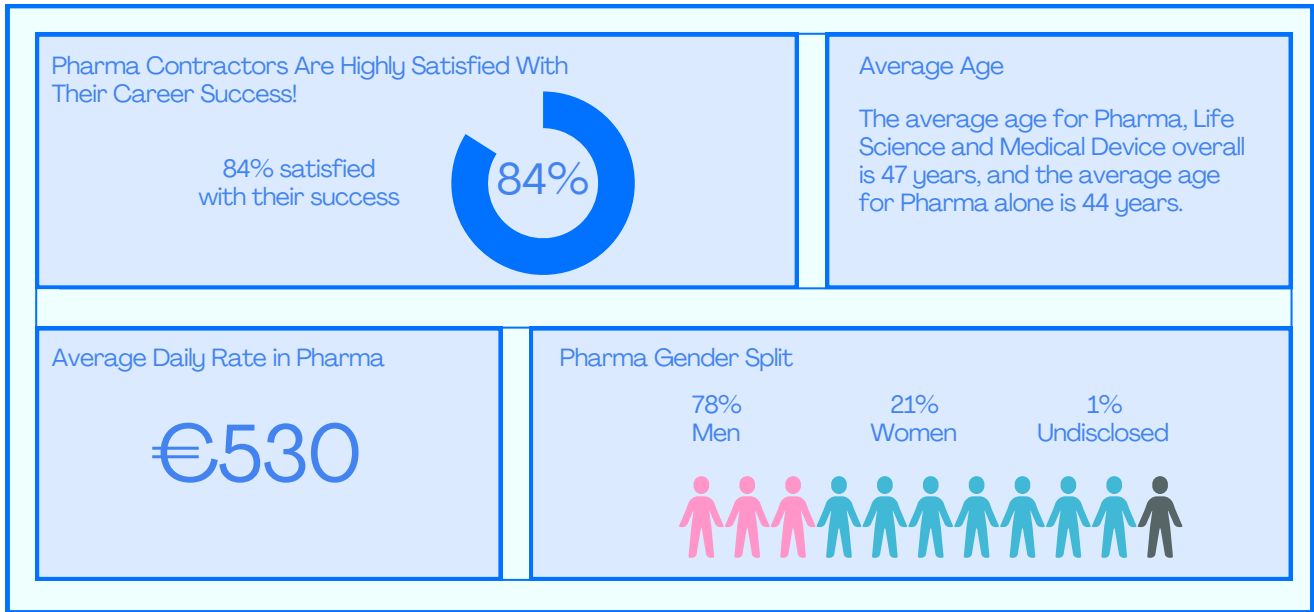
Ireland continues to be recognised as a global hub for pharmaceutical and biopharmaceutical manufacturing and innovation, underpinned by strong regulatory standards, a skilled workforce and sustained international investment. 2025 was a year of uncertainty for the industry with threats of significant tariffs. Following EU-US trade agreement, 2026 brings more predictability with agreement of a structured tariff ceiling of (15 %) for EU-made pharmaceuticals entering the US.

Ireland continues to attract foreign direct investment into biopharma, resulting in over 75 major manufacturing plants currently in operation. Many of these facilities are highly advanced, integrating production, formulation and research and development within single sites, enabling efficiency, speed to market and compliance with global regulatory requirements ([IDA Ireland](#)).

Employment in the sector has continued to grow steadily, with more than 50,000 people now employed across pharma and biopharma roles nationwide. Multinational firms have reaffirmed their long-term commitment to Ireland through new investments and upgrades. A notable example is Merck's €150 million advanced filtration manufacturing facility in Cork, opened in late 2025 to support vaccine, monoclonal antibody, and cell and gene therapy production ([MedPath](#)).

Digital transformation is increasingly shaping how pharmaceutical companies operate, with growing adoption of automation, data analytics and digital regulatory systems. This evolution continues to drive demand for skilled professionals across production, quality, regulatory and digital functions, with contractors playing a critical role in enabling flexibility and rapid scaling ([Pharma Awards](#)).

PHARMA

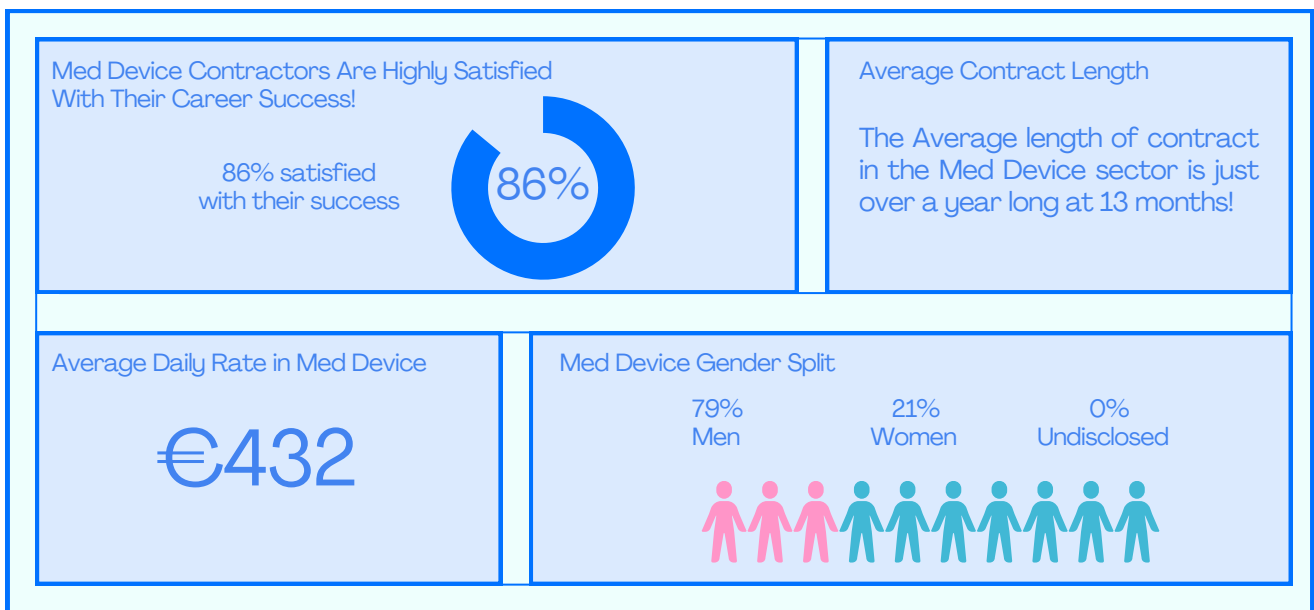


MEDICAL DEVICE

Ireland's medical technology sector has strengthened its position as one of the top global MedTech exporters, with recent figures showing exports approaching €20 billion annually. [Ibec](#)

Innovation remains at the heart of the sector's growth. Irish MedTech start-ups and scale-ups are drawing international attention for next-generation devices - from AI-enabled cardiac implants to digital cognitive diagnostics and high-throughput drug screening platforms, underlining Ireland's ability to commercialise breakthrough health technologies. [Think Business](#)

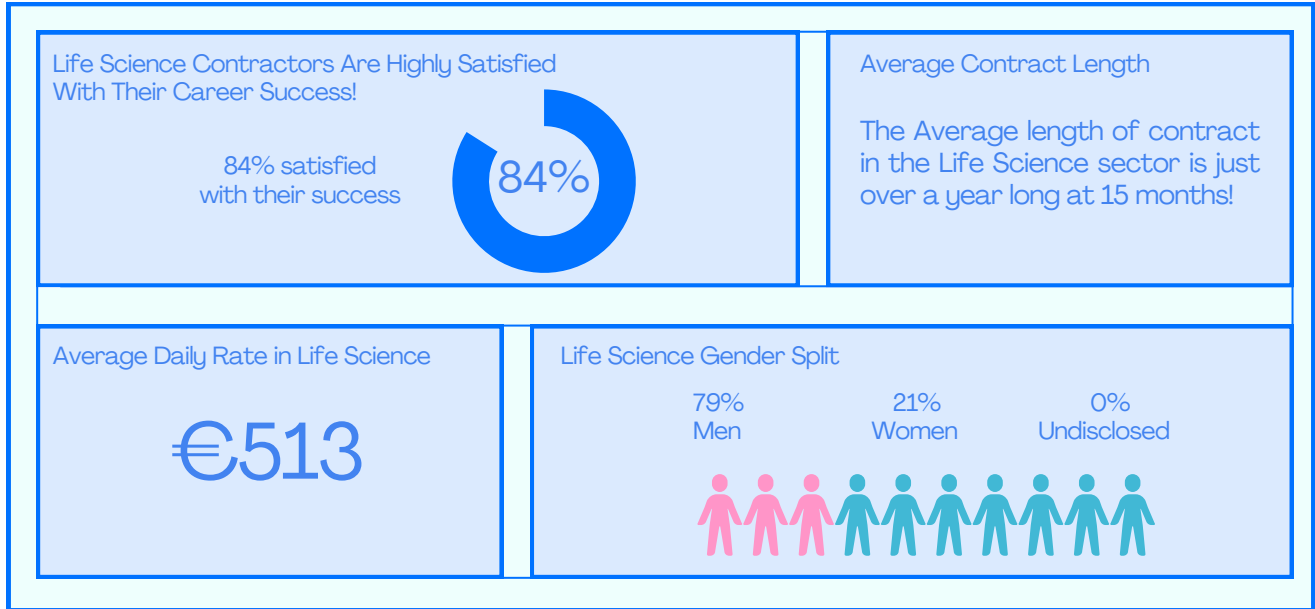
However, recently the industry has also called for stronger R&D supports, highlighting the competitive pressure from overseas tax incentives and the need to sustain long-term innovation investment at home. [Ibec](#)



Ireland's life sciences ecosystem and health tech companies raised a record €491 million in funding in 2024, which continued to propel growth into 2025, signalling strong investor confidence.

A major strategic development in 2025 was the announcement of the National Life Science Strategy for Ireland, designed to strengthen collaboration across industry, government and research institutions, support scaling of indigenous businesses, and drive innovation in areas such as advanced therapeutics, digital health and manufacturing technologies ([Ibec](#)).

Regional innovation efforts continue, the Western Development Commission marked its 50th MedTech investment, underlining how strategic funding of ecosystems across Ireland is helping to build a sustainable pipeline of high-impact technologies and jobs ([Western Development Commission](#)).

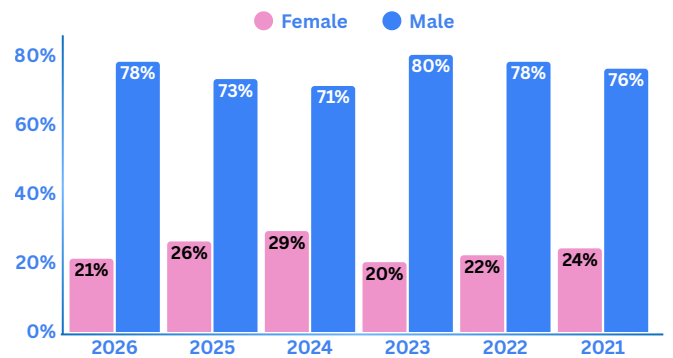


PHARMA

In 2026, the pharmaceutical sector continued to exhibit a male-dominated workforce. Male contractors accounted for 78% of the contractor population, representing an increase from 73% in 2025. Female representation has declined, dropping to 21% this year, marking a significant drop in female participation rate in the sector since the high of 29% in 2024.

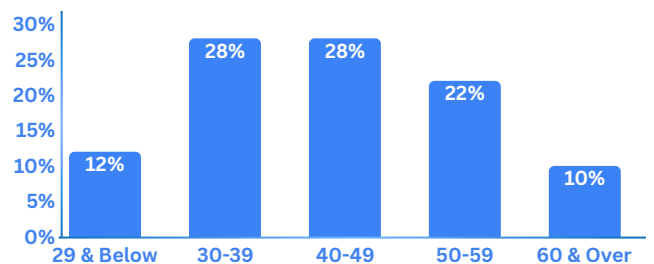
The age profile shows a slight restructuring towards mid-career and experienced professionals. The share of contractors aged 30–39 has fallen by 8 percentage points from 36% in 2025 to 28% in 2026. Contractors above 40 represent 60% of the workforce. The average contract length in Pharma has remained steady at 15 months, in line with last year.

GENDER



AVERAGE AGE 44 Years

AGE PROFILE



LIFE SCIENCE

In 2026, the gender profile of the Life Sciences sector remained broadly comparable with previous years. Male representation accounted for 79% of contractors, slightly higher than 75% in 2025, while female participation stood at 21%. Overall, the gender distribution continues to reflect a predominantly male contractor workforce, consistent with patterns observed in previous years. The age profile of contractors shows some notable changes in 2026. The proportion aged 29 and below decreased from 16% in 2025 to 3% in 2026. At the same time, the share of contractors aged 30 to 39 increased from 31% to 41%. While those aged 40 to 49 rose from 23% to 32%. The 50 to 59 age group also grew, increasing from 15% to 20%. In contrast, the proportion of contractors aged 60 and over declined from 15% to 4%. Overall, the 2026 distribution indicates a greater concentration of contractors in mid-career age groups compared with the previous year.

The average contract length in the Life Sciences industry remains stable at 15 months in both 2025 and 2026. This is slightly higher than the average of 14 months recorded in 2024. The average daily rate has fallen slightly to €513, down from €529 in 2025 and significantly below the highs of 2023 and 2024. While contract duration remains stable, this rate softening may suggest budget caution or increased contractor availability in this sector compared with recent years.

AVERAGE AGE **43 Years**

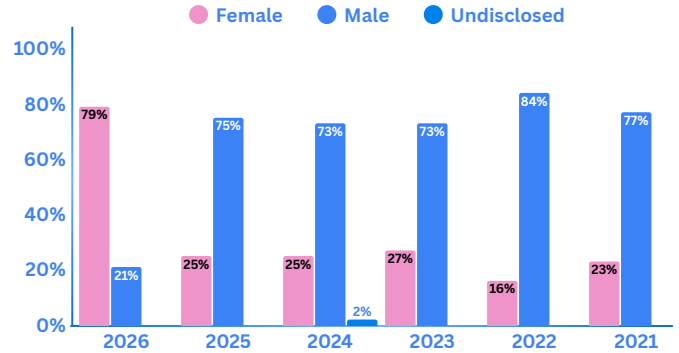
MED DEVICE

In 2026, the Medical Device sector remains predominantly male, with men representing 79% of contractors, up slightly from 75% in 2025. There is a shift in the age profile of the sector this year. In 2025, 23% of the contractors surveyed were aged 29 or below, but this has decreased to 17% in 2026. Meanwhile, the percentage of contractors between 40–59 years of age has increased. This might suggest an increasing reliance on experienced contractors compared to the new entrants.

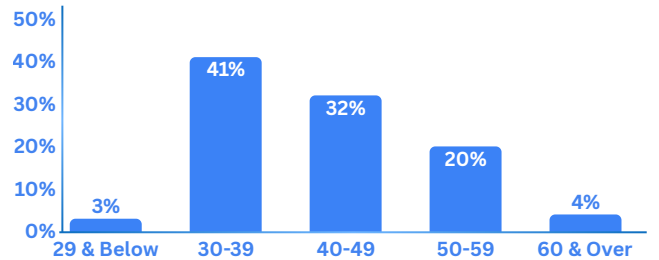
The average contract length in the Medical Device sector remains at 13 months in 2026. The average daily rate increased to €432 in 2026, up from €397 in 2025. This increase comes more as a correction to the sharp decline between 2024 and 2025, when rates fell from €492 to €397. The rise in 2026 may suggest early signs of recovery in daily rates within the sector.

AVERAGE AGE **42 Years**

GENDER



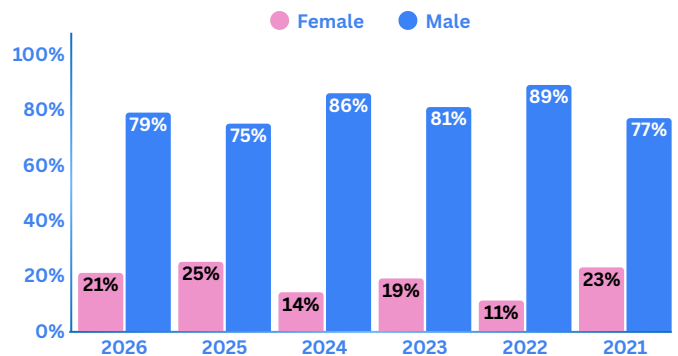
AGE PROFILE



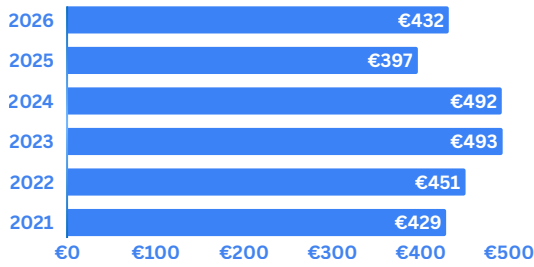
AVERAGE DAILY RATE



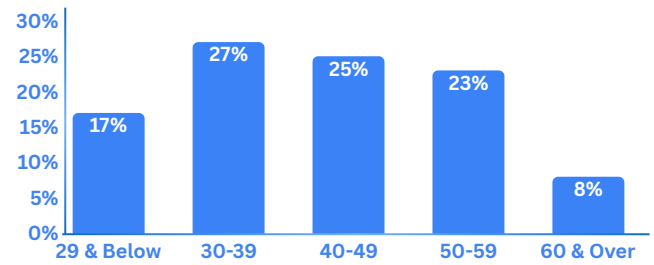
GENDER



AVERAGE DAILY RATE

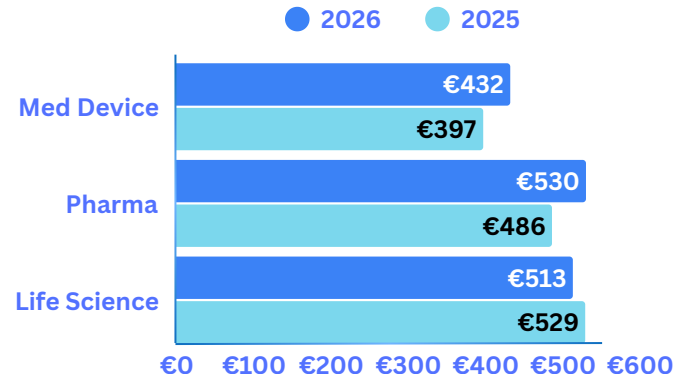


AGE PROFILE



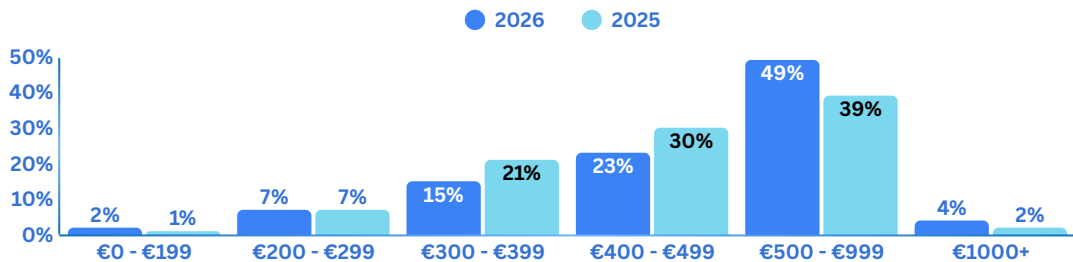
PHARMA, LIFE SCI & MED DEVICE DAILY RATES

Average daily rates in Pharma increased from €486 in 2025 to €530 in 2026, a rise of around 9%. This is the highest rate recorded across the six-year period and represents an increase of 17.3% since 2021. In the Life Sciences industry, rates declined from €529 in 2025 to €513 in 2026, a decrease of 3%. Rates remain almost 12% below the peak recorded in 2022. Medical Device industry rates rose from €397 in 2025 to €432 in 2026, an increase of 8.8%. However, rates still remain comparable to the rates in 2021.



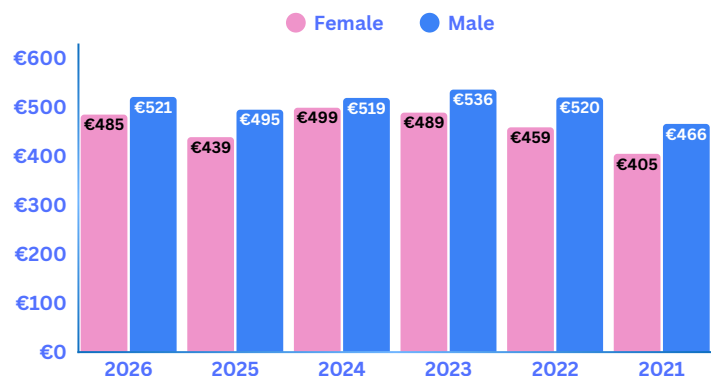
RATE DISTRIBUTION

The rate distribution shows a clear upward shift in 2026. In 2025, 42% of contractors earned between €300 and €499 per day. This has declined to 38% in 2026, while the share earning €500 or more has increased from 41% to 53%. Within the higher bands, 22% of contractors now earn between €500 and €599, 27% earn between €600 and €999, and 4% earn more than €1000 per day. Overall, the distribution indicates a movement toward the middle to upper rate brackets in 2026, suggesting an improvement in contractor rates.



AVG. DAILY RATES BY GENDER

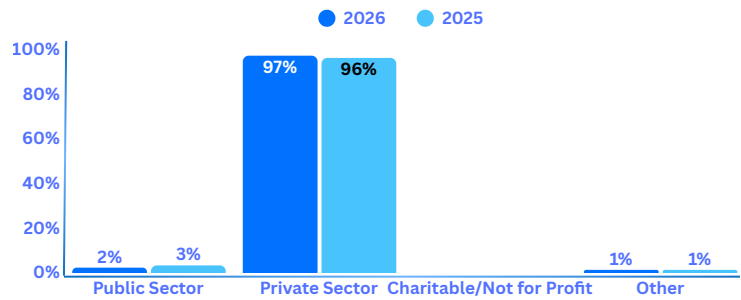
Overall, for the whole pharmaceutical sector, average daily rates have strengthened in 2026 for both genders. Daily rates for males rose 5% from €495 in 2025, to €521 in 2026. Female rates increased 10% from €439 in 2025, to €485 in 2026. This may be primarily driven by contractors in the pharma industry and medical device industry, as for life science industry, the rates have declined. The gender pay gap narrowed from 11% in 2025 to 6.9% in 2026. This is the smallest gender pay gap observed since the research started in 2021 and reflects improving pay parity.



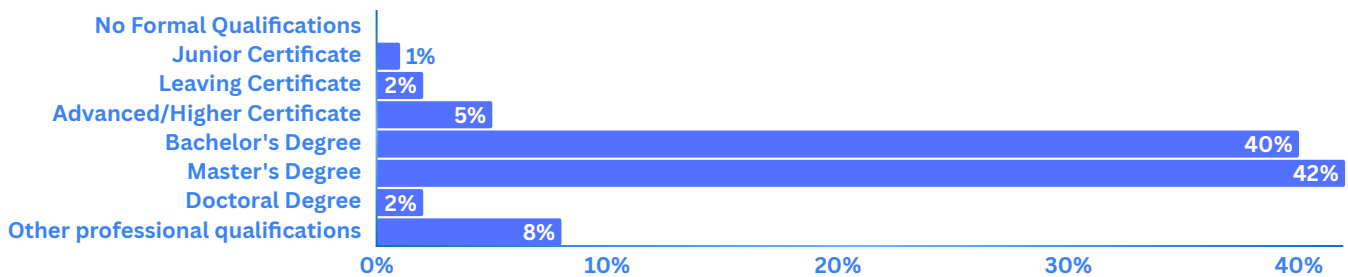
EDUCATION & SECTOR

The qualification profile of contractors in 2026 remains strongly degree focused. A total of 92% hold either a Bachelor's or above or some other professional qualifications, broadly consistent with the previous year. Within this, the share of contractors holding Master's degrees has increased to 42%, up from 35% in 2025, while the proportion with Bachelor's degrees has declined slightly to 40% from 46%. This shift may indicate a modest move toward more postgraduate qualified contractors within the sector.

