

Four stories from the **search desk** this month

What hiring leaders, CDOs & CTOs are living through right now

01 BUILDING FROM SCRATCH

42 Employees. Zero Process.

A VP of Data Science & Analytics brought me in as her executive search partner to hire a **Director of Data Science**. Under 42 employees. No formal interview process. No structured onboarding. She worried that would turn off the caliber of candidate she wanted.

So we built a roadmap together — and by the end of the week, she had something she could actually run.

You don't have to be Google or Amazon to hire the best talent — **Amazon didn't start with 10,000 employees**. Some of the most decorated Data Science & AI talent don't want a big bureaucratic culture. They want to build something.

< 3 wks to 2 qualified, engaged finalists

The 2-Week Roadmap

- ✓ 3 interview rounds in 2 weeks
- ✓ Selection criteria & technical evaluation tools
- ✓ Behavioral, situational & technical interview guides
- ✓ Offer & onboarding built to attract top talent
- ✓ Offer decision finalized within 48 hrs of final interview

It's rarely the company holding a candidate back. It's usually how the opportunity is being told.

02 THE RETURN-TO-OFFICE SPRINT

87% of New Postings Are Fully On-Site

Everyone assumes hybrid is winning the return-to-office fight. The numbers say otherwise — hybrid postings were **cut nearly in half in two quarters**. That's not a drift back to the office. It's a sprint.

For Data & AI leaders, this matters more than most functions. The best CDOs and CAIOs are the hardest to relocate — and the first to walk when the policy changes two weeks before they sign.

On-Site vs. Hybrid vs. Remote

Q1 2026



Q2 2026



■ On-site ■ Hybrid ■ Remote

It's rarely the offer that kills a search. It's usually the policy that changed underneath it.

MARKET PULSE — Q3 2026 AI & DATA HIRING SNAPSHOT

280%

YoY growth in Agentic AI job postings — the sharpest skill-demand shift on record

3.2:1

Open AI & Data roles for every qualified candidate on the market

48 hrs

The response window that separates accepted offers from ghosted ones

Source: nitruc Q3 2026 AI & Data Job Market report, compiled from Stanford AI Index, Gartner & Robert Half data

Two questions **every hiring leader** should be able to answer

Lessons from the intake call — before a search ever goes to market

03 THE FIRST QUESTION EVERY CANDIDATE ASKS

“Who Will I Be **Reporting To?**”

That's the first question I get when I begin outreach on a senior Data & AI executive search. Not the title. Not the comp. Not the hybrid setup.

Every senior candidate wants to know one thing: **am I working for a winning manager?** Their track record. Their wins. Can they get me to the next level. Your bio matters more than you think.

Most leaders aren't prepared to answer that in under 30 seconds. If you can't, that's the first thing we fix — before the search ever goes to market.

The Intake-Call Question

“Tell me why I should resign from my current employer to come work for you.”

If there's hesitation — if the answer gets fumbled — that tells us the team isn't ready to go to market yet. We'll spend as long as it takes to get it right. There are no redo's when you're attracting senior Data & AI talent.

“ If we can nail down “why work for you,” everything else falls in order.

04 THE SEARCH POST-MORTEM

“I Hired the **Wrong Person.**”

No CTO or CDO wants to say it out loud. Four rounds of interviews. Five people in the process. Weeks of alignment meetings. Six months later, everyone quietly knows it didn't work out.

Here's the reality: **nobody has a crystal ball.** You can run a great process and still get it wrong. That's not failure — that's hiring. The leaders who get better at it are the ones who go back and ask what question they should have asked.

Two Questions For Every Intake Call

“Paint me a picture — what has this person accomplished by their 1-year anniversary? Their 2-year?”

“What's one part of the