SECTORS



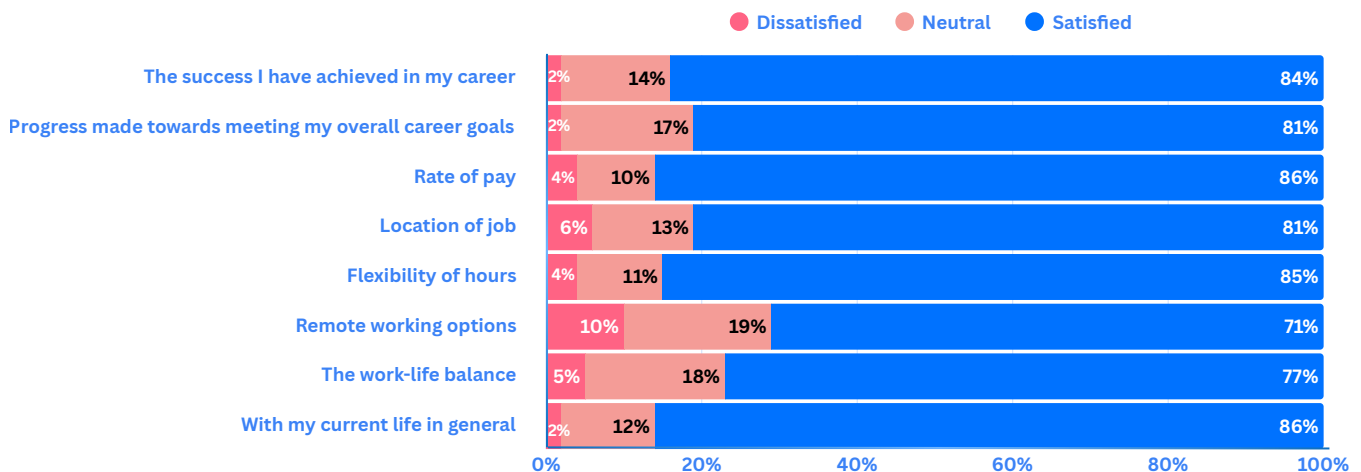
EDUCATION



HOW PHARMA, LIFE SCIENCE & MED DEVICE CONTRACTORS FEEL ABOUT THEIR WORK

Overall satisfaction measures among Pharma, Life Sciences and Medical device contractors remain high in 2026, with most indicators showing either modest improvement or broadly stable sentiments. Pay continues to rank among the strongest areas of satisfaction. In 2026, 86% of respondents reported satisfaction with their rate of pay, broadly consistent with last year. Satisfaction with flexibility of hours also increased marginally, rising from 83% in 2025 to 85% in 2026. Work life balance showed a similar improvement, with satisfaction increasing from 72% to 77%. Remote working options also saw an uplift, with satisfaction rising from 66% in 2025 to 71% in 2026. Some measures, however, recorded small declines compared with the previous year. Satisfaction with job location decreased slightly from 83% in 2025 to 81% in 2026. Perceptions of career progression also softened modestly, with satisfaction regarding progress toward overall career goals falling from 84% to 81%. Similarly, satisfaction with success achieved in one's career declined slightly from 86% to 84%.

Despite these modest movements across individual measures, overall life satisfaction remains strong. In 2026, 86% of respondents reported being satisfied with their life in general, a small increase from 85% in 2025. It is important to note that these slight fluctuations may be influenced by the sample of contractors surveyed and may not necessarily represent a significant underlying change.

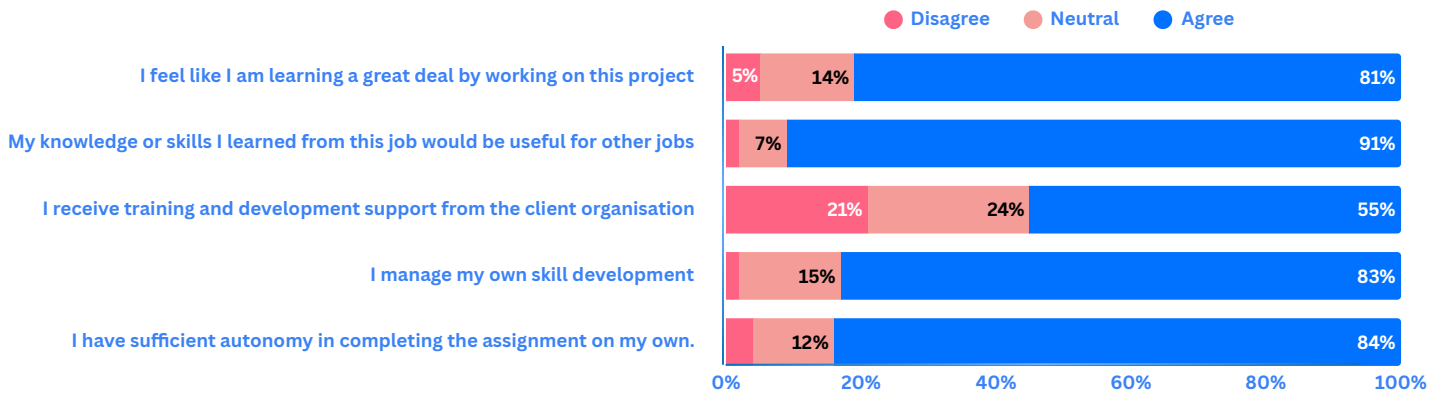


THE FUTURE AND FINDING WORK

Confidence in how Pharma, Life Sciences, and Medical Device contractors view their skills, learning, and autonomy has increased compared to 2025. 91% of respondents in 2026 agree that the knowledge and skills gained from their current roles are both useful and transferable, up from 87% in 2025.

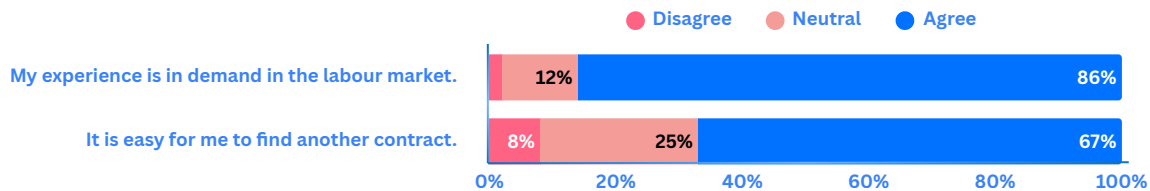
Contractors also report a strong degree of personal responsibility for maintaining their skills. A total of 83% agree that they manage their own skill development, while only 2% disagree. Similarly, 84% report having sufficient autonomy to complete their assignments independently, suggesting that many contractors experience a relatively high level of independence in their roles.

Views are more mixed when it comes to training and development support from client organisations. While 55% agree that they receive such support, a notable share of respondents are either neutral (24%) or disagree (21%). This may indicate that formal development support is less consistently provided, with many contractors relying more on self-directed skill development.



EMPLOYABILITY

This year 86% of respondents agree that their expertise is in demand in the labour market while 67% agree that it will be easy for them to find another contract.



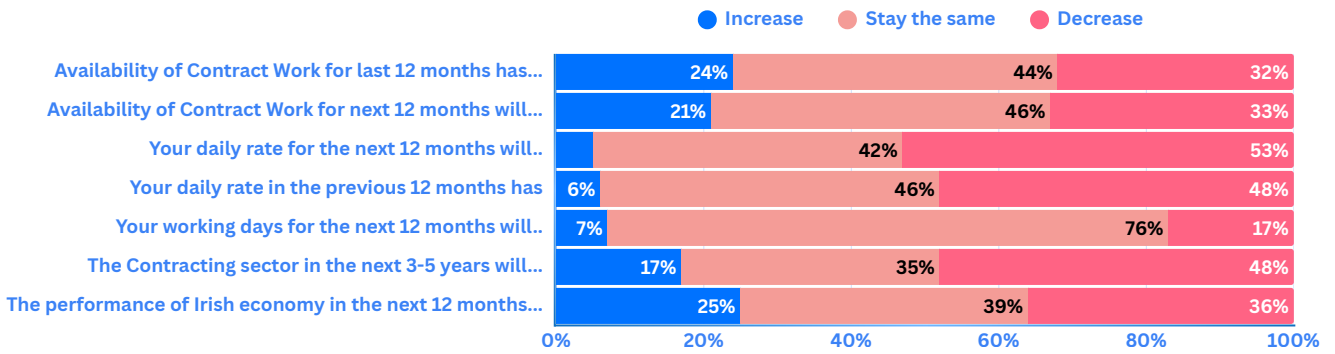
PHARMA CONTRACTORS THOUGHTS ON THE FUTURE

In 2026, Pharma, Life Sciences, and Medical Device contractors are less optimistic about the sector compared to 2025. In 2025, 44% of respondents agreed that contract availability had increased over the previous 12 months. This year, only 32% of respondents agreed that contract availability had increased over the previous 12 months, while 24% felt that the availability of contracts over the last 12 months had decreased, as opposed to 11% in 2025, perhaps signalling a growing concern that the market is tightening.

Expectations for the year ahead have also reduced. Just 33% expect contract availability to increase in the next 12 months (down from 38% in 2025), and the proportion expecting a decline has more than doubled from 10% in 2025 to 21% in 2026, reflecting increased caution. The expectation for increases in daily rates for the next 12 months remains positive with 53% anticipating higher daily rates (up slightly from 51% in 2025).

Only 17% foresee more working days in 2026 down from 21% in 2025, with 76% expecting no change, suggesting contractors are anticipating steady rather than increased demand in working days over the next 12 months. Confidence in the contracting sector's 3–5-year outlook has declined. Expectations of growth in the next 3–5 years have fallen from 54% in the last year to 48% this year, while those forecasting a decline in the contracting sector have risen from 12% to 17%. The performance of the Irish economy shows the sharpest drop, just 36% of respondents expect improvement in the performance of Irish economy in 2026 compared to 2025, and 25% expect conditions to worsen. While contractors remain confident in the sector's long-term potential they are becoming more cautious amid broader economic uncertainty.

PHARMA CONTRACTORS THOUGHTS ON THE FUTURE



CONFIDENCE INDEX

In 2026, confidence index scores across Pharma, Medical Device, and Life Sciences are down compared with 2025. Confidence in the contracting sector over the next three to five years has declined in all sectors, Pharma fell from +23 to +18 (-5), Medical Device from +33 to +28 (-5), and Life Sciences saw the largest drop from +28 to +13 (-15). While all the scores remain positive, the significant fall in Life Sciences indicates a considerable weakening in outlook.

Confidence in the Irish economy has weakened across all sectors. In Pharma, the confidence index declined from +18 in 2025 to +7 in 2026, while Medical Device fell from +21 to +14. The largest change is observed in the Life Sciences sector, where the confidence index moved from a positive +20 in 2025 to -2 in 2026, indicating a more cautious outlook among contractors in this sector.

Confidence in both the contracting sector and the wider economy has declined. Economic optimism, previously steady through 2024 and 2025, weakened sharply in 2026, especially for those contracting within Life Sciences.



TECHNOLOGY



QUOTE FROM RESPONDENT

'Working independently gives me the freedom to focus deeply on technical tasks without constant interruptions. It also allows me to take full ownership of solutions, which is motivating and rewarding as an IT specialist'

Ireland continues to grow its status as a key European hub for technology innovation and digital enterprise, supported by strong foreign direct investment, a highly skilled workforce and a growing indigenous start-up ecosystem. The ICT sector now employs over 110,000 people, and Ireland is home to more than 2,300 technology start-ups, collectively supporting approximately 50,000 jobs across software, AI, fintech and digital services ([Central Statistics Office](#), [Scale Ireland](#)). However, there was a 4% decline in employment in early 2025, driven by a reduction of 16,400 roles in computer programming, consultancy and related activities, underscoring the ongoing volatility within the industry. ([RTE](#))


From an economic perspective, Ireland's ICT market is estimated to be worth circa €22 billion in 2025, with projections indicating growth to over €31 billion by 2029, driven by continued demand for cloud services, data infrastructure and enterprise digital transformation ([Mordor Intelligence](#)).

Throughout 2025, increased AI adoption, regulatory-led technology investment and enterprise modernisation programmes have reshaped operating models and skills requirements as the sector moves into 2026 ([IBEC](#)). Budget 2026 has planned to provide a €9.4 billion investment in infrastructure, supporting productivity and long-term growth, while investments in digital connectivity and innovation strengthen efficiency, scalability, and Ireland's standing as a competitive hub for technology and research ([PwC](#)).

Cybersecurity remains one of the most significant growth opportunities within ICT. Workforce demand and industry growth is generally expected to remain at 10% annually, creating a requirement for an approx. additional 10,000 cybersecurity professionals in Ireland ([Cyber Ireland](#); [Enterprise Ireland](#)).

ICT CONTRACTORS ARE HIGHLY SATISFIED WITH THEIR CAREER SUCCESS!

80% satisfied with their success



AVERAGE CONTRACT LENGTH


The Average length of contract in the ICT sector is just over a year long at 14 months.

AVERAGE DAILY RATE IN TECHNOLOGY

€572

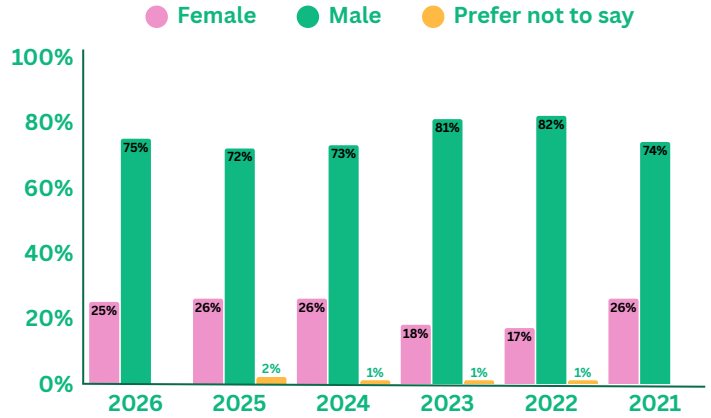
ICT GENDER SPLIT

75% Men 25% Women



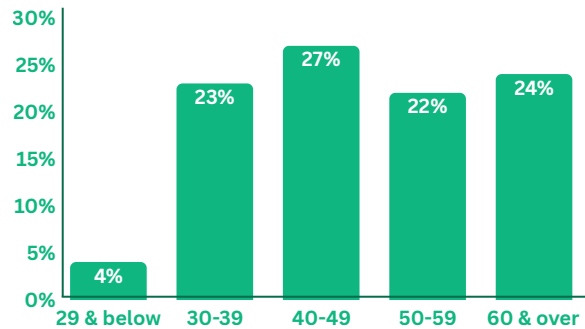
GENDER

In 2026, the gender split has remained almost similar to the previous year. Males account for 75% of ICT contractors, compared to 72% in 2025, while females represent 25%. Since 2024, the share of female contractors in this sector has hovered around a quarter.



AGE

In 2026, the age profile of ICT contractors showed increased participation from older workforce. The share of contractors aged 29 and under declined to 3%, down from 7% in 2025 and 10% in 2024. In contrast, those aged 60 and over accounted for 24%, up from 15% in 2025 and just 8% in 2024. The 40–49 age group has declined from 32% to 27%, while the 50–59 group remained stable at 22%.



The mean age of ICT contractors has risen from 46 years in 2025 to 49 years in 2026. However, the increase in average age has not translated into an increase in average daily rates. The average daily rate reported has fallen from €632 in 2025 to €572 in 2026, more in line with levels seen in years prior to 2025, suggesting a market correction in terms of daily rates.

AVERAGE AGE

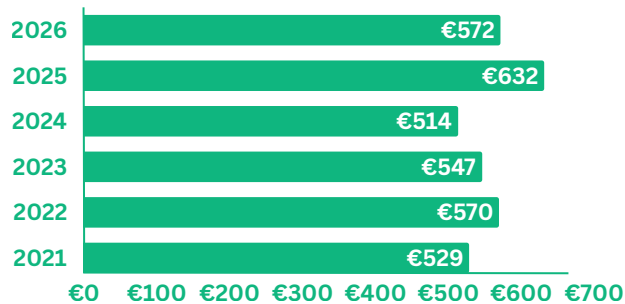


DAILY RATE

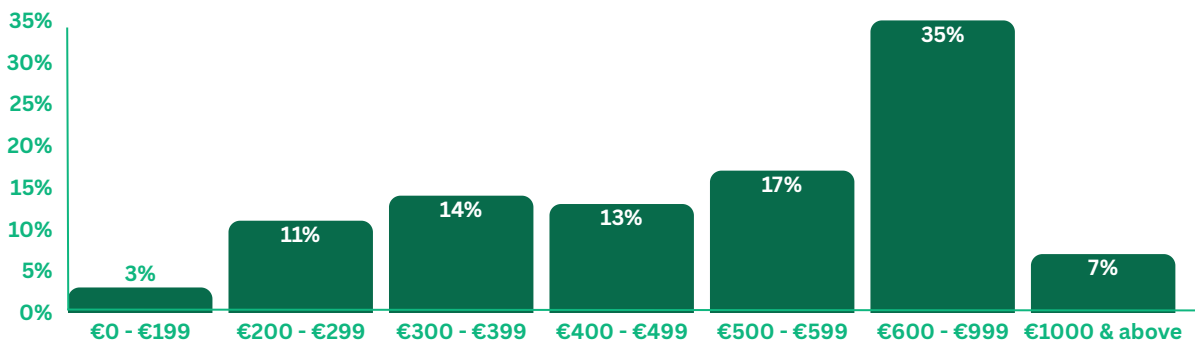
In 2026, contractors continue to be concentrated in the higher income bracket with around 59% earning Euro 500 and above. The €600–€999 band remains the largest category, remaining similar to the last year. The share of contractors earning €1,000 or more remains at 7%.

Shifts are more visible in the middle-income bands. The proportion earning €500–€599 fell slightly from 19% to 17%, while the €400–€499 group declined from 17% to 13%. At the same time, the share of contractors in the €300–€399 range rose from 10% to 14%. Overall, the results remain fairly consistent.

AVG. DAILY RATES



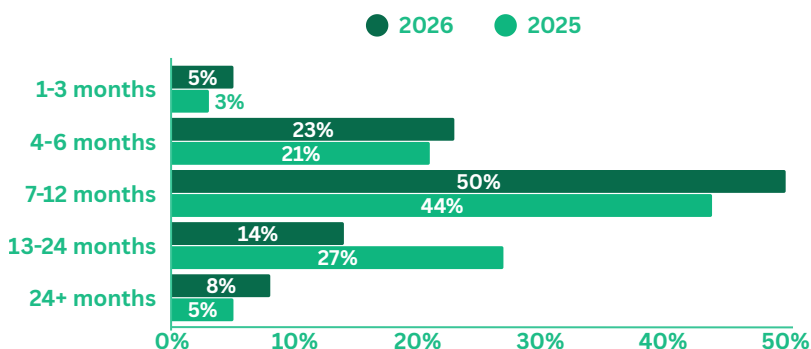
DAILY RATES



CONTRACT LENGTH

In 2026, the average contract length reduced slightly from 15 months in 2025 to 14 months, though no conclusive comments can be made. The only major change that can be seen is the drop in percentage of contracts with 13–24 Months length. The 7–12 month category has grown from 44% in 2025 to 50% in 2026. Contracts over 24 months have seen a small increase from 5% to 9%.

The 2026 data indicates that clients might be favouring shorter contracts, especially within the 7–12 month range. The reduction in contract length combined with the reduction in daily rates, points to a decrease in average earnings potential.

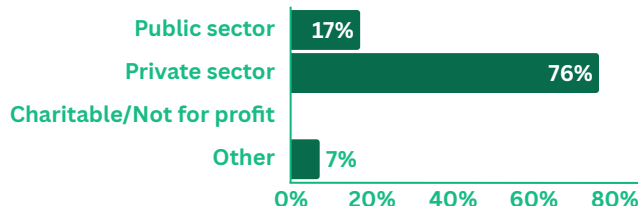


AVG. CONTRACT LENGTHS



SECTOR

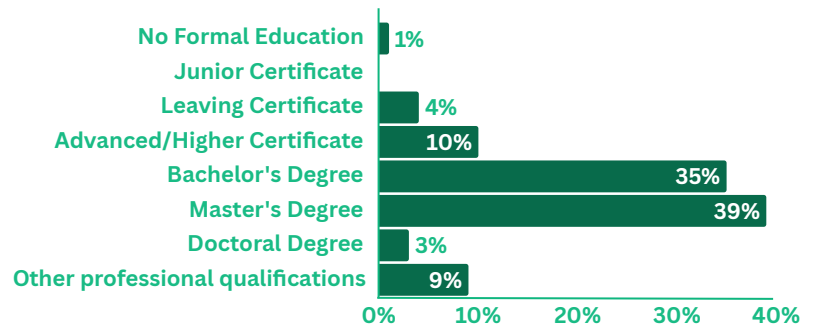
Private organisations have again shown up as the main source of contracting opportunities, while demand from the public sector has remained limited.



EDUCATION

In 2026, the education profile of ICT contractors remains comparable to 2025. The share of respondents with an Advanced or Higher Certificate fell from 16% to 10%.

Majority of the contractors (86%) either hold a Bachelor's degree or above or have completed some other professional qualifications. This signals a strong educational criterion required to work in this sector.

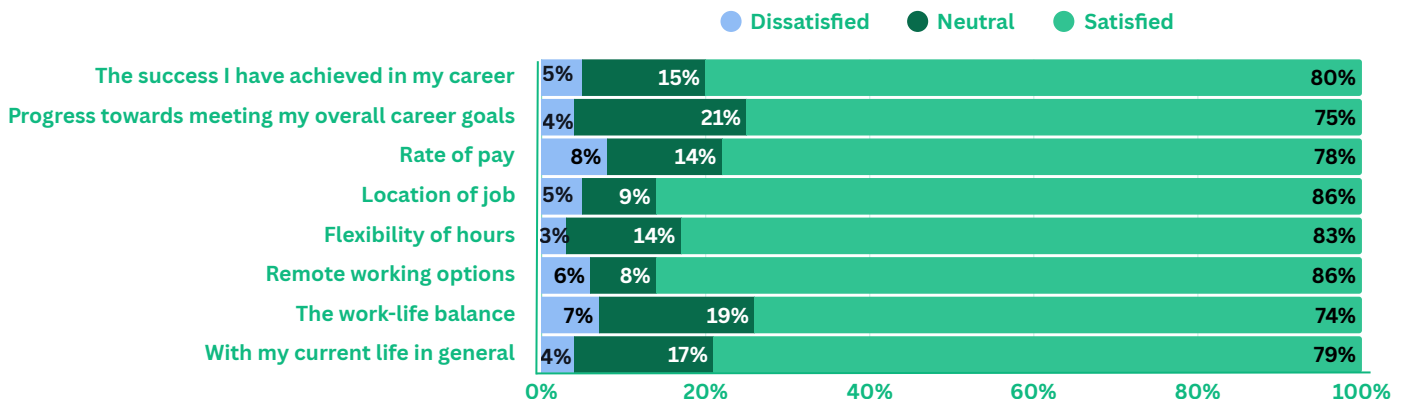


HOW ICT CONTRACTORS FEEL ABOUT THEIR WORK

In 2026, satisfaction levels among ICT contractors dropped across all career and lifestyle measures compared with 2025. While they still remain satisfied, the intensity of satisfaction has declined.

Satisfaction with career-related criteria have declined the most, satisfaction with career success fell from 93% in 2025 to 80% in 2026, and satisfaction with of the progress they have made towards meeting their career goals fell from 88% agreement in 2025 to 75% in 2026. Satisfaction with rate of pay declined from 85% in 2025 to 78% in 2026.

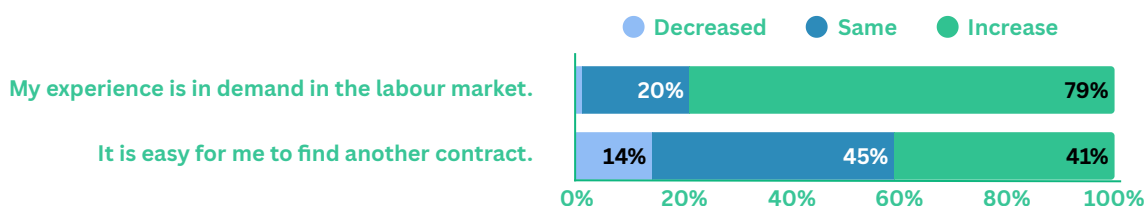
Satisfaction levels with working conditions also declined in 2026 compared to 2025, satisfaction with flexible hours dropped from 91% to 83%, remote working from 87% to 86%, and work-life balance declined from 86% to 74%. Satisfaction with life in general decreased from 87% in 2025 to 79% in 2026.



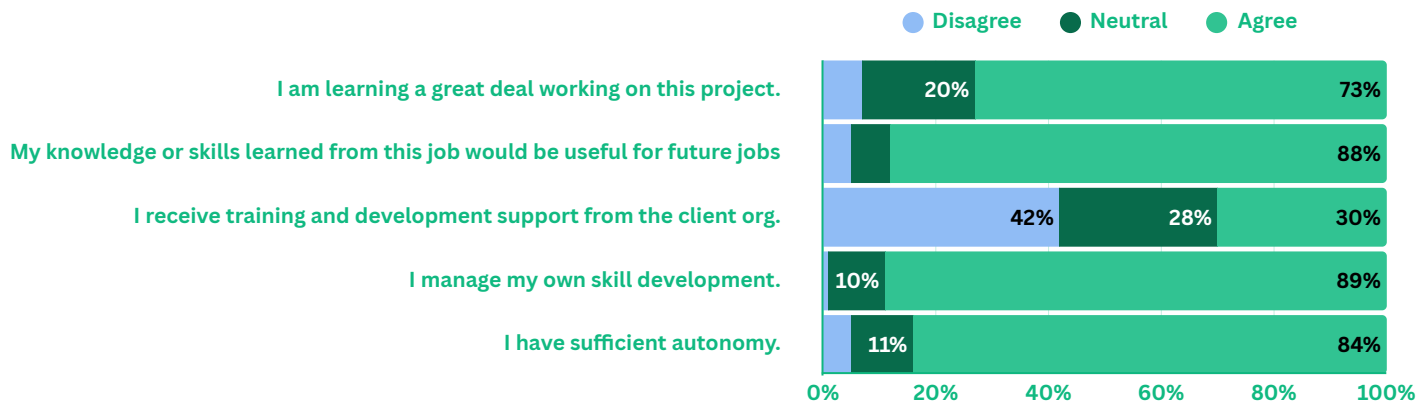
EMPLOYABILITY

Starting 2026, 79% of contractors believe their experience is in demand, 20% are neutral, and 1% disagree. This is consistent with last year i.e. 2025, suggesting overall confidence in ICT contractors' employability remains strong and stable. Moreover, 41% of contractors agree that it is easy to find another contract, 45% are neutral, and 14% disagree. This represents a slight improvement in confidence compared with 2025, when fewer agreed (38%) and more disagreed (22%).

For learnings, 73% of the respondents agree that they are learning a great deal by working on their current project, and 88% believe these skills will be useful in future roles. 89% of contractors manage their own skill development, reflecting the self-directed nature of learning and upskilling in contracting. 84% feel they have sufficient autonomy to complete their work. Just 30% of respondents agree that they receive training or development support from clients, 42% of respondents disagree, indicating that learning remains largely self-driven rather than client led.



FINDING WORK

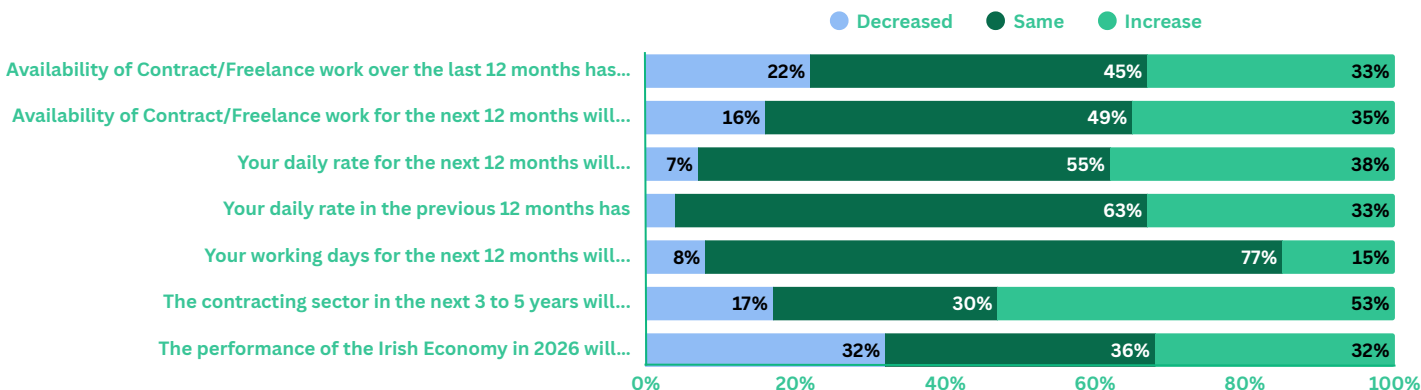


FUTURE EXPECTATIONS

For 2026, ICT contractors are more cautious in their outlook than in 2025. Looking back over the last 12 months, 45% believe contract availability stayed the same and 33% reported an increase, while 22% perceived a decrease. For the next 12 months, almost half (49%) expect contract availability to remain unchanged, 35% expect an increase in availability, while 16% are expecting contract availability to decline.

Expectations around daily rates are also conservative. 55% of respondents believe their rate will stay the same in the year ahead, up from 49% in 2025, 38% expect an increase down from 47% who expected an increase in 2025. In terms of working days the majority of respondents (77%) expect no change, while just 15% expect an increase. Longer term confidence in the performance of the contracting sector remains positive, with 53% expecting growth over the next three to five years, although 17% expect the sector to decrease. In terms of the Irish economy 32% expect improvement in the economy this year compared to economic performance in 2025, 36% expect no change, and 32% expect a decrease in performance.

The reason for this conservative outlook may be due to the ongoing geopolitical tensions leading to uncertainty in the markets. However, these reasons remain assumed.



CONFIDENCE INDEX

In 2025, ICT contractors were highly optimistic about both the contracting sector and the wider Irish economy. For 2026, there confidence seems to have reduced, especially regarding economic conditions in Ireland. Confidence in the contracting sector over the next three to five years fell from +31 to +20. Confidence in the Irish economy declined significantly from +14 in 2025 to just +0.3 in 2026. This may indicate that ICT contractors still view contracting as a strong and viable model but express uncertainty about Ireland's economic performance for the year ahead.

THE IRISH ECONOMY CONFIDENCE INDEX

| | |
|------|------|
| 2026 | +0.3 |
| 2025 | +14 |
| 2024 | +18 |
| 2023 | +11 |
| 2022 | +43 |
| 2021 | +16 |

THE CONTRACTING SECTOR CONFIDENCE INDEX

| | |
|------|-----|
| 2026 | +20 |
| 2025 | +31 |
| 2024 | +29 |
| 2023 | +35 |
| 2022 | +41 |
| 2021 | +35 |

FINANCE



QUOTE FROM RESPONDENT

“The ability to work on cutting-edge AI projects with leading organizations, directly implementing solutions that have measurable business impact. I find fulfilment in the autonomy to leverage my technical expertise, the opportunity to continuously learn emerging technologies, and the flexibility to balance multiple high-impact initiatives. Working with Blue Chip companies allows me to solve complex problems at scale while maintaining control over my career trajectory and professional growth.”


Ireland’s financial services sector remains strong, with solid export performance, jobs growth and international investment. The industry has expanded significantly in recent years and now directly employs over 60,000 people. Its footprint spans banking, asset and wealth management, funds, insurance, payments and fintech, and Ireland hosts operations for more than 30 international banks alongside a large cohort of global service firms, reinforcing its position as a leading European hub for internationally traded financial services. The sector makes a substantial contribution to economic output through high-value activity, export earnings and Exchequer returns, and is identified in government strategy as a core pillar of enterprise policy, with the current Ireland for Finance strategy (2019–2026) supporting substantive industry development.

Looking ahead to 2026, the Department of Finance’s plans, including the Ireland for Finance Strategy 2026–2030 consultation paper published last July and ongoing public commentary, point to continued, albeit more modest, real growth and emphasise the need for a competitive, well-regulated financial sector to support economic resilience and sustainable public finances.

As highlighted by the Department of Finance and in recent Budget 2026 documentation, financial services and related professional services are central to maintaining Ireland’s position as a small, open, export-oriented economy and to financing long-term investment in infrastructure, climate and nature under the State’s medium-term fiscal plans.

FINANCE CONTRACTORS ARE HIGHLY SATISFIED WITH THEIR CAREER SUCCESS!

89% satisfied with their success



AVERAGE CONTRACT LENGTH


The Average length of contract in the Finance sector is just over a year long at 13 months.

AVERAGE DAILY RATE IN FINANCE

€604

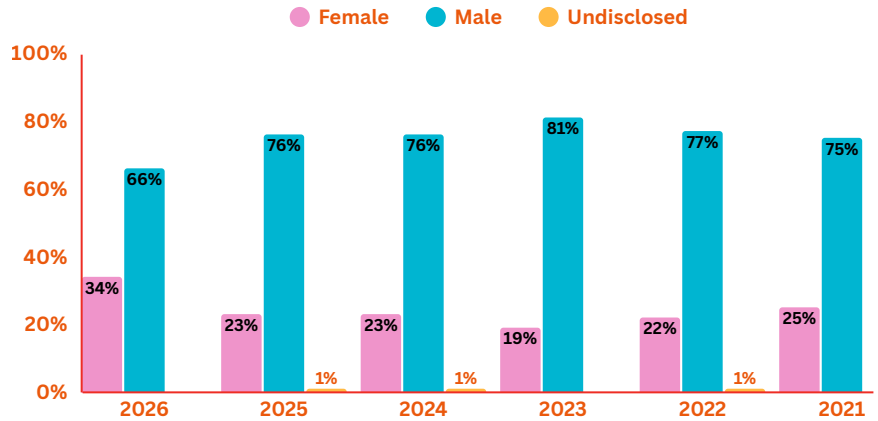
FINANCE GENDER SPLIT

66% Men 34% Women 0% Undisclosed



GENDER

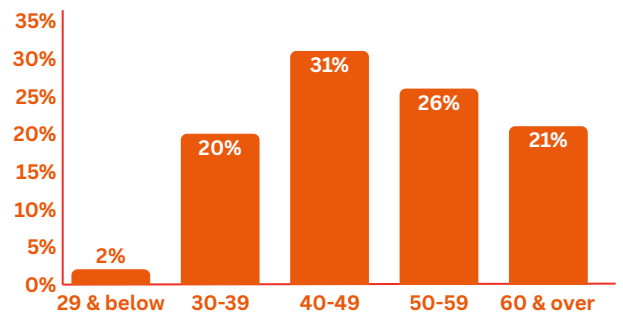
The finance sector shows 66% male participation compared to 34% female participation. There has been a significant increase in the number of females operating in the finance sector up 11% from the last year. This has been the highest percentage of females reported since this research began.



AGE

In 2026, the age profile of contractors shifted younger compared with 2025. The average age remained almost similar, with a slight drop from 49 years in 2025 to 48 years in 2026. The percentage share of those aged 30–39 almost doubled from 11% to 20%, indicating stronger mid-career entry into contracting roles from the previous year. At the same time, the core 40–49 age group declined from 37% to 31%, while the 50–59 cohort also decreased from 30% to 26%. Participation among those aged 60 and over increased slightly, from 18% to 20%. Representation of contractors under 30 fell from 4% to 2%, indicating that early-career entry to contracting in the finance sector remains uncommon.

The average daily rate declined significantly from €683 to €604. This may be attributed to the increased participation of mid-career professionals in the sector, drawing the mean rates downwards.



AVERAGE AGE **48**
Years

AVERAGE AGE

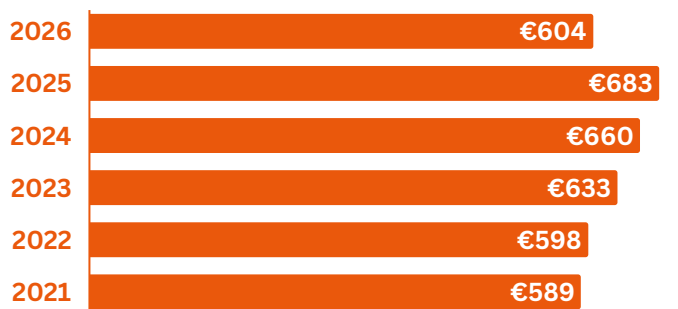


WHAT FINANCE CONTRACTORS ARE EARNING

In 2026, the average daily rate in the finance sector is €604, a decline from €683 last year. Contracting in the finance sector remains highly lucrative as the average daily rate remains well above the overall average of €556. This reinforces finance as one of the highest-paid contracting sectors with most finance contractors continuing to earn at the upper end of the market.

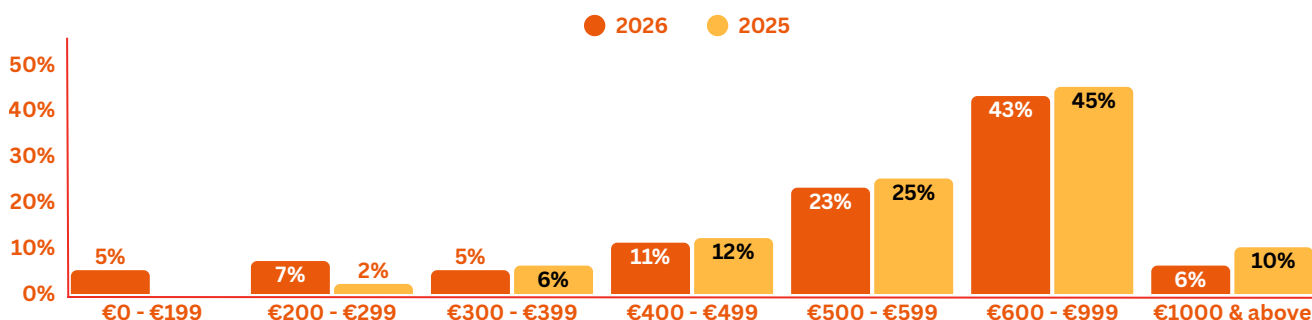
Starting 2026, 72% of contractors in finance industry reported earnings of €500 or more per day, down from 80% in 2025. The share of contractors earning between €600 and €999 remains dominant at 43% in 2026, down slightly from 2025 at 45%. Those earning €1,000 or more per day fell slightly from 10% to 7%. At the lower end of the scale, 5% of contractors in 2026 are earning under €200.

AVG. DAILY RATES BY YEAR



AVG. DAILY RATE = **€604**

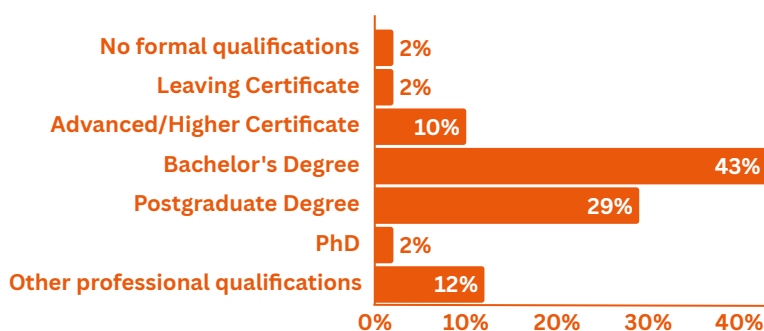
DAILY RATES BY YEAR



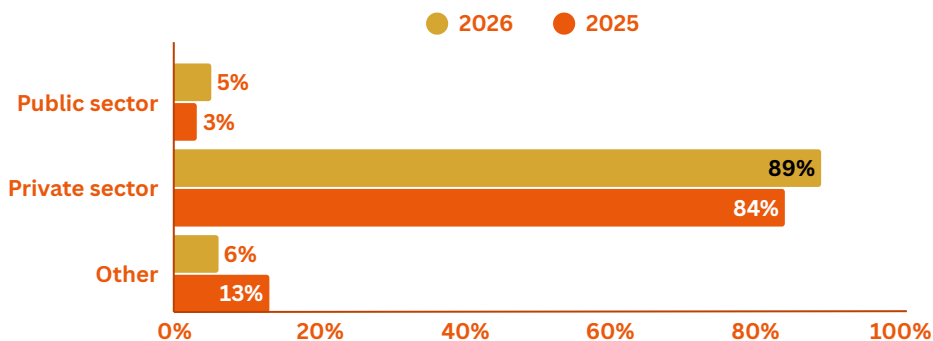
EDUCATION

86% of finance sector respondents in 2026 hold at least a Bachelor's degree qualification or have done other professional courses.

The educational distribution of contractors remains broadly consistent with last years, showing strong demand for qualified and well-educated contractors.

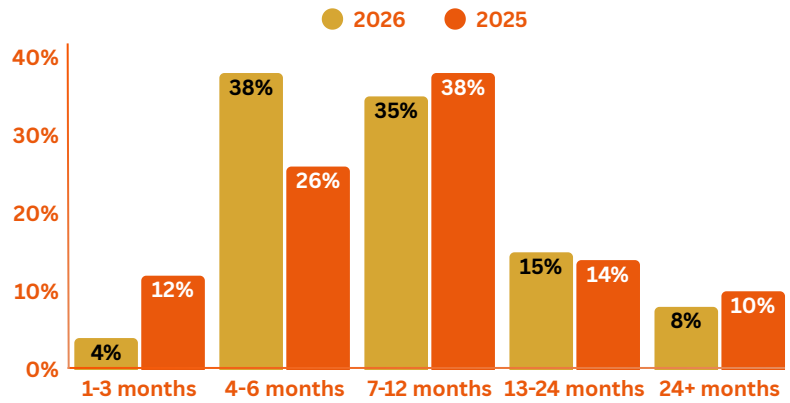


SECTOR



CONTRACT LENGTH

The average contract duration in this sector stands at 14 months. Contracts with durations of 4–6 months increased markedly to 38%, compared with 26% in 2025, indicating a notable shift toward mid-term engagements. In contrast, very short assignments of 1–3 months declined sharply from 12% to 4%. Contracts within the 7–12 month category accounted for 35% of engagements in 2026, representing a slight decline from 38% in 2025. Meanwhile, 23% of contracts extend to 13 months or longer, broadly consistent with the distribution observed in 2025. The proportion of long-term contracts exceeding 24 months remained fairly consistent with the last year.

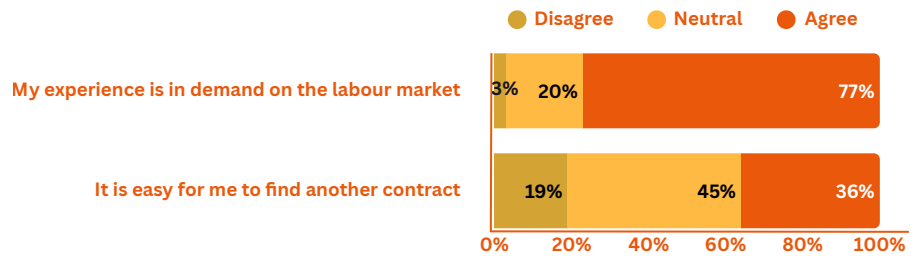


AVERAGE CONTRACT LENGTHS



EMPLOYABILITY

Employability perceptions remain positive, with 77% believing that their experience is in demand, compared with 75% in 2025. However, confidence of contractors in securing another contract is weaker compared to last year. Only 36% say it would be easy, down from 49% in 2025.

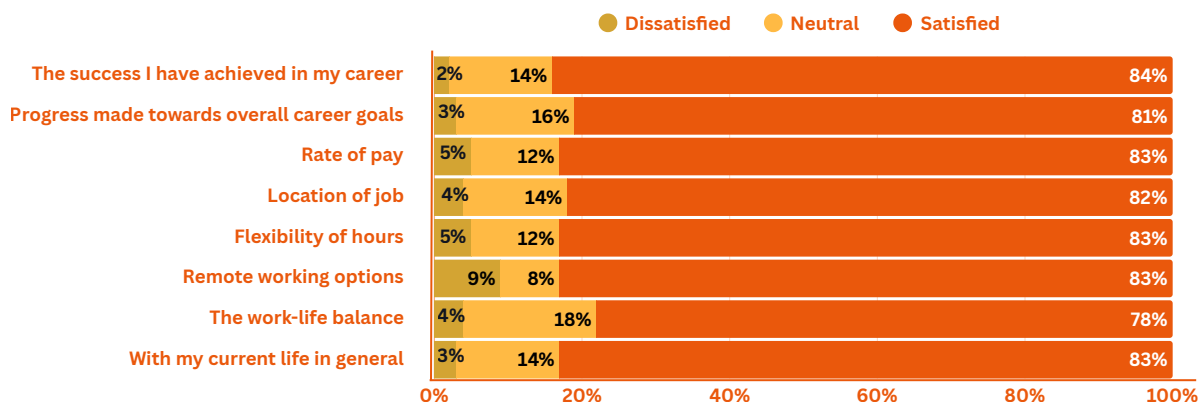


HOW FINANCE CONTRACTORS FEEL ABOUT THEIR WORK

Finance contractors continue to feel positive about their lives but express less satisfaction with their career opportunities and working conditions compared to 2025.

Career success satisfaction fell from 89% to 84%, and satisfaction with progress made towards career-goals declined slightly from 84% to 81%.

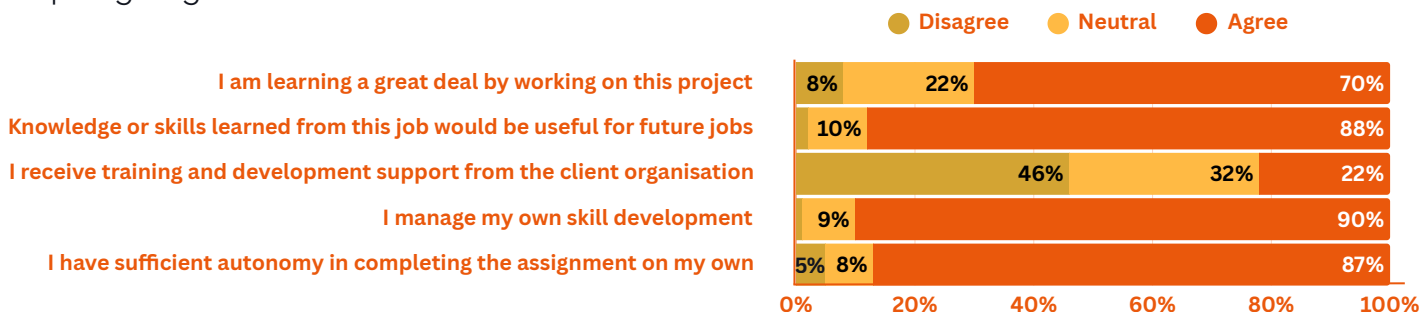
Satisfaction with rate of pay decreased from 88% in 2025 to 83% in 2026. A similar pattern appears across job conditions. Satisfaction with location of job fell from 86% to 82%, and flexibility of hours declined from 89% to 83%. Remote working options satisfaction dropped from 90% to 83%. Work-life balance satisfaction dipped marginally, from 80% to 78%. Satisfaction with life in general increased from 80% in 2025 to 83% in 2026. Overall, a slight decrease across most satisfaction measures can be seen compared to 2025.



FINDING WORK

Most finance contractors feel they are developing transferable skills, with 88% agreeing their knowledge will be useful for future roles. However, only 70% feel they are learning a great deal on their current project. This gap suggests learning is occurring, but not always on the current role.

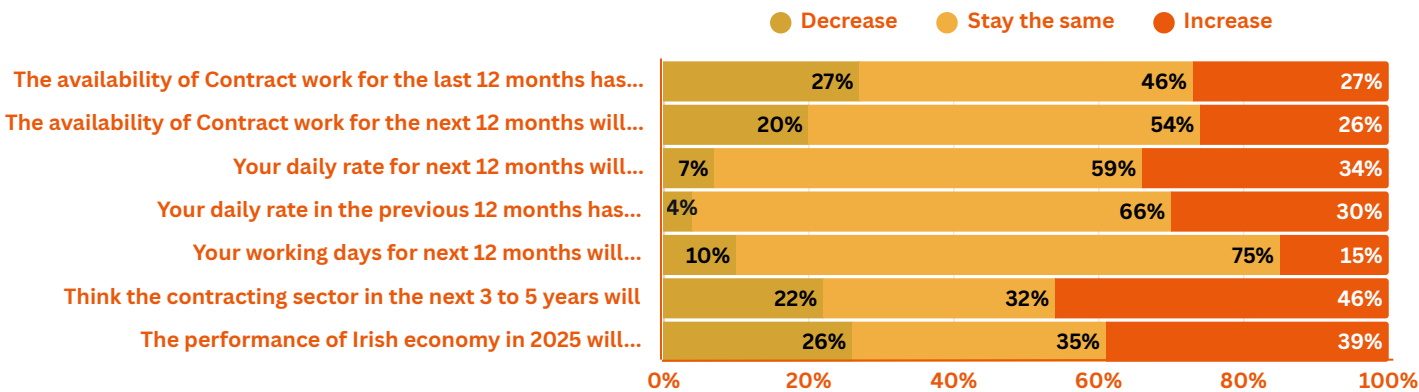
Responsibility for development clearly sits with the individual. 90% manage their own skill development, while just 22% receive training or development support from client organisations. Nearly half actively disagree that clients provide development support. Autonomy remains a strong positive. 87% report sufficient independence in completing assignments.



FUTURE EXPECTATIONS

The share of finance contractors expecting greater availability of contract work over the next 12 months dropped from 38% in 2025 to 26% in 2026, with most now expecting no change. Expectations for daily rate increases held steady at 34% in both years, although more contractors in 2026 anticipate rates remaining unchanged rather than increasing.

Contractors in the finance sector continue to view the contracting sector positively in 2026, though expectations are more restrained than in 2025. For 2026, 78% believe the sector will stay the same or grow over the next three to five years, compared with 87% believing this in 2025. The proportion expecting growth fell from 51% to 46%, while those expecting a decline increased from 13% to 22%, showing a shift towards caution. Views on the Irish economy show a similar pattern. For 2026, 39% expect the economy to perform better than in 2025, down from 43% the year before, while the share expecting worse performance increased from 13% to 26%. This indicates rising concern about broader economic conditions. This may be due to the rising uncertainty in the markets due to geopolitical tensions and abrupt global policy changes.



CONFIDENCE INDEX

Those working in the finance sector are optimistic about both the contracting sector and the Irish economy. In 2026 the confidence index score in relation to the performance of the contracting sector in the next 3–5 years is +17. Finance contractors expressed more caution about the performance of the Irish economy for the year ahead with a confidence index score of +7, down from +16 last year.

THE IRISH ECONOMY CONFIDENCE INDEX

| | |
|------|-----|
| 2026 | +7 |
| 2025 | +16 |
| 2024 | +10 |
| 2023 | +6 |
| 2022 | +40 |
| 2021 | +7 |

THE CONTRACTING SECTOR CONFIDENCE INDEX

| | |
|------|-----|
| 2026 | +17 |
| 2025 | +22 |
| 2024 | +24 |
| 2023 | +34 |
| 2022 | +40 |
| 2021 | +37 |

ENGINEERING



QUOTE FROM RESPONDENT


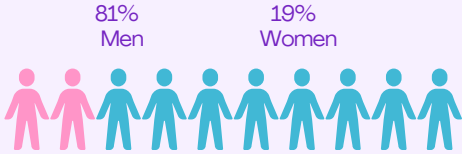
“Working independently is fulfilling because it offers autonomy, deep focus, flexibility, and a sense of ownership. It allows for creative problem-solving and personal accountability, leading to higher satisfaction and productivity.”

Ireland’s engineering sector remains a core driver of the economy, the sector employs over 50,000 people and is made up of over 10,800 enterprises, 65% of them are indigenous companies. It is responsible for exports of €8.8 billion. ([lbec](#))

The Consultant Engineering Services industry in Ireland has seen increased demand for technical and specialist services across sectors such as telecommunications, water, transport and utilities ([IBISWorld](#)). Public investment is still a key demand signal for engineering capacity, particularly in transport infrastructure, with Budget 2026 setting out major funding commitments. ([gov.ie](#)). Government focus on sustainability and innovation has intensified, with engineering firms increasingly involved in low-carbon technologies, smart infrastructure and digital engineering practices that support Ireland’s transition to a greener, more competitive economy.

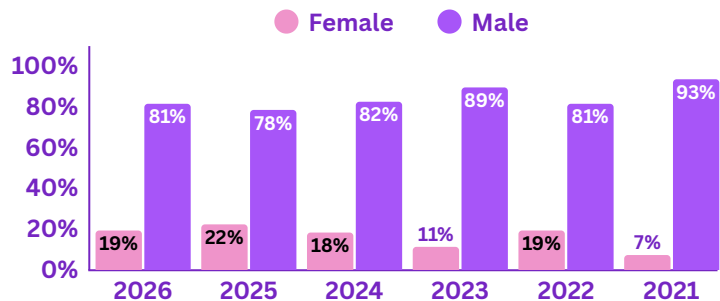
In the 2026 Budget submission, industry representatives emphasised the strategic need for supportive policies to sustain competitiveness amid global trade pressures, including calls for mechanisms such as export credit insurance to protect firms against tariff risks ([lbec](#)). The sector has also seen continued private investment, with companies like Egis announcing the creation of 100 new engineering roles in Ireland as infrastructure project pipelines expand ([Engineers Ireland](#)).

As Ireland further positions itself as a hub for innovation and sustainable engineering, the industry continues to offer strong prospects for employment, skills development and long-term economic impact.

| | |
|---|--|
| <p>ENGINEERING CONTRACTORS ARE HIGHLY SATISFIED WITH THEIR CAREER SUCCESS!</p> <p>84% satisfied with their success</p>  | <p>AVERAGE CONTRACT LENGTH</p> <p>The Average length of contract in the Engineering sector is over a year long at 17 months.</p> |
| <p>AVERAGE DAILY RATE IN ENGINEERING</p> <p>€479</p> | <p>ENGINEERING GENDER SPLIT</p> <p>81% Men 19% Women</p>  |

GENDER

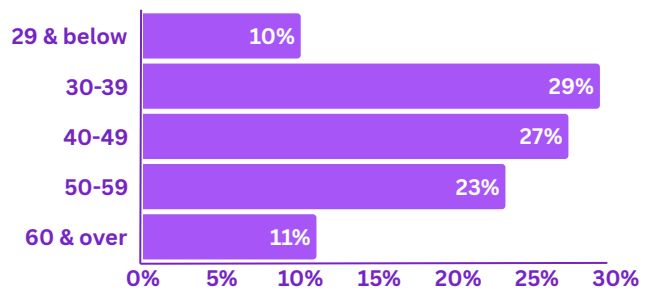
In 2026, the engineering contracting sector remained predominantly constituted with males, with 81% males and 19% females, comparable with 78% males and 22% females in 2025. It is disappointing to see this slightly decline in female participation in the sector especially when awareness efforts targeted at increasing female participation continue, including Engineers Ireland’s STEPS programmes.



AGE

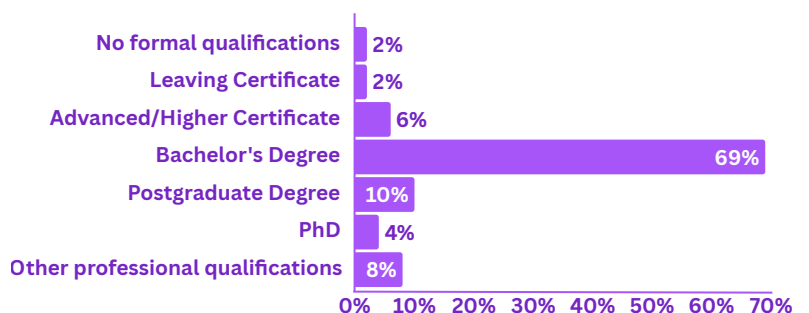
The average age of contractors in the engineering sector increased to 45 years in 2026, up slightly from 43 years in 2025. Despite this rise, engineering contractors remain younger than the overall contractor population, where the average age stands at 47 years.

Contractors aged under 50 accounted for 66% of the engineering contractor workforce in 2026, representing a slight decline from 69% in 2025. This may indicate a gradual shift toward an older age profile within the sector. The most notable change occurred among the 60+ age group, whose share doubled from 6% in 2025 to 12% in 2026. This sharp increase may suggest a growing presence of late-career specialists in this sector.

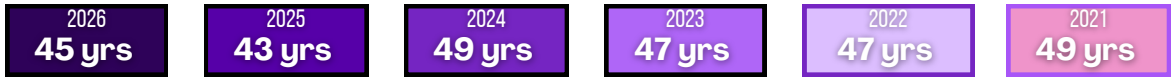


EDUCATION

For education, 2026 results show that 83% contractors in this sector have achieved Bachelors or higher level of education (Bachelor’s 69%, Postgraduate 10%, PhD 4%), compared with 78% in 2025 with Bachelors level or higher (Bachelor’s 47% and Master’s 31%).



AVERAGE AGE



DAILY RATE

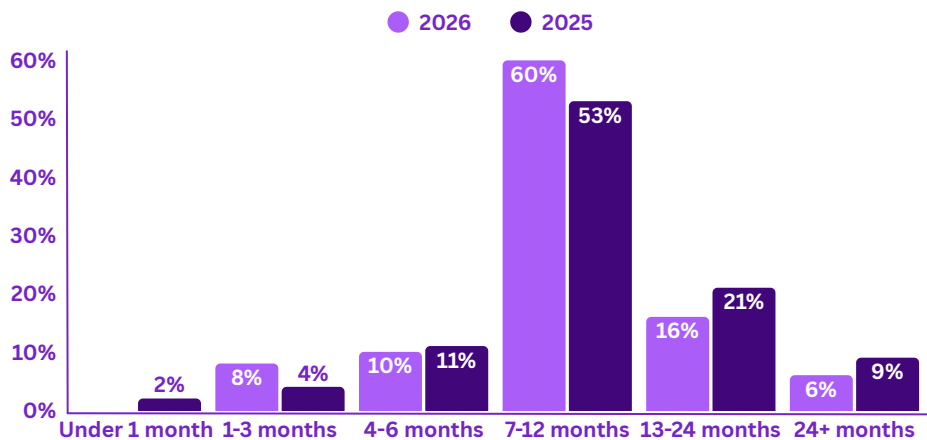
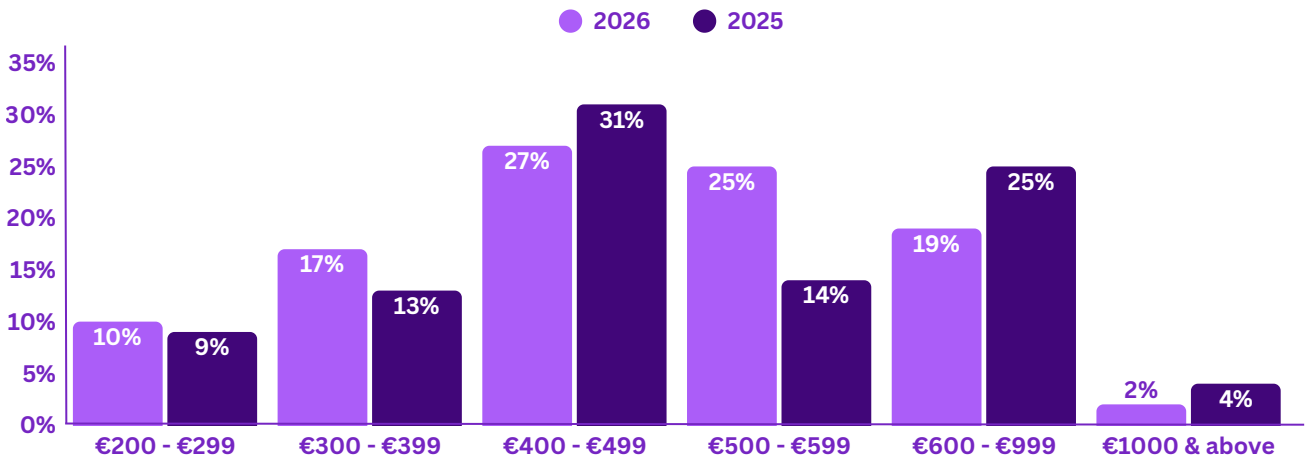
Average daily rates for contractors declined in 2026, with the mean rate dropping from €519 in 2025 to €479, a decrease of 7.7%. The average daily rate distribution by age changed as well, compared to last year's survey: the percentage of contractors earning €500–€599 per day increased from 14% to 25%, while those earning the €600–€999 rate band decreased from 25% to 19%, and those earning €1,000+ declined from 4% to 2%. Overall, little over half of the contractors reported earning less than €500 and little less than half reported earning over €500.

AVG. DAILY RATES



Average **€479**
Daily Rate Per Day

DAILY RATE



CONTRACT LENGTH

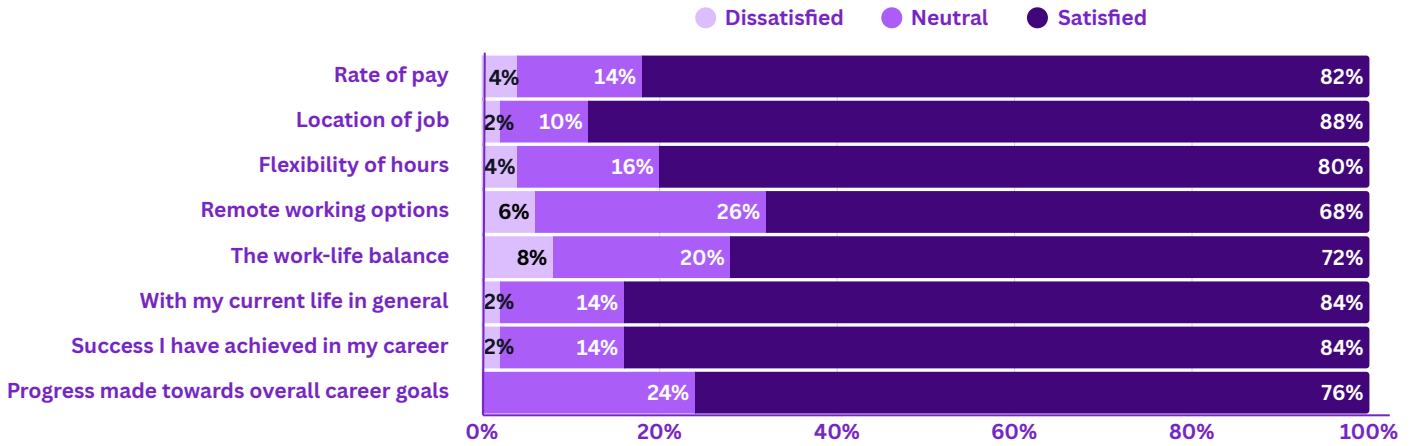
An increase in average contract length can be noted for this year's survey. The mean moved from 15 months in 2025 to 17 months in 2026. Contracts of 7–12 months increased from 53% to 60%. Long contracts (24+ months) declined from 9% to 6%, while 13–24 months also fell from 21% to 16%. Shorter contracts under 6 months were stable at 18% in 2026 versus 17% in 2025.

AVERAGE CONTRACT LENGTHS



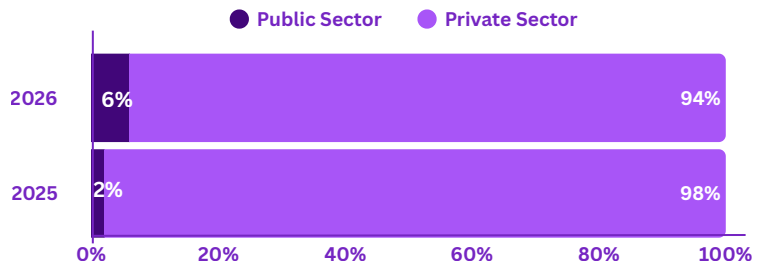
HOW ENGINEERING AND TECHNICAL CONTRACTORS FEEL ABOUT THEIR WORK

Satisfaction improved in several quality-of-life measures in 2026. Satisfaction with life in general increased from 79% in 2025 to 84% in 2026. Satisfaction with work-life balance increased significantly from 58% to 72%, and satisfaction with job location increased from 71% in 2025 to 88% in 2026. Satisfaction with remote working options was relatively stable, moving from 67% to 68% as was satisfaction with the flexibility of hours 81% in 2025 versus 80% in 2026. The slight decrease was in rate of pay satisfaction, falling from 88% to 82%, which aligns with the lower average daily rate in 2026. Satisfaction levels with career outcomes are high, with 84% satisfied with career success and 76% satisfied with the overall progress towards career goals.



SECTOR

94% of engineering contracts are in the private sector with 6% in the public sector up from 2% in 2025.

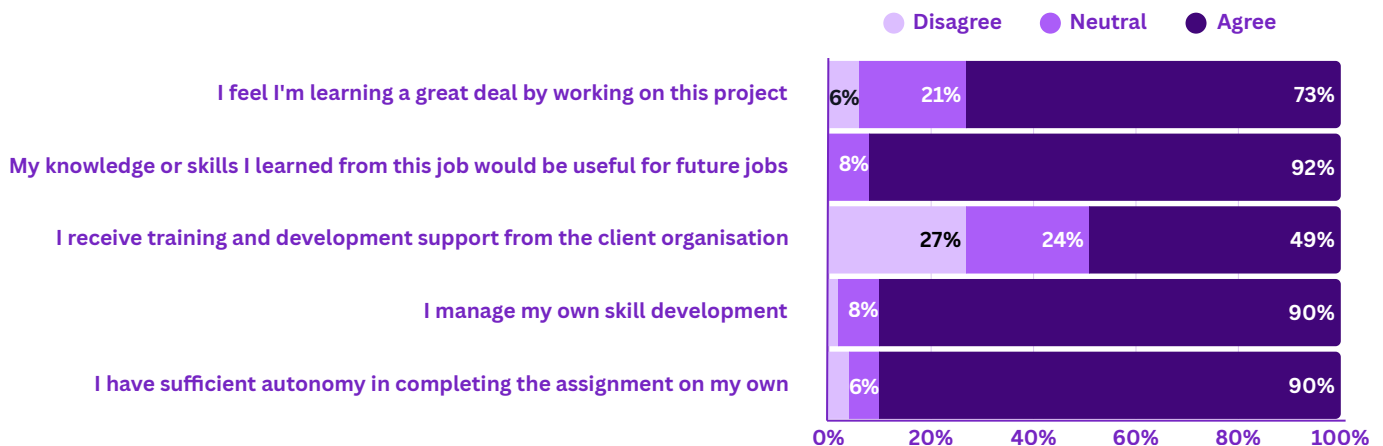


FINDING WORK

Engineering and technical contractors report very strong learning outcomes from their project work. Most feel that their roles actively build transferable skills and support long-term employability, even when formal training support from clients is limited.

Nearly three quarters (73%) agree that they are learning a great deal on their current project. For knowledge and skills transferability, 92% agree that the knowledge and skills gained on their current assignment will be useful for future roles, suggesting that working on engineering projects builds a valuable knowledge bank over time, with usefulness for future projects.

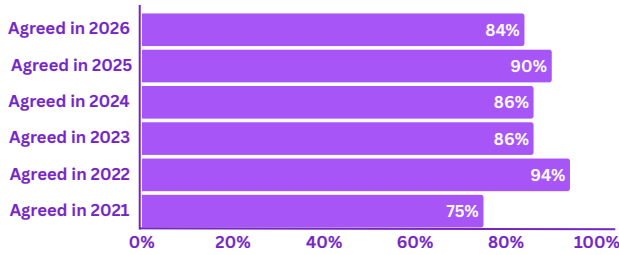
90% of the contractors in this sector reported that they actively manage their own skill development, while 49% reported receiving training and development support from their client organisation. This suggests that, in practice, professional development in engineering sector is largely contractor-led rather than client-driven. For autonomy, 90% agree that they have sufficient autonomy to complete assignments independently.



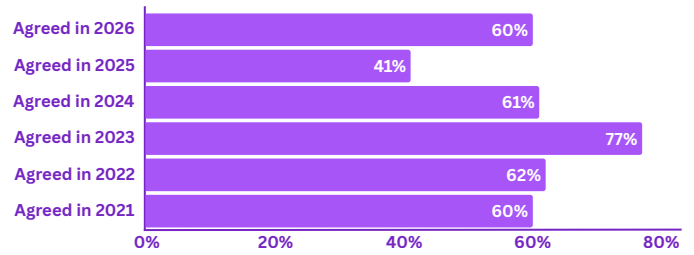
EMPLOYABILITY

84% of engineering contractors agree that their experience is in demand in the labour market, as against 90% in 2025. Engineering contractors were also positive about the availability of roles, with 60% agreeing that it would be easy for them to find another contract up, from 41% in 2025.

MY EXPERIENCE IS IN DEMAND ON THE LABOUR MARKET...



IT IS EASY FOR ME TO FIND ANOTHER CONTRACT...

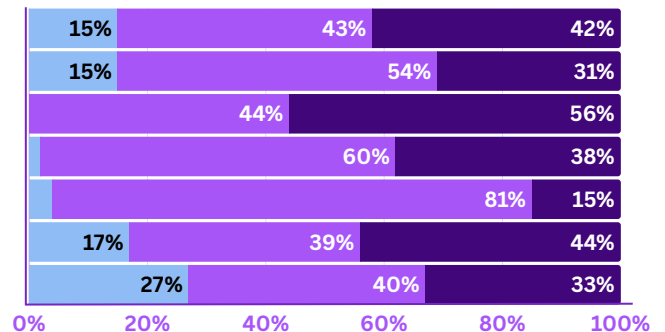


FUTURE EXPECTATIONS

Looking towards the future, Engineering contractors express concerns for 2026, especially on future availability of contract work, while optimism exists towards day rates and the performance of the Irish economy.

The proportion of contractors expecting an increase in the availability of work over the next 12 months declined significantly, falling from 53% in 2025 to 31% in 2026. Over the same period, the share of respondents who believe work availability will remain the same rose from 34% to 54%, indicating a shift in sentiment from growth expectations toward a more stable outlook. Confidence in the longer-term performance of the contracting sector (over the next three to five years) has also weakened. The percentage of contractors expecting an improvement declined from 55% in 2025 to 44% in 2026, while those expecting conditions to deteriorate increased from 7% to 17%. In contrast, expectations regarding daily rates over the next 12 months have strengthened slightly. In 2026, 56% of contractors expect daily rates to increase, compared with 51% in 2025. Meanwhile, the outlook for the number of working days remains largely stable, with 81% of respondents expecting no change. Perceptions of the Irish economic outlook have improved modestly, with 33% of respondents expecting economic performance in 2026 to be stronger than in 2025.

- The availability of Contract/Freelance work for the last 12 months has...
- The availability of Contract/Freelance work for the next 12 months will...
- Your daily rate for the next 12 months will...
- Your daily rate in the previous 12 months has...
- Do you think your working days for the next 12 months will...
- Do you think the contracting sector in the next 3 to 5 years will...
- Do you think the performance of Irish economy in 2026 will...



CONFIDENCE INDEX

Those working in the engineering and technical activities sector remain optimistic about both the contracting sector and the Irish economy, however there is a drop in confidence in the contracting sector since last year. For 2026 the confidence index score in relation to the performance of the contracting sector in the next 3-5 years is +18, versus +29 in 2025. The confidence index score in relation to the performance of the Irish economy for 2026 is +5 up slightly from +2 last year.

THE IRISH ECONOMY CONFIDENCE INDEX

| | |
|------|-----|
| 2026 | +5 |
| 2025 | +2 |
| 2024 | +9 |
| 2023 | +8 |
| 2022 | +35 |
| 2021 | +2 |

THE CONTRACTING SECTOR CONFIDENCE INDEX

| | |
|------|-----|
| 2026 | +18 |
| 2025 | +29 |
| 2024 | +28 |
| 2023 | +27 |
| 2022 | +40 |
| 2021 | +25 |

MEDICAL LOCUM



QUOTE FROM RESPONDENT

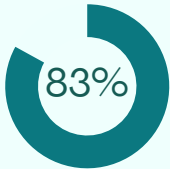

“Independent working gave me autonomy. Removal from bureaucracy of large organisations. I can focus on my work and hone my strengths. My performance and job satisfaction is higher as a result. I could work more which was something I desired. I could engage in learning opportunities at my own pace and whim and tailor my skillset. It permitted me autonomy to stay in one location to live and buy a home. Working independently gave me a flex, it gave me independence, and it actually gave me a sense of security.”

The medical locum sector in Ireland enters 2026 as a core pillar of healthcare delivery. Persistent workforce shortages, an ageing population, and rising demand for services continue to place pressure on hospitals, GP practices, and community care. Locum doctors and pharmacists provide essential flexibility and capacity within this system. This remains especially critical as service demand grows faster than permanent recruitment, a trend recognised by the Health Service Executive and the Department of Health.

Hospitals and GP practices remain highly dependent on locum doctors. Demand is strongest in regional and rural areas, where recruitment challenges are most acute. In 2026, temporary medical staffing continues to underpin continuity of care, with a significant proportion of consultant and non-consultant hospital doctors working on fixed-term or locum arrangements, reflecting patterns highlighted by the Irish Hospital Consultants Association. ([The Journal](#)).

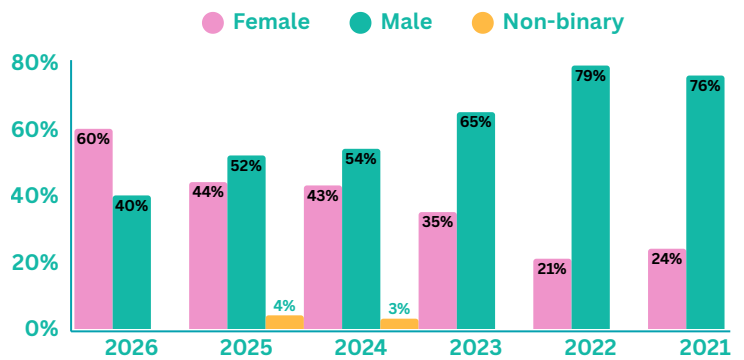
In 2026, the pharmacy sector is benefiting from the second year of a €75 million State investment, agreed between the Government and the Irish Pharmacy Union. Following €25 million in 2025, a further €50 million is being rolled out in 2026, supporting a more sustainable and modern community pharmacy model. The agreement has expanded pharmacists’ scope of practice through the Common Conditions Service, enabled the introduction of an unused medicines return scheme, and strengthened pharmacies’ role in public-health delivery ([Irish Times](#)). Community pharmacies rely on locum pharmacists to maintain opening hours and service levels during leave, vacancies, and peak demand. Evidence from the Irish Pharmacy Union continues to show regular use of locum cover, with temporary staffing forming a substantial share of workforce capacity at busy periods.

Overall, the 2026 outlook points to sustained reliance on medical locums. Flexible working preferences among clinicians, combined with structural workforce gaps and demographic pressures, mean locum professionals will remain indispensable to Ireland’s healthcare system in the year ahead.

| | |
|--|---|
| <p>MEDICAL LOCUM CONTRACTORS ARE SATISFIED WITH THEIR CURRENT LIFE IN GENERAL</p> <p>83% satisfied with their success</p>  | <p>AVERAGE CONTRACT LENGTH</p> <p>The Average length of contract in the Medical Locum sector is one of the shortest of the main sectors at 7 months.</p> |
| <p>AVERAGE DAILY RATE IN MEDICAL LOCUM</p> <p>€496</p> | <p>MEDICAL LOCUM GENDER SPLIT</p> <p>40% Men 60% Women</p>  |

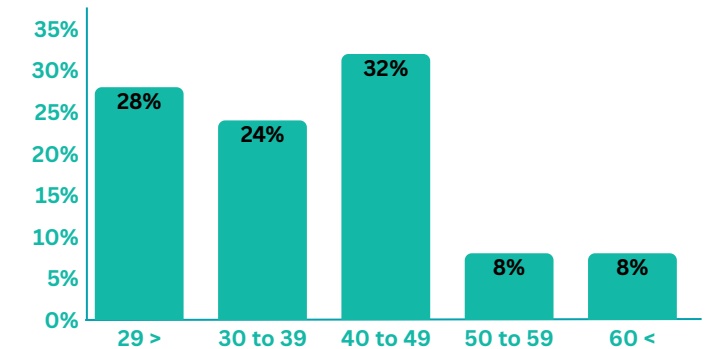
GENDER

The medical locum sector is the only sector where the percentage of female independent professionals is more than males, in the survey. In 2026, results of the medical locum sector show that 60% of the contractors working in the sector are females, a significant increase from 2025, when the percentage was 44%. The average female gender split across all other major contracting sectors is 28%.



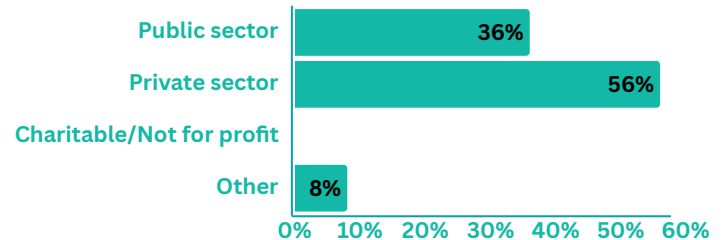
AGE

The average age of contractors in the medical locum sector has increased, rising from 38 years in 2025 to 40 years in 2026. This shift may be due to the notable changes in the age profile of contractors over the past year. The most significant change is observed in the 30–39 age group, where representation declined from 38% in 2025 to 24% in 2026. In contrast, the proportion of contractors aged 29 and under increased by 5 percentage points, while the 40–49 age group also rose by 5 percentage points.



At the upper end of the age distribution, the share of contractors aged 60 and over doubled, reaching 8% in 2026, although this increase is from a relatively small base. Meanwhile, contractors aged 50–59 also account for 8% of the workforce. Interestingly, around 52% contractors in this sector are less than 40 years old.

SECTOR

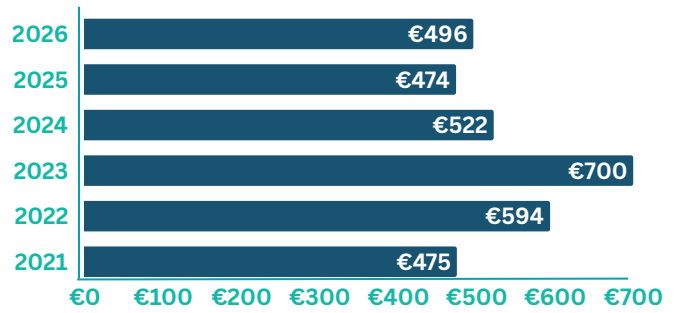


| AVERAGE AGE | 2026 | 2025 | 2024 | 2023 | 2022 | 2021 |
|-------------|--------|--------|--------|--------|--------|--------|
| | 40 yrs | 38 yrs | 40 yrs | 42 yrs | 46 yrs | 41 yrs |

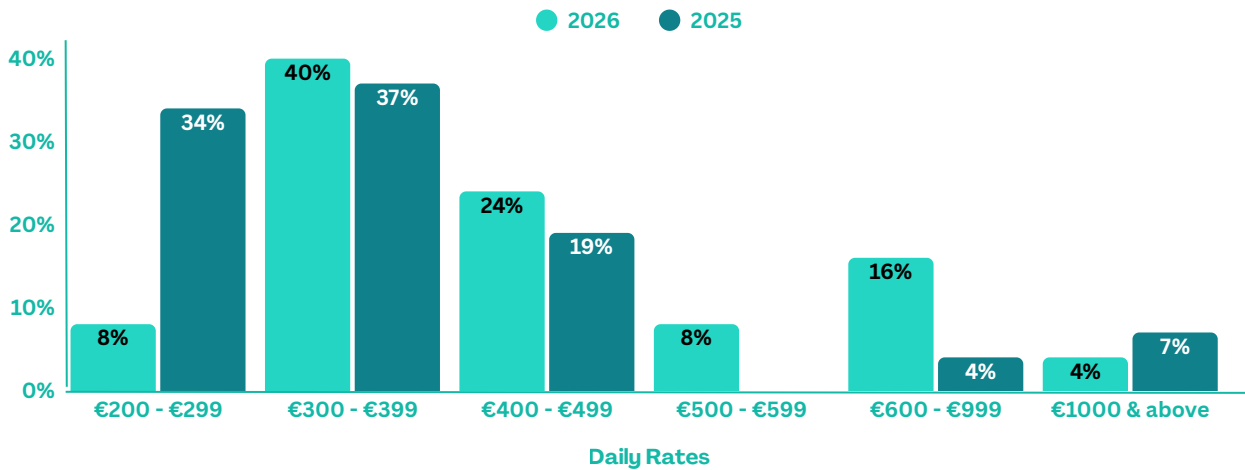
DAILY RATE

The average daily rate for the sector rose slightly from €474 in 2025 to €496 in 2026, an increase of 4.6%. In 2026, almost half (48%) of all respondents were earning daily rates less than €399. Interestingly, the €600–€999 band saw the strongest growth, rising from 4% in 2025 to 16% in 2026. In 2025 11% of contractors earned more than €600 a day this has increased to 20% of contractors in the sector earning more than €600 a day in 2026.

AVERAGE DAILY RATES

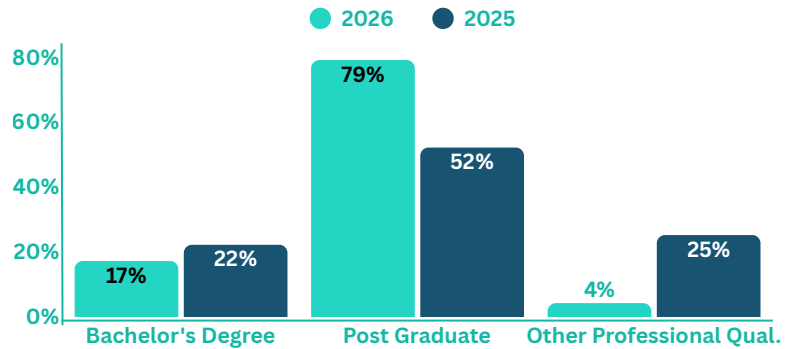


DAILY RATES BY YEAR



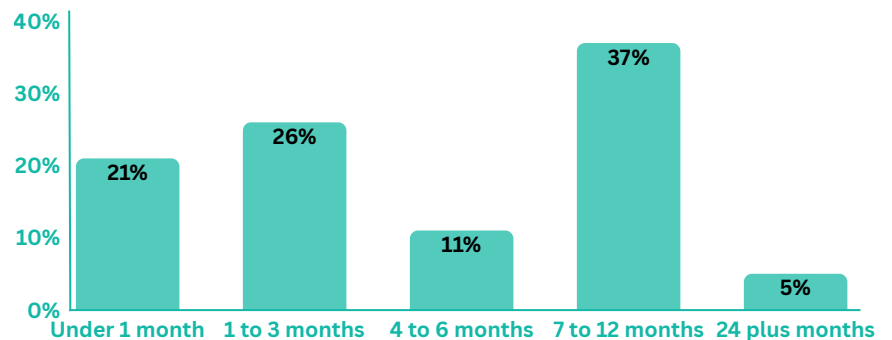
EDUCATION

2026 survey data shows an increase in education qualifications of contractors with a remarkable 79% of respondents holding postgraduate qualifications, up from 52% in 2025. Other professional qualifications dropped from 26% in 2025 to just 4% in 2026.



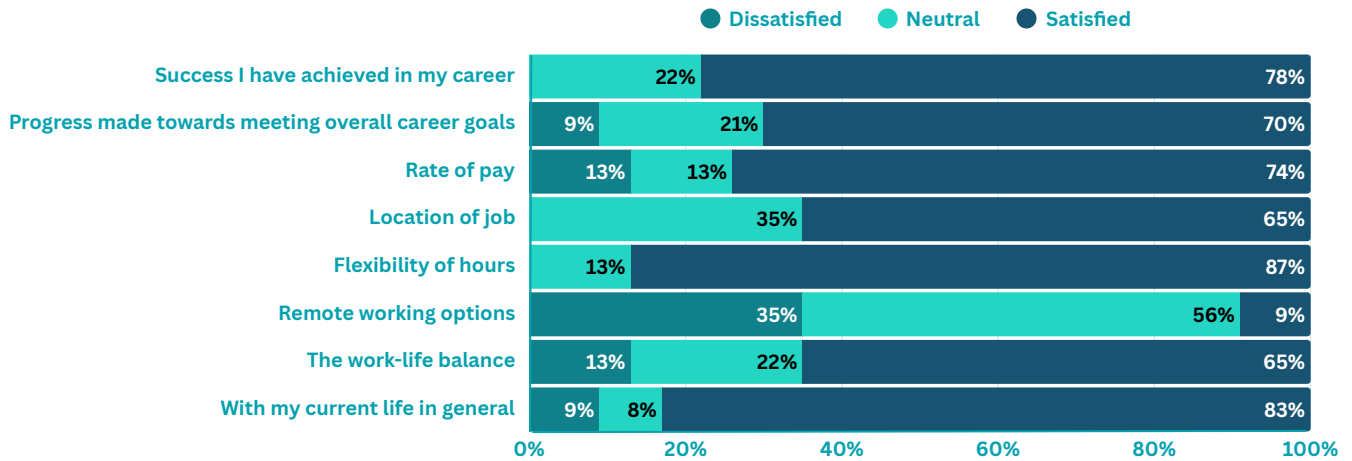
CONTRACT LENGTH

The average contract length for this sector increased from 5 months in 2025 to 7 months in 2026, suggesting little more stability for contractors. The share of short contracts (6 months or less) fell from 79% to 58%, showing a clear move away from shorter engagements. Contracts of 7–12 months became the norm, rising from 21% to 37%, and 5% of contracts in 2026 ran for 24 months or more. Clearly, a shift in the length of contracts offered to contractors in this sector can be seen, may be due to rising and recurring demand.



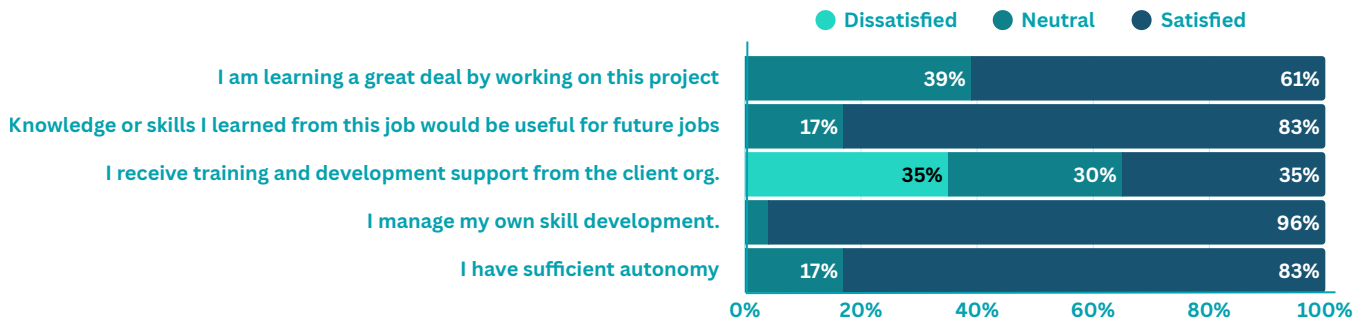
HOW MEDICAL LOCUMS FEEL ABOUT THEIR WORK

All satisfaction scores have dropped in 2026. While satisfaction with current life in general remains high it has dropped from 96% in 2025 to 83% in 2026. Satisfaction for the rate of pay dropped from 84% to 74%, work life balance dropped from 80% in 2025 to 65%. The satisfaction rating for the flexibility of hours remained same as last year. Remote working options continue to record the lowest satisfaction levels among the factors assessed, with only 9% of medical locums reporting satisfaction in 2026. Many locums need to be physically present in a hospital, practice or pharmacy to work, it is therefore unsurprising that they have the lowest satisfaction rating for remote working options across all sectors.



FINDING WORK

Medical locums report very strong self-directed skill development and autonomy, 96% agree they manage their own skill development, and 83% agree they have sufficient autonomy. 83% agree their skills and knowledge are transferable. Only 35% agree they receive training and development support from the client organisation.



EMPLOYABILITY

Medical locums are confident that their experience is in demand on the labour market, with 83% of respondents in agreement with that statement. 78% of respondents also agree that it would be easy for them to find another contract.

IT IS EASY FOR ME TO FIND ANOTHER CONTRACT...

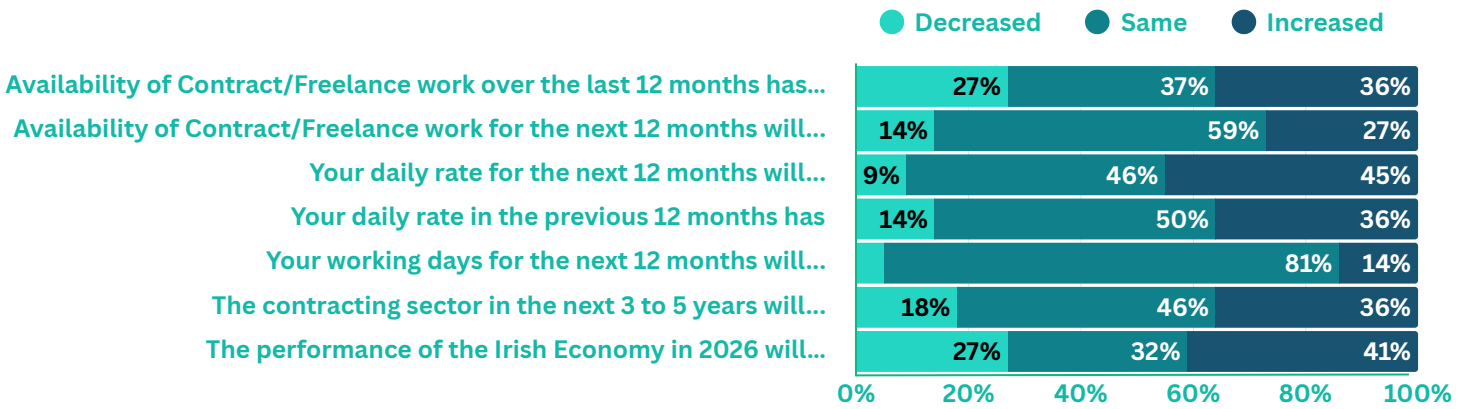


MY EXPERIENCE IS IN DEMAND ON THE LABOUR MARKET...



FUTURE EXPECTATIONS

The expectation for the future of the Medical Locum sector is optimistic. 86% of respondents believe that the availability of contract work over the next 12 months will stay the same or increase. 91% expect their daily rate to stay the same or increase in the year ahead. 82% believe that the contracting sector will stay the same or improve over the next 3–5 years. 73% also expect the Irish economy to perform the same or better in 2026 compared with 2025.



CONFIDENCE INDEX

Medical Locums report a modest level of confidence in both the future of the contracting sector and the performance of the Irish economy. Confidence levels in this sector have shown some volatility in recent years across both indicators.

In 2026, the confidence index stands at +11 for expectations regarding growth in the contracting sector over the next three to five years. Confidence in the future performance of the Irish economy is slightly lower, with an index score of +9. These results suggest a cautiously positive outlook among Medical Locums for the coming years.

THE IRISH ECONOMY CONFIDENCE INDEX

| | |
|------|-----|
| 2026 | +9 |
| 2025 | +8 |
| 2024 | +3 |
| 2023 | -11 |
| 2022 | +44 |
| 2021 | +2 |

THE CONTRACTING SECTOR CONFIDENCE INDEX

| | |
|------|-----|
| 2026 | +11 |
| 2025 | +4 |
| 2024 | +5 |
| 2023 | -3 |
| 2022 | +13 |
| 2021 | +25 |

CONFIDENCE INDEX



Throughout this report you will see reference made to the 'Confidence Index.' The confidence the participants have in several areas was expressed through the way they answered a number of key questions almost identical in nature but presented in different ways.

The average weighting of these answers is then used to calculate the confidence index. A confidence index of zero would indicate that there was a totally neutral feeling by the respondents. A positive figure represents a positive outlook, with the scale maxing at 100, while a negative score indicates the feeling of unfavourable negative feelings towards the economic or business future.

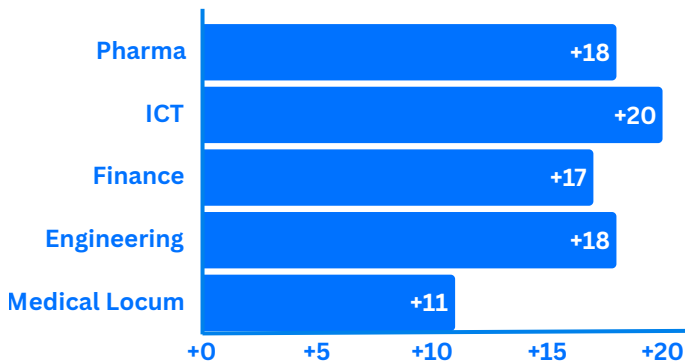
The confidence index score relating to the performance of the Irish Economy varies depending on the age profile of the contractors and the industry the contractors operate in.

CONFIDENCE INDEX BY SECTOR

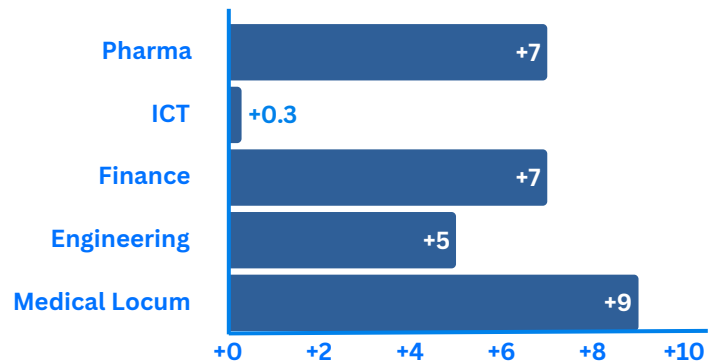
The outlook for 2026 shows a more measured view of both the Irish economy and the contracting sector when compared with 2025. Confidence in the performance of the Irish economy declines across all groups, moving from a strong positive position in 2025 +17 to a modest positive score in 2026 +6. This pattern is consistent by gender and across industries, suggesting a shared expectation of slower economic conditions. Medical Locum contractors remain the most positive about the economy in 2026 +9, while ICT and Engineering +0.3 and +5 respectively report the lowest confidence levels.

Expectations for the contracting sector over the next three to five years remain positive in 2026 but are lower than in 2025 across every industry. Overall confidence index score falls from +26 to +21, indicating a slightly more cautious view of future demand for contract roles. ICT and Engineering sectors experience the largest drop in confidence index scores, ICT scores moved from +31 in 2025 to +20 in 2026, and Engineering dropped from +29 to +18. Pharma, Finance also saw a reduction in scores compared with 2025. Medical Locum shows a small improvement year on year but continues to lag behind other sectors in overall confidence. Despite the drop in confidence index scores this year contractors in each sector continue to report positive outlooks.

CONTRACTING SECTOR IN THE NEXT 3 TO 5 YEARS.



PERFORMANCE OF THE IRISH ECONOMY IN 2026

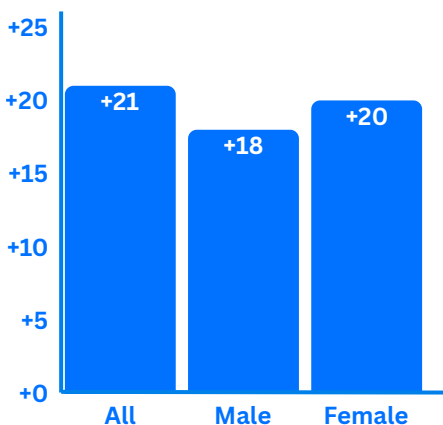


CONFIDENCE INDEX BY GENDER

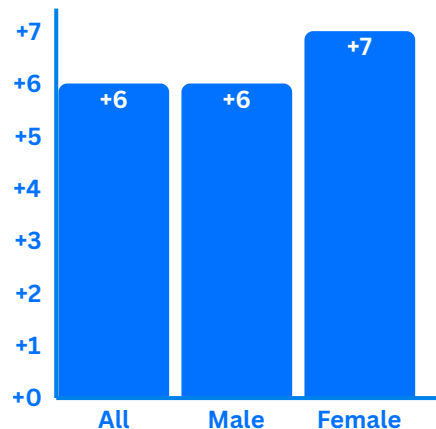
Gender differences remain limited. Both male and female contractors report lower expectations for the contracting sector in 2026 than in 2025. Female contractors remain marginally more positive than male contractors about both the performance of the Irish economy and the contracting sector.

The 2026 confidence index scores point to an environment where confidence remains intact but more restrained. Contractors continue to see opportunities across all major industries, with expectations adjusted downward from the more optimistic levels reported in 2025.

CONTRACTING SECTOR IN THE NEXT 3 TO 5 YEARS.



PERFORMANCE OF THE IRISH ECONOMY IN 2026



CONFIDENCE INDEX BY GENERATION

The 2026 outlook shows a reset in expectations across all generations when compared with 2025. Confidence in the contracting sector over the next three to five years remains positive for every age group. Boomers become more positive in 2026, rising from +22 to +24, suggesting continued confidence in demand for experience-led contracting. Gen X and Millennials both report lower confidence than in 2025. Gen Z stands out, with confidence increasing from +23 to +30, pointing to strong belief in future contracting opportunities despite wider economic uncertainty.

Views on the performance of the Irish economy ease across all generations in 2026. Boomers and Gen X both move from +15 in 2025 to +6 in 2026, reflecting a more cautious economic view. Millennials show a similar pattern, falling from +18 to +5. Gen Z remains the most positive about the economy, although confidence also declines year on year, from +18 to +9.

CONTRACTING SECTOR IN THE NEXT 3-5 YEARS



THE PERFORMANCE OF THE IRISH ECONOMY IN 2026



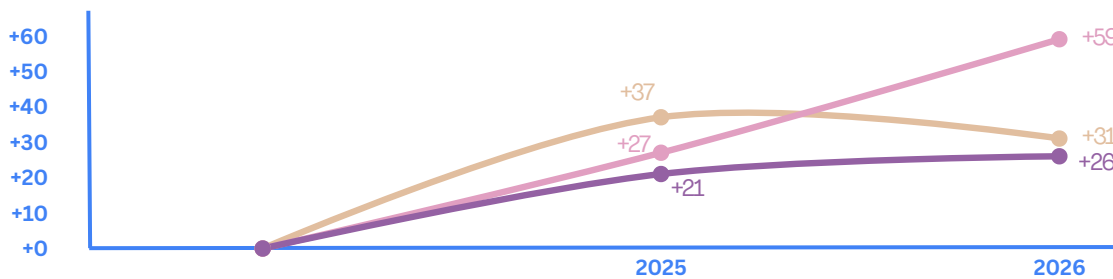
CONFIDENCE INDEX RECRUITERS & CLIENTS

The 2026 outlook from recruiters remains positive for the contracting market, though expectations for the next 12 months are lower than in 2025. Recruiters have a confidence index score of +31 in 2026 down from +37 in 2025. This indicates continued demand, but at a reduced level year on year. Views on the performance of the Irish economy also dropped, slightly from +19 in 2025 to +17 in 2026.

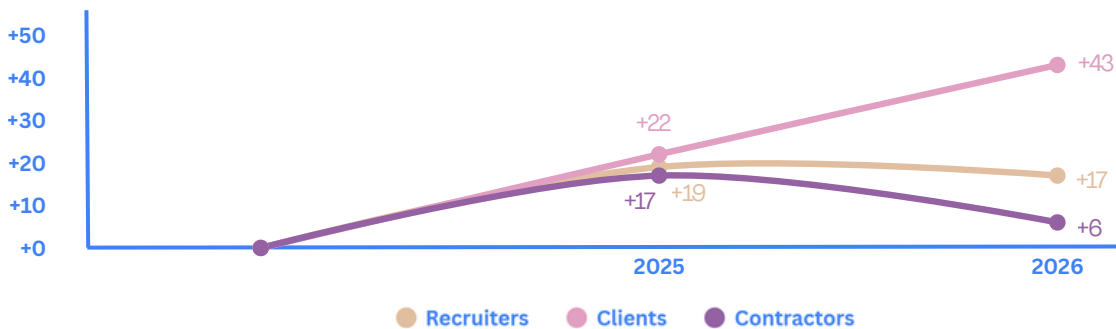
Client organisations have a more positive outlook in 2026. Expectations for the number of contract roles increase substantially, rising from +27 in 2025 to +59 in 2026. This suggests they expect a growing reliance on contractors to meet business needs. Confidence in the Irish economy among client organisations remains high at +43, exceeding both recruiter expectations and 2025 levels.

Relative to 2025, the 2026 findings show a clear contrast in perspective. Recruiters report lower expectations for growth in contract roles and economic performance, while client organisations signal a significant increase in demand for contractors alongside strong confidence in the economy.

CONFIDENCE IN THE CONTRACTING INDUSTRY



THE PERFORMANCE OF IRISH ECONOMY



WHAT THE RECRUITERS SAY



QUOTE FROM RESPONDENT

“Clearer tax guidance, all contractors spend half their lives trying to interpret Revenue rules written in a language that would confuse a saint. More clarity on allowable expenses, simpler rules around BIK, and a clean, modern framework for self-employed versus employee status would save everyone grief, especially in sectors like IT, engineering and healthcare.”

The contracting sector in Ireland continues to strengthen in 2026, recruiters recognise the change in how organisations access skills and deliver work. Recruiters report reliance on contractors to provide flexibility, specialist expertise, and delivery speed in uncertain conditions. Confidence remains high. 70% of recruiters expect the number of contract roles to increase over the next 12 months, while 73% believe the contracting sector will grow over the next three to five years. This points to contracting being an important part of the future of workforce strategy.

Growth is being supported by ongoing demand across regulated and delivery-intensive sectors, where access to skills and scalability remain critical. Recruiters report stable expectations around rates and utilisation, suggesting a market focused on continuity and value rather than rapid expansion. Recruiters remain positive however they are balancing optimism about demand against more cautious client behaviour.

Recruiters believe structural support for independent professionals remains weak. Access to mortgages continues to be the most significant barrier, alongside the need for clearer tax guidance, more allowable expenses, and better access to benefits such as pensions, income protection, and healthcare. Visa processing and work permission clarity are also seen as constraints, particularly for highly skilled roles, where delays can prevent timely placements.

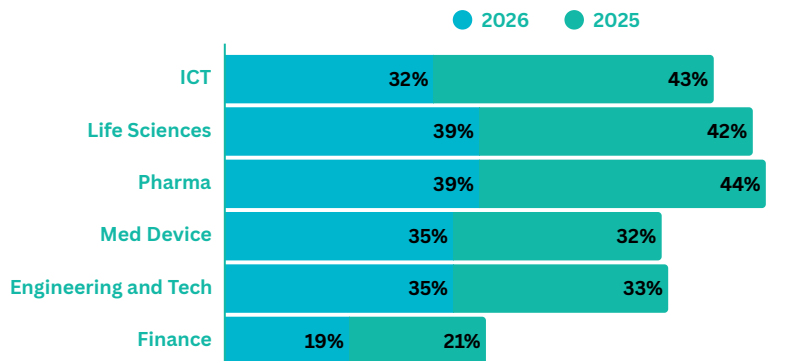
Recruiters also highlight the need for clearer government communication and stronger recognition of contracting as a legitimate and valuable form of work. This includes clearer employment definitions and guidance following recent legal developments, which have increased caution among client organisations. Contractors play an important role in supporting multinational firms, scaling projects, and attracting foreign direct investment, and recruiters believe this contribution should be more openly acknowledged.

In response to demand, many recruitment firms continue to invest in contract capability, expanding contract desks and expertise. With strong expectations for contract growth in 2026 and beyond, recruiters see contracting as a key commercial opportunity, but are looking for policy, regulation, and infrastructure to improve to better recognise and support the independent workforce.

INDUSTRY BREAKDOWN

Recruitment for contracting roles is concentrated in six key industries: Information Technology, Life Sciences, Pharmaceuticals, Medical Devices, Engineering and Finance.

Note: The sum of the % in the graph is not 100% as some recruiters are hiring contractors for multiple industries.



CONTRACT DESK

Recruiters were asked whether the number of contractors on their books had decreased, increased or stayed the same. Over half reported that the number of contractors had increased 51% up from 48% in 2025. However, in 2026 the number of agencies who said the number of contractors on their books had decreased has increased from 21% in 2025 to 27% in 2026.

The number of contractors...



AVERAGE LENGTH OF CONTRACTS OFFERED

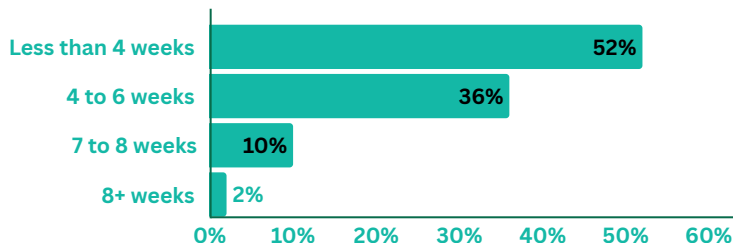
The average contract length offered by recruiters has increased in 2026, with 62% of recruiters offering 12 months contracts in 2026 up from 49% in 2025. There was a drop in 6 months contracts being offered down from 36% in 2025 to 21% in 2026. This would indicate more stability for contractors.



CONTRACT ROLES

88% of contract roles are reportedly filled within 6 weeks up from 80% in 2025. More than half 52% are filled in less than 4 weeks. 10% of contract roles in 2026 took 7 to 8 weeks to fill, down from 18% in 2025. Recruiters reported client indecision as a factor increasing the time it takes to get contractors started. 37% of contractors placed are new to contracting. The increase in the speed with which contractors are placed could indicate clients and recruiters are both getting more familiar with the model and/or there is greater availability of talent.

TIME TAKEN TO FILL A CONTRACT ROLE



WHEN YOU FILL A CONTRACT ROLE, WHAT PERCENTAGE OF THE CANDIDATES HAVE NEVER CONTRACTED BEFORE?

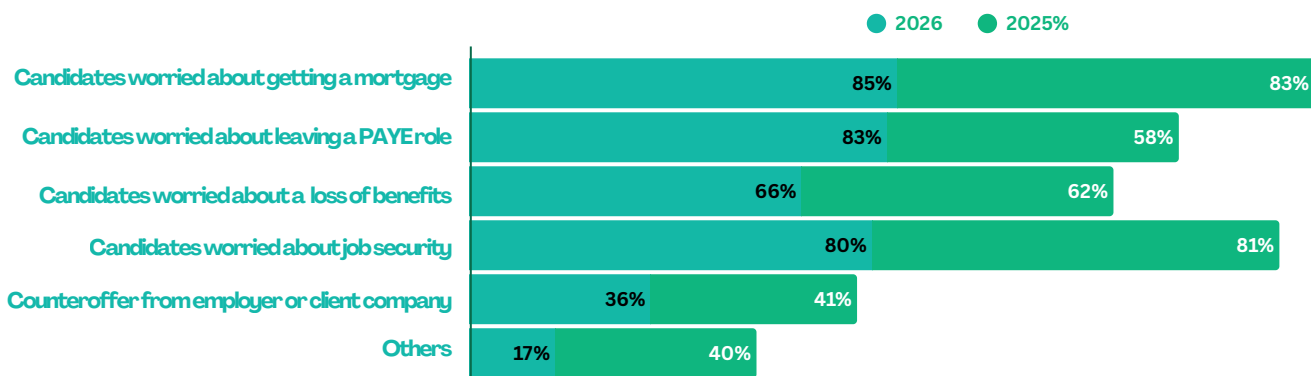
37%

CHALLENGES FOR RECRUITERS WHEN PLACING CONTRACTORS

In 2026, the biggest change is the rise in candidate hesitation about moving from PAYE into contracting. 83% of recruiters report that candidates are worried about leaving a PAYE role, compared with 58% in 2025. This points to a stronger preference for perceived stability. It also suggests that candidates are weighing risk more carefully, even when contract opportunities are available. Mortgage concerns remain the most frequently cited challenge and increased slightly from 83% to 85%, reinforcing how perceived treatment of contractors in access to lending continues to influence their decisions.

Concerns linked to security and protection remain high. Worry about job security is almost unchanged at 80% in 2026 compared with 81% in 2025, showing that fear of income gaps and contract endings continues to affect decision making. Anxiety about losing employment benefits increased from 62% to 66%. This highlights ongoing concerns around sick pay, paid leave, pensions, and insurance, and highlights the need for clearer explanations to candidates of how these can be managed while contracting.

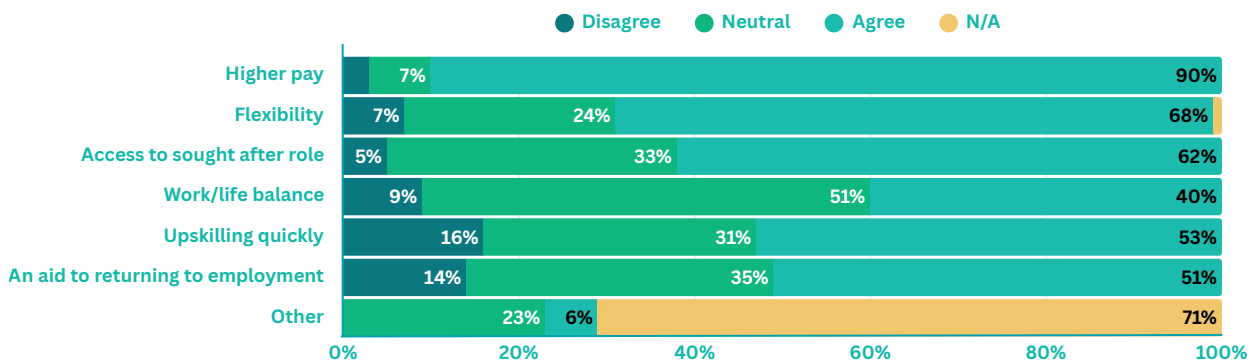
Some pressures eased for recruiters. Counteroffers from employers or client companies fell from 41% to 36%, which may indicate fewer retention attempts or less appetite among candidates to stay in permanent roles once they have decided to explore contracting. The proportion selecting “Other” reasons dropped sharply from 40% to 17%. This suggests that candidate concerns are now more concentrated around a small number of clear issues rather than a wide range of factors.



BENEFITS FOR CANDIDATES

In 2026, recruiters remain clear that higher pay is the strongest benefit contractors receive from contracting, but the strength of agreement has softened. 90% agree that higher pay is a key benefit, down from 95% in 2025. While still dominant, this reduction suggests that pay alone is less convincing as a differentiator, possibly reflecting tighter budgets or greater candidate focus on security and certainty. Flexibility also declined as a perceived benefit for contractors, with agreement falling from 76% to 68%. This points to a reality where flexibility is still valued, but perhaps it is seen as a given rather than perceived as a benefit.

The order of importance of contractor benefits shows some change between 2025 and 2026. Higher pay remains the top benefit in both years and continues to rank first. Flexibility also stays in second place, although its perceived importance has weakened. Below these two, the ranking changes. In 2025, work–life balance ranked ahead of upskilling, but in 2026 upskilling moves ahead, with 53% agreeing it is a key benefit compared with 40% for work–life balance. This indicates that development and future employability are now valued more highly than lifestyle outcomes. Access to sought–after roles remains mid–ranking in both years, though its importance has eased slightly. Aid to returning to employment has strengthened marginally, with agreement increasing to 51% in 2026 from 49%.



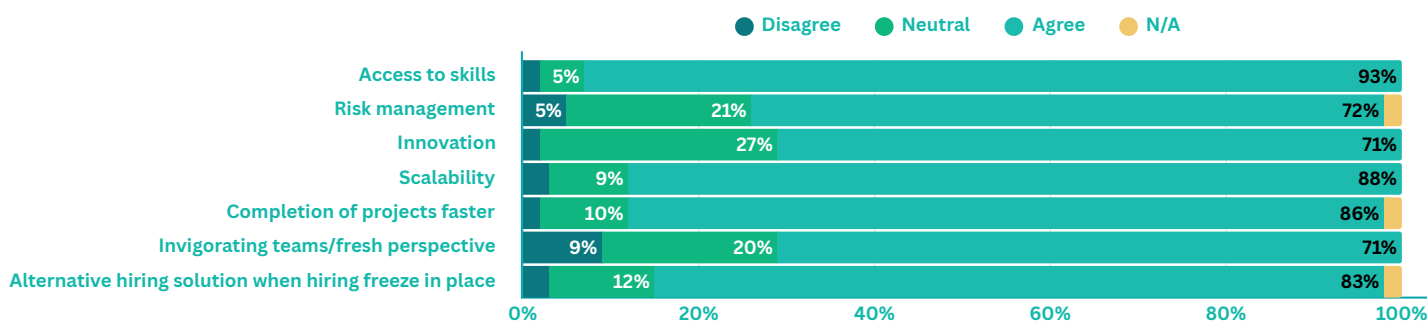
BENEFITS FOR CLIENT ORGANISATIONS

In 2026, recruiters continue to see strong and consistent benefits for client companies engaging contractors. Access to skills remains the most important benefit, with 93% of recruiters agreeing, highlighting that contractors remain a primary route for accessing scarce and specialised expertise.

Scalability strengthens in relative importance in 2026. 88% of recruiters agree that contracting supports scaling teams up or down, compared with 86% in 2025. This highlights the growing need for flexibility in headcount and cost control. Agreement that contractors enable faster completion of projects falls from 91% to 86%, suggesting that while speed remains a core benefit, delivery environments may be more complex or capacity more constrained than in the previous year.

The perceived value of contracting as an alternative during hiring freezes has reduced. In 2026, 83% agree with this benefit, down from 95% in 2025. This indicates that hiring freezes, while still relevant, are less dominant in shaping contractor engagement than they were previously. At the same time, other benefits become more valuable. 71% of recruiters agree that contractors bring innovation and fresh perspectives, up from 68% in 2025, pointing to a growing appreciation of their contribution beyond pure delivery.

New measures in 2026 provide further insight. Risk management is recognised by 72% of recruiters, showing that contracting is increasingly seen as a way to manage uncertainty and exposure. Access to skills remains the primary benefit, however scalability and risk control are gaining importance, and there are changes in the narrative around contracting recognising that it provides solutions beyond short-term hiring constraints.



SKILLSETS IN DEMAND

Recruiters were asked what skillsets will be most in demand in the next 12 months in their industry. Demand for the next 12 months is concentrated around delivery, engineering, automation, and emerging technology, with regulation and compliance close behind. The 2026 outlook is delivery-led and execution-focused. Project management and engineering dominate. Automation and validation remain in high demand. AI and data have moved firmly into the top tier. Clients are prioritising skills that can be deployed quickly, operate in regulated environments, and support large-scale transformation.

- Project Management:** Includes project managers, project planning, Capex delivery, agile project roles, and programme leadership. Demand spans all sectors.
- Automation and Control Systems:** Covers automation engineers, Delta V, Allen Bradley/Rockwell, GMP automation, and digital manufacturing. Strongly linked to capital projects and efficiency drives.
- Validation, CQV, and Commissioning:** Includes CQV engineers, equipment validation, fill/finish experience, and commissioning roles. Consistently mentioned across life sciences and manufacturing.
- Engineering (Process, Electrical, Mechanical, Civil):** Includes process, chemical, electrical, mechanical, MEP, construction, and telecoms engineers. Mid-level engineers are highlighted as particularly hard to source.
- AI, Data, and Machine Learning:** Includes AI skills, AI automation, data engineering, analytics, ML, prompting, and platforms such as Databricks and MS Fabric.
- Cybersecurity and IT Security:** Covers cyber security, OT security, GRC, Microsoft Defender, operational resilience, and cloud security.
- Cloud, Infrastructure, and DevOps:** Includes Azure, cloud migration, infrastructure, DevOps, VMware, and enterprise cloud administration.
- Quality, Regulatory, and Compliance:** Includes QA, QC, quality engineering, regulatory, QP, EHS, and pension or investment compliance. Often linked to regulated industries.
- Software Development and Digital Roles:** Includes software engineers, Java, full-stack developers, product owners, business analysts, and HRIS or ERP transformation roles.
- Trades and Technical Specialists:** Includes electricians, maintenance technicians, CNC machinists, aviation engineers, and site-based specialists. Demand is described as immediate when skills align.



ROLES DIFFICULT TO FILL IN NEXT 12 MONTHS

Recruiters were asked what roles will be hardest to fill in the next 12 months. The hardest roles to fill over the next 12 months according to recruiters are:

1. **Project Managers and Project Controls**
2. **Automation Engineers**
3. **Validation, CQV, and CSV Engineers**
4. **Electrical Engineers**
5. **Cybersecurity Specialists**
6. **Engineering Roles (Mechanical, Process, Project)**
7. **Data, AI, and Emerging Technology Roles**
8. **Quantity Surveyors and Construction Specialists**
9. **Quality, EHS, and Compliance Roles**
10. **Specialist IT and Systems Roles**

Roles hardest to fill in 2026 combine three traits. Specialist knowledge. Regulated or safety-critical environments. On-site or hybrid delivery. Generalist roles appear less frequently. Scarcity is highest where experience cannot be substituted or trained quickly.

RECRUITERS ADVISE INDEPENDENT PROFESSIONALS TO UPSKILL IN THE FOLLOWING AREAS BASED ON CURRENT CLIENT NEEDS:

- AI and Machine Learning
- Validation, CQV, and Commissioning
- Automation
- Data Analytics and Data Skills
- Project Management and Delivery
- Cybersecurity and IT Security.
- Cloud Technologies
- Quality, Compliance, and Regulatory Skills
- Engineering Specialisation and Dual-Skilling
- Sustainability and Green Skills

Upskilling priorities in 2026 are clear. Technology-led skills dominate. Contractors who combine deep domain knowledge with AI, data, or automation capability are best positioned.

There is a clear difference between what clients are hiring for now and what recruiters advise contractors to prepare for next. Current demand is focused on immediate delivery. Project management, automation, engineering, validation/CQV, and cybersecurity dominate because they are scarce, billable, and essential to keeping projects moving in regulated and capital-intensive environments.

Upskilling advice is more future-focused. AI, machine learning, data analytics, and cloud skills feature much more strongly here than in current demand. This reflects expectation rather than reality. Recruiters are signalling where opportunity is likely to grow, not where most contracts sit today.

Some areas align across both views. Project management, automation, and validation appear in both lists, linking present demand with future relevance. These skills remain safe investments.

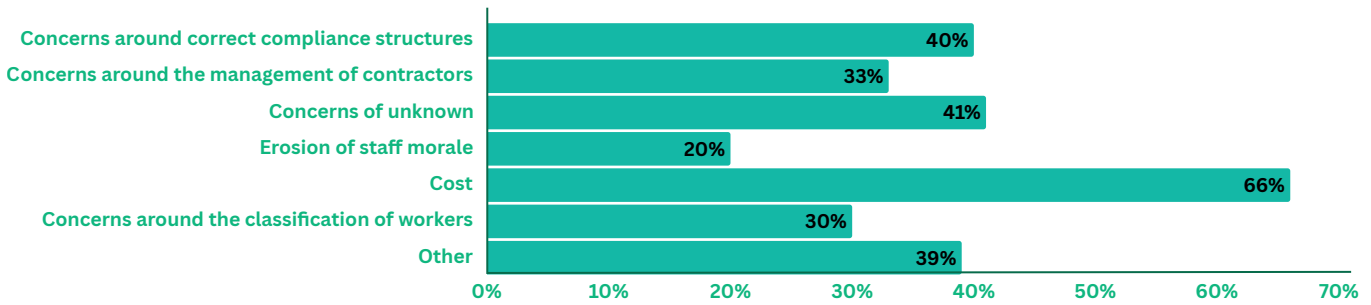
The gap is about timing. Clients are solving today's problems. Recruiters are preparing contractors for tomorrow's market. The strongest position sits in the overlap. Contractors need to maintain deep delivery skills while adding targeted AI or data capability that strengthens an existing role.

BARRIERS TO RECRUITING CONTRACTORS FROM CLIENTS

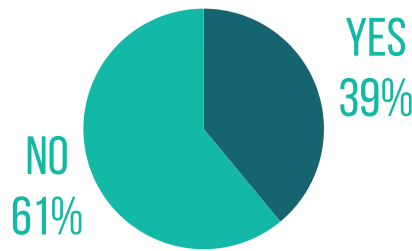
In 2026, cost remains the most significant barrier when clients engage contractors, but its influence has reduced. 66% of recruiters report cost as a concern, down from 80% in 2025. This suggests that while budget pressure remains, clients may be more accustomed to contractor rates or are placing greater value on delivery and access to skills.

Compliance-related concerns remain high and unchanged year on year. 40% of recruiters report concerns around correct compliance structures in both 2025 and 2026. This follows an increase from 30% in 2024 and is likely influenced by heightened awareness of regulatory risk, including the impact of the Domino's case. Related concerns around worker classification fall from 37% in 2025 to 30% in 2026, indicating some improvement in understanding or confidence around engagement models.

Uncertainty has increased. "Concerns of the unknown" rise to 41% in 2026 from 31% in 2025. This suggests a more cautious client mindset, possibly driven by economic uncertainty or changing regulatory expectations. Concerns around managing contractors also increase, from 20% to 33%, perhaps highlighting perception of challenges linked to remote working, oversight, and integration into teams.



DO YOU THINK THE GOVERNMENT IS DOING ENOUGH TO SUPPORT PROFESSIONAL CONTRACTORS?

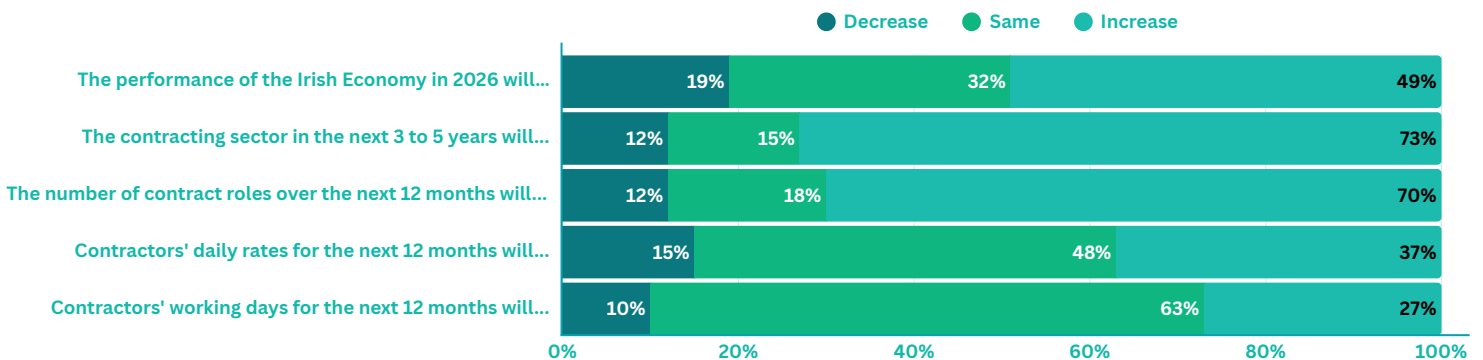


FUTURE EXPECTATIONS

Recruiter outlook remains positive in 2026, but the balance of expectations has changed compared with 2025. Confidence in the Irish economy has strengthened. In 2026, 49% of recruiters expect the economy to improve compared with 2025, up from 47% who expected improvement in the previous year. At the same time, the proportion expecting a decline increases from 14% to 19%, while those expecting stability fall from 39% to 32%. This points to a more polarised outlook, with firmer views at both ends.

Expectations for contract role availability remain strong. In 2026, 70% of recruiters expect the number of contract roles to increase over the next 12 months, marginally down from 71% in 2025. The share expecting a decrease rises from 6% to 12%, indicating a more cautious short-term view despite continued overall optimism.

In 2026, 73% of recruiters believe the contracting sector will grow over the next three to five years, signalling strong confidence in the sustainability of the market. Expectations around rates are more cautious. 37% expect daily rates to increase, while nearly half anticipate no change. Working days are expected to remain stable, with 63% forecasting no change and 27% expecting an increase. Recruiters remain positive but more measured in 2026, with growth expectations balanced by greater caution.



CONFIDENCE INDEX

Recruiters report optimism for both the economy and the contracting sector with confidence index scores of +17 and +31 respectively.

THE PERFORMANCE OF IRISH ECONOMY IN 2026

| | |
|-------------|------------|
| 2026 | +17 |
| 2025 | +19 |
| 2024 | +21 |
| 2023 | +2 |
| 2022 | +49 |
| 2021 | +35 |

THE NUMBER OF CONTRACT ROLES IN THE NEXT 12 MONTHS

| | |
|-------------|------------|
| 2026 | +31 |
| 2025 | +37 |
| 2024 | +29 |
| 2023 | +29 |
| 2022 | +56 |
| 2021 | +49 |

BARRIERS EXPERIENCED BY RECRUITERS

Recruiters were asked what do you think client organisations, or other stakeholders, could do to make it easier to place contractors into roles?

Responses identified a number of challenges faced by recruiters when trying to place contractors that if addressed would make placing contractors easier. They highlight process and mindset, rather than talent availability, as the main barriers to placing contractors.

SPEED AND URGENCY IN HIRING

The most dominant theme is pace. Recruiters repeatedly stress that slow processes result in lost candidates. As one respondent put it, “many hiring managers don’t act fast enough,” while others simply summarised the issue as “speed of process, interview, offer time.” Delays in CV review, interviews, and decision-making are seen as particularly damaging in a contractor market, where good candidates are often available for short windows only. Several recruiters note that a two-week end-to-end process is “ideally” what is needed to stay competitive.

CLEAR ROLES, TIMELINES, AND BUDGETS UPFRONT

Lack of clarity is another major frustration. Recruiters highlight situations where “sometimes we don’t get job specs” or receive only “1–2 sentences sent via email.” They call for clear role definitions, agreed timelines, and budget approval before roles go to market. One respondent stresses the need to “be certain you are approved to hire before going to market,” while another highlights the importance of “a clear interview process and budget in advance of releasing roles.”

RATES ALIGNED TO THE MARKET

Commercial misalignment features strongly. Recruiters repeatedly advise clients to “revise rates to reflect the market” and, in some cases, “increase rates, perhaps offer a completion bonus.” Strong rates, alongside longer contracts, are seen as critical to attracting scarce skills and maintaining momentum once candidates engage.

BETTER ENGAGEMENT AND COMMUNICATION WITH AGENCIES

Recruiters emphasise the value of active engagement rather than portal-only processes. They call for intake calls, direct access to hiring managers, and regular feedback. One response notes that “too many roles come through portals where we get no engagement with the client,” making it difficult to answer candidate questions. Dealing directly with hiring managers is described as “great,” while additional layers through HR, MSPs, or RPOs are seen to “add extra steps” and slow decisions.

FLEXIBILITY IN HOW ROLES ARE STRUCTURED

Flexibility is repeatedly cited as a differentiator. Recruiters highlight the need for openness to hybrid or remote work, especially “in regions outside of Dublin.” Others encourage clients to be flexible on requirements, location, or even “partially filling roles with available contractors instead of trying to fill the full requirement with one candidate.”

DECISION-MAKER INVOLVEMENT FROM THE START

Several responses stress the importance of hiring manager involvement early in the process. “Hiring manager / line manager involvement from start of briefing call” is seen as critical, as speed of decision-making and clarity are “interlinked.” Delays often arise when decision-makers are not available to interview or give timely feedback.

LONGER CONTRACTS AND CONTINUITY

Recruiters also point to contract structure. Longer durations of “12+ months,” early communication around extensions, and, in some cases, retention or sign-on bonuses are seen as ways to improve candidate confidence and reduce churn.

MINDSET TOWARDS CONTRACTING

Finally, recruiters call for a cultural shift. Clients are encouraged to “be more open and understanding of the benefits of contracting” and to treat contractors as a “strategic talent resource” rather than a short-term cost. One respondent highlights the need to stop “worrying about them moving from contract to contract” and instead focus on value delivered.

WHAT THE RECRUITERS SAY

We asked recruiters for their own statements on what changes they would like to see put in place to support contracting and here is what they had to say...

“ GREATER ABILITY TO ACCESS MORTGAGES

“ EQUAL NOTICE PERIODS, ESTABLISHMENT OF ALLOCATED OFFICE DAYS/REGULATION ACROSS THAT REQUIREMENT

“ BETTER ACCESS TO FINANCIAL SCHEMES FOR RAINY DAYS, PENSIONS, HEALTHCARE PLANS AND INJURY PLANS FOR ISPS

“ FASTER AND BETTER WAY OF EVALUATING QUALIFIED PERSONNEL FOR VISAS

“ CLEARER TAX GUIDANCE... MORE CLARITY ON ALLOWABLE EXPENSES, SIMPLER RULES AROUND BIK, AND A CLEAN, MODERN FRAMEWORK FOR SELF EMPLOYED VERSUS EMPLOYEE STATUS...

“ BETTER SUPPORT FOR HOUSING, EASIER TO GET MORTGAGES IS THE BIGGEST PROBLEM WE FACE. OUT SIDE OF ECONOMICAL ISSUES, AND CONTRACTORS GETTING BETTER PAY TO LIVE IN BETTER COUNTRIES WITH BETTER EXPERIENCES.

“ GOVERNMENT COMMUNICATION TO START UPS OR COMPANIES GOING ON A GROWTH TO CONSIDER CONTRACTING SO THEY CAN SCALE FASTER, HIGHLIGHTING THE BENEFITS IT BRINGS.

“ GREATER CLARITY, CONSISTENCY AND SUPPORT STRUCTURES PUT IN PLACE FOR CONTRACTING. THIS INCLUDES MORE TRANSPARENT GUIDELINES AROUND TAX, COMPLIANCE AND IR35-STYLE DETERMINATIONS,

“

1. GREATER CONTRACTING CLARITY AND CONSISTENCY
2. IMPROVED CONTRACTING PATHWAYS
3. STRONGER PLAYER/EMPLOYEE WELFARE MEASURES
4. MORE PROFESSIONAL CONTRACT MANAGEMENT PROCESSES
5. ENHANCED GOVERNANCE AND OVERSIGHT
6. STREAMLINED LEGAL AND COMPLIANCE REQUIREMENTS

WHAT THE CLIENTS SAY



QUOTE FROM RESPONDENT

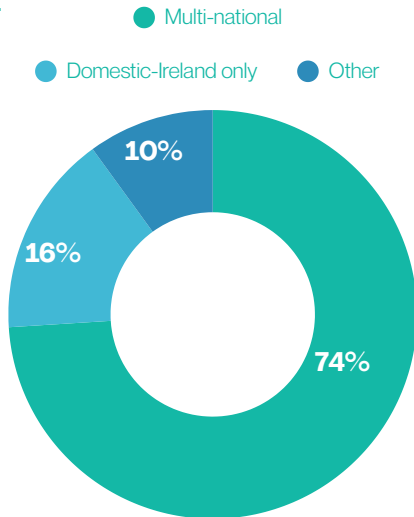
“There should be a clear and transparent metric on the pay and benefits between contractors and employees”

74% of client companies participating in the survey this year were multinationals and 16% were domestic Irish companies. 9% of companies had between 11 and 50 employees down from 16% last year, with 66% of companies involved in the survey having 500 employees or more.

In 2026, 30% of companies engage more than 200 contractors at any one time, confirming the central role of contractors in workforce delivery for larger organisations. 11% of client respondents engage fewer than 10 contractors and 16% engaging between 11 and 30. 5% engage 31–50 contractors, 6% engage 51–100, and 8% engage between 100 and 200. 24% of respondents were unsure of their current contractor numbers.

Looking ahead, expectations for the next 12 months suggest overall stability with a growth bias. 60% of organisations expect contractor numbers to stay within 10% of current levels, indicating steady demand. At the same time, 26% anticipate growth, with 20% expecting an increase of more than 10% and 6% forecasting growth above 20%. In contrast, 14% expect a contraction, split between 11% anticipating a decrease of 10% or more and 3% expecting a reduction of 20% or more. The outlook points to continued reliance on contractors in 2026.

CLIENT COMPANY TYPE



CLIENTS INDUSTRY PROFILE

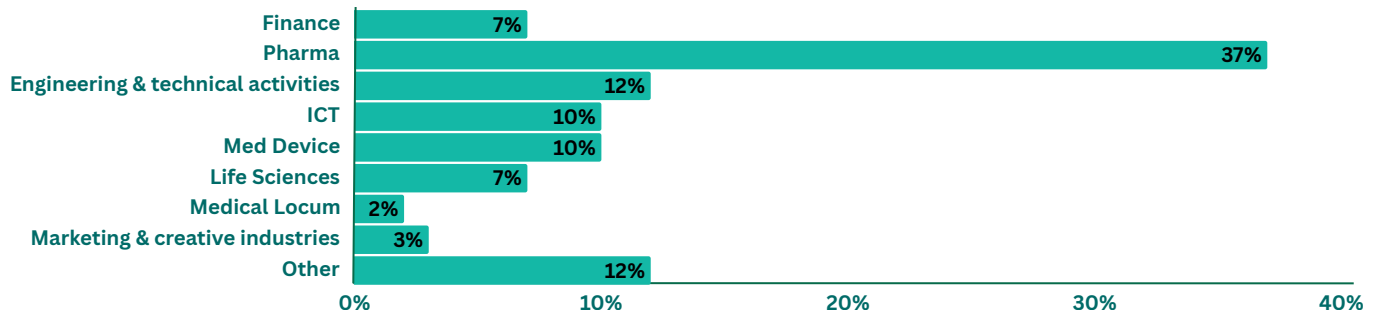
In 2026, contracting activity is more concentrated, with Pharma dominant at 37%, up from 30% in 2025. This points to sustained demand for specialist skills in regulated and knowledge-intensive environments. ICT accounts for 10% in 2026, down from 13% in 2025. Engineering and technical activities remain stable at 12%.

Medical Device contracting stands at 10%, down from 12% in 2025, while Life Sciences has declined to 7%. Finance has also reduced to 7%, from 9% in 2025, reflecting a more cautious approach to external resourcing. Medical Locum roles remain limited at 2%, while Marketing and creative industries have increased to 3%, up from minimal levels in 2025. The 'Other' category has contracted to 12%, down from 16%, reinforcing the shift towards more established core sectors, led by Pharma. 100% of client company respondents were in the private sector.

COMPANY SIZE



INDUSTRY BREAKDOWN

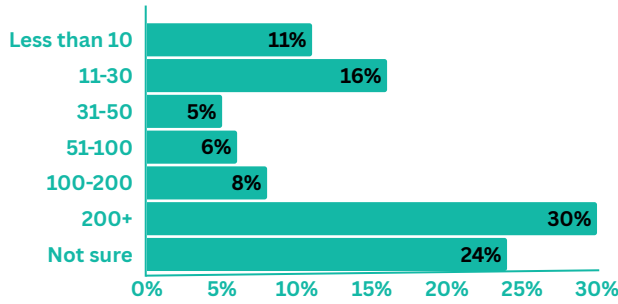


CONTRACTOR ENGAGEMENT

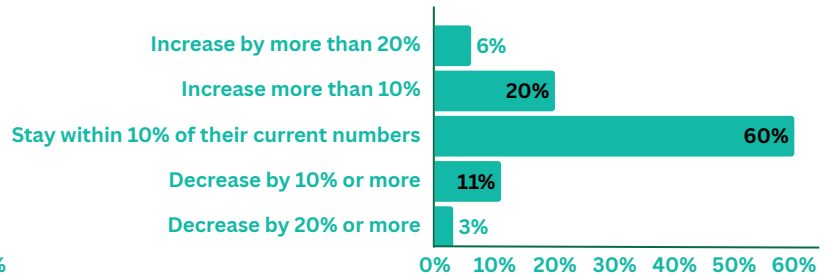
In 2026, companies show a stronger reliance on external recruitment agencies, with 56% using third-party providers, up from 37% in 2025. Direct recruitment has also increased, rising to 31% in 2026 from 25% in 2025, suggesting improved internal hiring capability. Referrals from existing contractors account for 7%, slightly higher than the 6% reported in 2025, reinforcing the value of trusted networks. In contrast, the use of a mix of recruitment approaches has fallen sharply to 5%, down from 32% in 2025, indicating a move towards more focused recruitment strategies.

Contractors in 2026 continue to be engaged predominantly in high-skill roles. Professionals, (SOC2) remain the largest group at 73%, down from 77% in 2025. Engagement of Managers, directors and senior officials, (SOC1) has reduced to 13%, from 20% in 2025, suggesting more selective use of senior contractors. Associate professionals and technicians, (SOC3) account for 23%, compared with 30% in 2025, while administrative and secretarial roles remain relatively stable at 14%. Sales and customer service roles are unchanged at 8%, indicating consistent but limited contractor use in customer-facing functions.

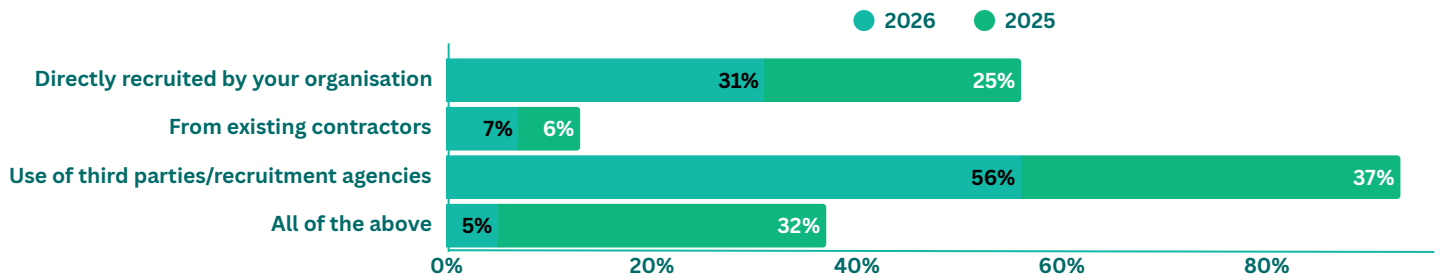
NO. OF CONTRACTORS ACTIVELY ENGAGED AT ANY ONE TIME



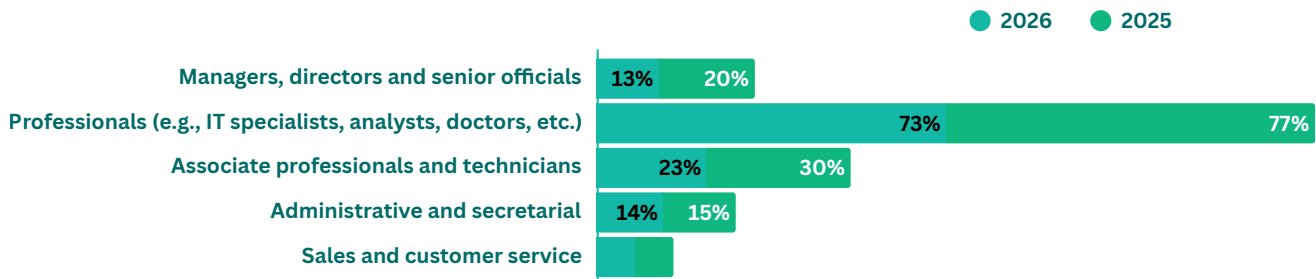
IN THE NEXT 12 MONTHS, DO YOU ANTICIPATE CONTRACTOR NUMBERS WILL...



HOW ARE CONTRACTORS IN YOUR ORGANISATION INITIALLY ENGAGED?



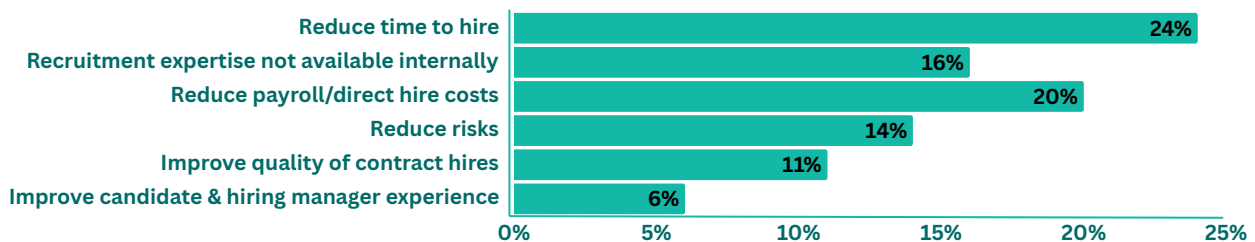
IN WHICH OF THE FOLLOWING FUNCTIONS DOES YOUR ORGANISATION ENGAGE CONTRACTORS



WHY COMPANIES USE RECRUITMENT AGENCIES

In 2026, the reasons clients use recruitment companies have changed, highlighting a more measured and selective use of external recruiters. Reducing time to hire remains the top driver at 24%, although this represents a significant fall from 46% in 2025, suggesting some improvement in internal hiring processes or more predictable contractor demand. Reducing payroll and direct hire costs accounts for 20%, down from 35% in 2025, indicating that cost pressure remains relevant but is no longer the dominant motivator it was previously.

Other drivers, accessing recruitment expertise not available internally has fallen to 16%, from 32% in 2025, while improving the quality of contract hires has reduced to 11%, down from 32%. The increases seen in recent years around risk reduction has eased in 2026, with 14% citing this reason, compared with 35% in 2025, suggesting either greater confidence in contractor engagement or improved compliance frameworks. Finally, improving the candidate and hiring manager experience is cited by 6%, down from 16% in 2025, reinforcing the overall trend towards more targeted use of recruitment partners.

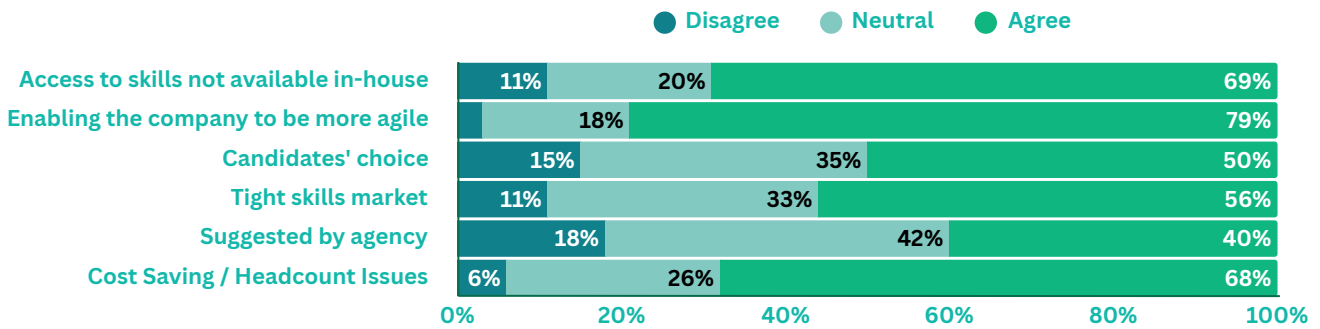


CRITERIA DRIVING DEMAND FOR CONTRACT ROLES

In 2026, demand for contract roles continues to be driven primarily by agility and access to scarce skills. Enabling the company to be more agile is now the strongest driver, with 79% agreement, up from 69% in 2025, highlighting the growing importance of flexible workforce models. Access to skills not available in-house remains a core factor, with 69% agreeing, compared with 70% in 2025, reinforcing the skills gap across key sectors.

Cost saving and headcount pressures emerge strongly in 2026, with 68% agreement, indicating budget restrictions and ongoing headcount controls. Candidates' choice has become more influential, with agreement rising to 50% from 36% in 2025, suggesting greater contractor preference for independent work is shaping hiring decisions. Tight skills market pressures remain consistent, with 56% agreement, largely unchanged from 2025.

Agency influence has increased, with 40% of organisations agreeing that contract hiring is suggested by agencies, up from 36% in 2025. While not the dominant driver, this upward shift aligns with wider evidence of agencies placing greater strategic emphasis on contract recruitment, reflecting a more proactive role in shaping client workforce strategies in 2026.

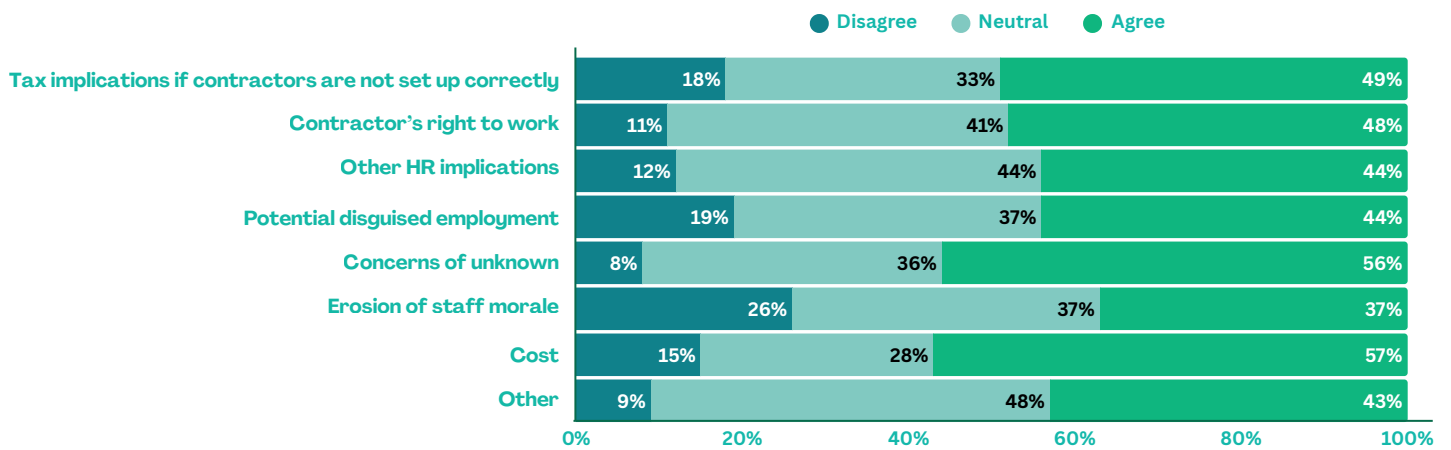


THE BIGGEST CONCERNS OR BARRIERS TO ENGAGING CONTRACTORS

In 2026, companies continue to report multiple barriers when engaging contractors, with cost remaining the single biggest concern. 57% agree that cost is a barrier, up from 58% in 2025. Concerns about the unknown have increased, with 56% agreeing in 2026, up from 52% in 2025, signalling ongoing uncertainty around how contractor engagements may evolve over time. Tax implications remain a major risk, with 49% agreement, reinforcing anxiety around compliance and potential penalties if contractors are not set up correctly. Several risk-related concerns have intensified. Contractors' right to work now concerns 48% of organisations, while other HR implications concern 44%, showing that education around employment status, and documentation still need to be addressed. Potential disguised employment has risen to 44%, up from 39% in 2025, indicating growing awareness of regulatory exposure. Erosion of staff morale has also increased, with 37% agreement, compared with 31% previously, suggesting greater sensitivity to the impact contractors may have on permanent teams. While cost remains the biggest barrier, risk, compliance and uncertainty have become more prominent in 2026.

So, while cost remains a major barrier, the real friction points lie in uncertainty, compliance complexity, communication gaps and inconsistent treatment. Many of these barriers are viewed as solvable through clearer rules, better education, stronger processes and more inclusive engagement practices. Analysis of open-ended responses highlights additional barriers but also provides more insight into the main barriers and concerns that exist when engaging contractors:

- Lack of clarity and transparency:** Particularly around tax rules, employment status and compliance. Many reference fear of fines, audits and disguised employment, pointing to a need for stronger government guidance and clearer legislation.
- Communication and engagement:** Respondents highlight gaps between contractors, employees, managers and head office. Calls for more dialogue, honest managers, regular feedback and better internal communication are common, lack of clarity is leading to morale erosion.
- Contract structure and stability:** Many respondents request longer-term contracts, rolling agreements, clearer scope definition and better visibility on rates and contract length. Short or uncertain contracts are seen as a driver of churn, disengagement and delivery risk.
- Fairness and parity:** Respondents frequently mention unequal treatment between contractors and permanent staff. This includes disparities in benefits, workload, job quality and recognition.
- Process improvement and professionalism:** Suggestions include dedicated HR support, stronger recruitment processes, better candidate matching, mandatory compliance checks, training for managers, and standardised KPIs. Better processes would reduce risk, improve quality and build trust on both sides.

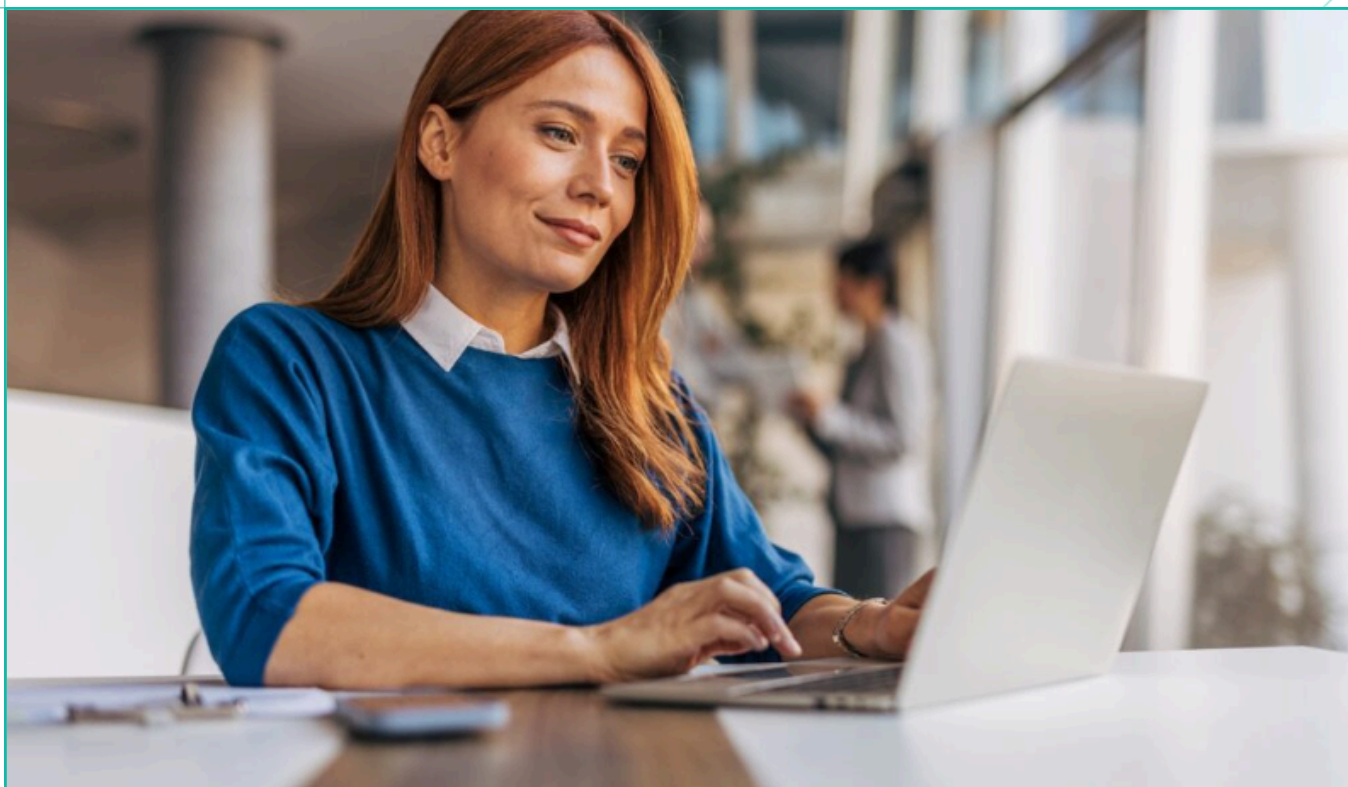


KEY SKILLS

Client companies were asked to identify the skills they find hardest to access in the current market. They highlighted both a shortage of specific skills and a lack of experience in applying these skills in real-world scenarios. Their feedback is summarised as follows:

- AI, AI/ML and Applied Data Expertise** - AI engineers, AI/ML specialists, AI governance, data engineering, SRE, advanced analytics and automation. Clients stress a shortage of contractors who can deliver real, production-level value, not theoretical knowledge or sales-led AI capability.
- Cybersecurity, Cloud and Enterprise IT Architecture** - Cybersecurity specialists, IT security SMEs, ServiceNow, ITSM, cloud, solution and enterprise architects.
- Senior Engineering and Technical Specialists** - Senior engineers, technical SMEs, process specialists, engineering/mathematics profiles, civils, mechanical and electrical technicians.
- Project Management and Change Leadership** - Senior project managers, change management, PM change control and delivery leads..
- Regulated-Industry and Compliance Expertise** - Skills linked to GMP, FDA, EU regulation, pharma, biotech and food safety feature strongly.

Others: Hybrid Technical–Leadership Profiles. Product, Platform and Digital Delivery Roles. Automation, Industry 4.0 and Digitalisation Skills. Sector-Specific and Niche Domain Knowledge.



SKILLS REQUIRED TO MEET FUTURE GOALS

Respondents were then asked to identify the key skills they think would be needed to achieve their goals in the coming years. Their responses highlighted five future-critical skillsets clearly stand out. These reflect both strategic direction and practical delivery needs across organisations.

1. AI, Data and Advanced Digital Capability: AI dominates the responses by a wide margin. This includes AI integration, AI management, AI development, machine learning, automation, PowerBI, data engineering, DevOps, SRE, cloud and cybersecurity. Importantly, organisations are not just seeking AI literacy. They want people who can apply AI to real business problems, modernise systems, support decision-making, and integrate AI safely into workflows.

2. Project, Product and Change Management: Strong and consistent demand appears for project management, product management, change management and finance transformation skills. These are roles focused on delivery, governance and coordination, especially in complex or regulated environments such as pharma, engineering and large-scale IT programmes. Clients are looking for people who can turn strategy into execution.

3. Senior Technical and Engineering Expertise: There is sustained demand for senior engineers, process engineers, electrical specialists, IT engineers, validation experts and technical SMEs. Organisations emphasise experience, depth and credibility, particularly where safety, compliance, utilities and critical infrastructure are involved. This reflects a preference for experienced practitioners over generalists.

4. Leadership, Communication and Stakeholder Skills: Human capability features strongly alongside technical demand. Repeated references include leadership, communication, stakeholder management, adaptability, accountability, collaboration and people management. Clients want professionals who can work across teams, influence outcomes, and integrate smoothly with permanent staff, not operate in isolation.

5. Regulatory, Compliance and Operational Excellence Skills: Many responses point to the need for regulatory knowledge, quality, governance, process improvement, lean practices, ESG and operational excellence. This reflects growing pressure to deliver results within tighter regulatory, ethical and sustainability frameworks, especially in highly regulated sectors.

Future demand is not about single skills. It is about blended capability. Organisations need people who combine advanced digital or technical expertise with leadership, adaptability and delivery focus. AI may be the headline, but organisations are equally clear that experience, critical thinking and communication will determine what makes a contractor valuable in the years ahead.

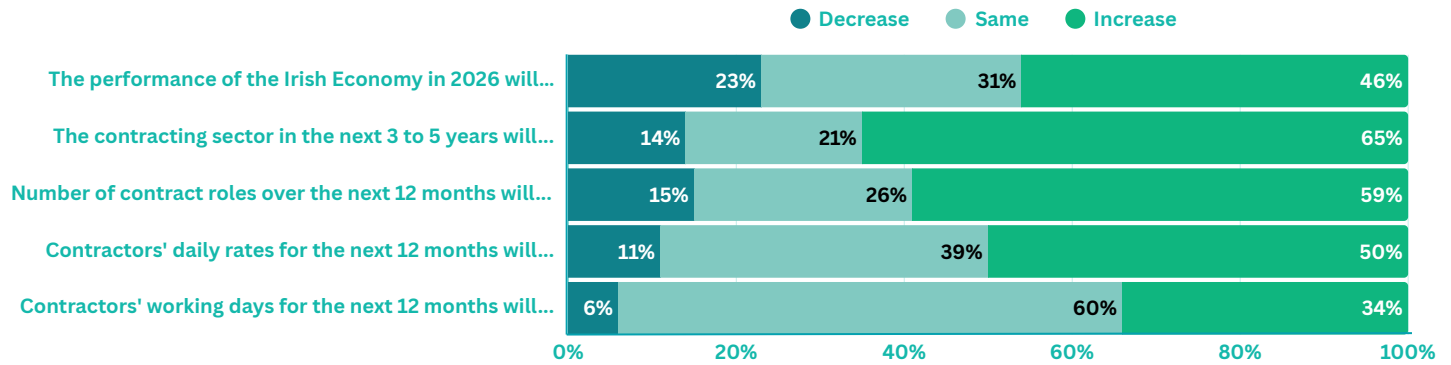
FUTURE EXPECTATIONS

Clients remain positive in 2026 in both the performance of the Irish economy and the contracting sector over the next 12 months.

Expectations for the Irish economy remain strong, with 46% expecting performance to improve in 2026, only marginally below the 48% who expected improvement in 2025. However, a higher proportion now expect conditions to decline 23% vs 15%, indicating growing caution alongside continued optimism.

Outlook for the contracting market is stronger than for the wider economy, 59% expect the number of contract roles to increase over the next 12 months, up from 53% in 2025. 65% of respondents believe that the contracting sector will grow over the next 3–5 years, confirming that contractors will remain central to delivery, in the years ahead.

Half of clients expect contractors' daily rates to increase, while 39% expect them to hold steady. Expectations for working days are more stable, with 60% anticipating no change and 34% expecting an increase.



CONFIDENCE INDEX

The confidence index scores are positive +59 up from +27 in 2025, in relation to the contracting sector and +43 up from +22 in 2025, in relation to the performance of the Irish economy in 2025.

THE PERFORMANCE OF IRISH ECONOMY IN 2026

| | |
|------|-----|
| 2026 | +43 |
| 2025 | +22 |
| 2024 | +27 |
| 2023 | -5 |
| 2022 | +50 |
| 2021 | +13 |

THE NUMBER OF CONTRACT ROLES IN THE NEXT 12 MONTHS

| | |
|------|-----|
| 2026 | +59 |
| 2025 | +27 |
| 2024 | +28 |
| 2023 | +8 |
| 2022 | +46 |
| 2021 | +25 |

MESSAGES TO THE GOVERNMENT

“TO SUCCEED, AN ECONOMY NEEDS TO BE FLEXIBLE AND ENTREPRENEURIAL EVEN THOUGH PRECARIOUS EMPLOYMENT IS STRESSFUL. OTHERWISE, THE SLIDE INTO MEDIOCRITY AND APATHY IS INEVITABLE.”

“RECOGNIZE THE VALUE OF THIS CRITICAL FORCE BY ADDING IT TO THE BRIEF OF THE JUNIOR MINISTER FOR EMPLOYMENT”

Contractors identify a wide range of practical and financial factors as important to sustaining independent work, including fair taxation, access to social welfare, clarity on allowable expenses, pensions, housing, and opportunities to upskill. These issues shape day-to-day viability and long-term security and appear consistently across their qualitative responses. However, beneath these concrete concerns sits a deeper, unifying issue that cuts across sectors, income levels, and career stages. Many responses reveal that contractors do not feel fully recognised or respected for the economic value they contribute to Ireland's economy. This perceived lack of recognition influences how other challenges are experienced and interpreted, framing questions of tax, welfare, and policy not only as technical issues, but as signals of whether contracting is seen as legitimate, valued way of work. The following section focuses on how contractors describe this recognition gap and what they believe needs to change to address it.

Contractors' responses show a clear set of needs and expectations about what would make independent work feel properly recognised, respected, and sustainable. At the centre is a strong desire to be seen as a legitimate part of the workforce, not treated as an exception or a problem to be managed. Many want contracting acknowledged as a normal and necessary way organisations deliver work, with respondents asking government to explicitly recognise this contribution in policy and public messaging. This is expressed in direct appeals such as, “Accept that contractors are essential for how our economy is setup,” and “Recognise the value of this critical force.” The practical request underneath is straightforward: include contractors in labour strategy, workforce planning, and how employment is discussed, measured, and reported so their contribution is visible rather than overlooked.

“NO FORMAL RECOGNITION FOR THE HIGHLY SKILLED, MOTIVATED AND FLEXIBILITY THAT CONTRACTORS PROVIDE AT VERY HIGH COST TO THEMSELVES AND FAMILIES.”

“THE GOVERNMENT DO NOT FULLY RECOGNISE THIS SECTOR EVEN THOUGH EVERY SECTOR OF THE ECONOMY USES FREELANCERS/INDEPENDENT CONTRACTORS TO BRING VALUE AND GET THINGS DONE.”

Contractors also want fairness that reflects the risk and costs they carry, they feel like they are treated like employees for taxation but like outsiders when seeking welfare supports. They repeatedly call for a model where contribution and entitlement align, particularly through improved access to social welfare during illness or gaps between contracts. What they want is not preferential treatment, but parity and credibility: “We should be seen as workers,” and “Rights should be the same if not better than employees... we are tax payers too and should be treated with more respect.” This includes wanting PRSI contributions to translate into meaningful supports, and for basic protections to exist that recognise the “no work, no pay” reality of contracting.

A third priority is their need for consistent guidance, this would remove ambiguity and reduce the sense that independent workers are always at risk of being challenged or misunderstood. Contractors want the rules to be simple, stable, and aligned across departments, with practical clarity on status, compliance, and what is allowed. Several call for government to “make it easier to navigate” and provide “clearer, consistent guidance across departments.” This is partly about reducing stress and administrative load, but it is also about recognition: clear rules signal that contracting is a valid and understood form of work, not a grey area.

Contractors also want their economic contribution recognised through equal access to mainstream financial systems, especially mortgages and credit. Many describe wanting decisions to be based on income history rather than employment label and ask government to engage directly with banks and financial institutions, so contractors are not treated as inherently high risk. The underlying request is respect through equal treatment: “Work with financial institutions so we are not discriminated against.” For many, this is not only a financial issue, but a life-stage and stability issue tied to long-term planning.

“I DON'T THINK THE GOVERNMENT CONSIDERS CONTRACTORS AS 'REAL' WORKERS.”

“THEY TREAT CONTRACTORS THE SAME AS COMPANIES. CONTRACTORS ARE PEOPLE, NOT AS INTEGRATED IN THE WORKFORCE AS STAFF BUT EQUALLY AS IMPORTANT.”

Recognition is also framed as needing practical infrastructure and visibility, not just statements. Contractors want simple access points to supports, training, entitlements, and guidance. Ideas include a “one stop shop” portal for contractors, clearer information campaigns, and more accessible learning supports that do not assume people can take unpaid days to upskill. They want training and development treated as a legitimate business need, not a personal luxury, with respondents calling for “support for upskill,” and noting that employees receive training while contractors have to self-fund and lose earnings to attend. This is especially strong in technology-led sectors, where skills must remain current to keep Ireland competitive.

“GOVERNMENT POLICY SEEMS TO BE GEARED TOWARDS THE TRADITIONAL EMPLOYER/EMPLOYEE FRAMEWORK.”

CONTRACTORS HAVE NO VOICE IN GOVERNMENT.”

“I DON'T SEE MEANINGFUL INDEPENDENT REPRESENTATION FOR THE SECTOR.”

Finally, contractors want respect expressed through how they are treated by institutions and clients, including transparency and predictable processes. Even where comments are framed around tax and welfare, the underlying request is dignity and trust. This is captured in blunt language such as, “Don't treat us like scammers,” and in calls for government to engage directly with contractors when shaping legislation: “Seek out contractor and freelancers to give feedback on each piece of labour legislation.” In short, contractors want recognition that is felt in everyday systems: fair rules, clear guidance, equal access, and protections that reflect the reality of independent work.

“ACCEPT THAT CONTRACTORS ARE ESSENTIAL FOR HOW OUR ECONOMY IS SETUP.”

“CONTRACTORS ARE KEY FOR IMPLEMENTING ANY LARGE FDI.”

“THIS TYPE OF WORK ADDS HUGE VALUE TO THE KNOWLEDGE AND FINANCIAL ECONOMIES, SO SHOULD BE INCENTIVISED.”

In summary the qualitative responses point to a need for recognition that is both symbolic and structural. Contractors want contracting to be publicly acknowledged as a valuable and legitimate way to work, and they want the system to act as if that is true. They want visibility in policy, fairness in entitlements, clarity in rules, equal access to finance, and practical supports that reflect how independent work actually operates, and they want it now!

“IT'S HARD NOT TO FEEL OVERLOOKED.”

“CONTRACTORS ARE ESSENTIAL FOR HOW ORGANISATIONS ACTUALLY OPERATE.”

“FEELS LIKE WE CARRY THE BURDEN WITHOUT ENJOYING MANY OF THE PROTECTIONS.”

“WE ARE A VALUABLE ASSET BUT OUR TREATED LIKE A BURDEN BY OUR GOVERNMENT.”

“VERY LITTLE DONE TO SUPPORT PEOPLE WHO WANT TO DO MORE.”

“THERE IS AN OUTDATED BIAS AGAINST CONTRACTORS.”

“IT GENUINELY MAKES YOU FEEL YOU'RE PAYING ALL THAT TAX FOR NO PERSONAL BENEFIT.”

“MOST MAJOR PROJECTS REQUIRE A FLEXIBLE COMPETENT MOTIVATED WORKFORCE AND THAT IS WHAT MOST FREELANCE CONTRACTORS ARE.”

“THE AMOUNT OF PRSI AND PAYE I HAVE TO PAY IS NOT REFLECTED IN ANY WAY IN TERMS OF THE SERVICES AVAILABLE TO ME.”

AUTHOR BIOGRAPHIES



ANDREW BURKE

CHAIR OF BUSINESS STUDIES AT TRINITY COLLEGE DUBLIN

Professor Andrew Burke is Chair of Business Studies at Trinity College Dublin. He served two terms as Dean during 2015-2023 when Trinity Business School tripled in size and secured Triple Accreditation (AACSB, AMBA and EQUIS) placing the School in the top 1% of business schools in the world. He is also a Fellow of Trinity College Dublin and has served on the Board of the University and Audit Committee. He has also served on the Governing Body of UCD. He was Bettany Chair and the Founding Director of the Bettany Centre for Entrepreneurship at Cranfield School of Management, UK. He was Chairperson of the Centre for Research on Self-Employment (CRSE) in London from 2014-2020. He has held visiting professorships at UCLA in 2002 and 2012 and was a Research Professor at the Max Planck Institute of Economics, Germany. He is widely published in top ranked international

journals including the Harvard Business Review, and the Journal of Management Studies. His work has been presented at the EU Commission, World Trade Organization, HM's Treasury, UK Houses of Commons and Lords as well as through media such as Forbes Magazine, the Financial Times, RTE and BBC television and radio. He graduated with a D.Phil (Oxford University), MSc (London School of Economics), MA (NU) and an honorary MA (Dubl.). He is an executive coach and holds a Certificate in Executive Coaching from the University of California, Berkeley. He is a former President and Ent's Officer of UCD Students' Union hosting bands such as the Pogues, Dr Feelgood, the Damned, Frankie Goes to Hollywood, the Human League and Wilko Johnson during his time in these roles. During his student days he played in a number of indie bands which were commercially unsuccessful but enjoyable experiences for the band, if not the audience!



NA FU

CHAIR OF RESPONSIBLE LEADERSHIP AT TRINITY COLLEGE DUBLIN

Professor Na Fu is Chair of Responsible Leadership and Fellow at Trinity College Dublin. She is also a Fellow of the Chartered Institute of Personnel and Development (CIPD), Co-Director of the Trinity Centre for Digital Business and Analytics and Director for the Trinity AI XR Hub.

Professor Na Fu's research lies at the cutting edge of digitalisation, responsible AI, and human resource management. Her research leadership is evidenced by securing over €11 million in competitive research funding and leading multiple EU-funded projects, including LEADSx2030, TechConnect, and WOTAM, focusing on the digitalisation of work and skills. Her work has been published in leading journals such as the Journal of Management, Human Resource Management, Human Resource Management Journal, Human Relations, Journal of Business Ethics, and the International Journal of Human Resource Management.

Professor Fu's insights have attracted widespread attention from leading media outlets like RTE, The Irish Times, People Management, Business Post, Global Voice, Forbes, and BBC. She is a highly sought-after keynote speaker at both academic and industry events and serves as a respected judge for industry awards. Through her industry reports and policy engagement, she actively shapes digital transformation and HR strategies, directly influencing policymakers. Beyond research, she contributes actively to interdisciplinary leadership and academic policy dialogue across Europe.



HITESH KAPOOR

RESEARCH ASSISTANT AND PHD SCHOLAR

Hitesh Kapoor is a doctoral student at Trinity Business School in the field of Entrepreneurship and holder of the prestigious Eric Flamholtz Scholarship award. He is involved in studying the role of freelancers in the modern business world and how freelancers enable businesses in their growth and scalability. He is also interested in discovering how the use of freelancers in business changes the perception of various stakeholders about the business. Prior to his doctoral studies, Hitesh completed his postgraduate degree in Marketing and Strategic Innovation & Entrepreneurship from IMT, Ghaziabad, India. He has also been involved in a research project with the Ministry of Finance, India, on Digital Transformation. He has gained extensive experience in Marketing, Leadership, and Operations through his professional career. Hitesh is now focused on conducting quality research in the emerging blended workforce model, where the typical workforce is complemented with freelancers, contractors, and AI.



JIMMY SHEEHAN

MANAGING DIRECTOR OF CONTRACTING PLUS

Jimmy Sheehan is Managing Director of Contracting Plus, a forward-thinking firm dedicated to empowering self-employed professionals through comprehensive accounting, tax, and financial services. With a mission to simplify the complexities of financial management for contractors, freelancers, and other self-employed individuals, Jimmy leads the company with a focus on growth, innovation, and client success.

A seasoned accountant with an entrepreneurial background in business development, Jimmy brings over two decades of experience in scaling businesses and implementing innovative solutions that enhance operational efficiency and client satisfaction. His expertise lies in crafting tailored strategies that address the unique challenges faced by self-employed professionals,

helping them to not only meet their financial obligations but also to thrive in competitive markets. His professional journey is marked by a proactive approach to leveraging technology, which has positioned Contracting Plus as a trusted partner for self-employed professionals seeking reliable and innovative advice in the areas of tax, accounting and financial services.



GERALDINE PENNEY

MARKETING MANAGER OF CONTRACTING PLUS

Geraldine Penney is the Marketing Manager at Contracting PLUS, where she focuses on promoting and communicating the value of self-employment to all stakeholders. Her proactive approach positions Contracting PLUS as a trusted partner for self-employed professionals. Geraldine's professional journey is enriched by her experience running her own business, working in SMEs, and multinational corporations.

This diverse background gives her a deep understanding of the dynamics of self-employment and corporate responsibilities, allowing her to communicate with all stakeholders effectively and seamlessly. Her notable achievements include winning an international Direct Mail Marketing Award for Bioferrin USA (Glanbia) and the Accenture Global Innovation Award for developing and launching Ireland's first grocery Click & Collect business with Superquinn.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

We extend our heartfelt appreciation to all the professional contractors and organisations who actively participated in the study, offering invaluable insights into Ireland's project economy landscape. A special acknowledgment is owed to Sarah Merrigan and Mary Ucheboh in Contracting PLUS for their valuable assistance. We are also indebted to Conor Edwards, Sandra Rafter and Fiona Tyrell of Trinity College Dublin for their professional support.

To cite this report: *Burke, A., Fu, N., Sheehan, J., Penney, G., & Kapoor, H. (2026). Ireland's Project Economy 2026: A Barometer of Independent Professionals, Contractors and Solo Self-Employed. Trinity College Dublin.*

<https://doi.org/10.25546/112702> ISBN: 978-1-911566-65-6

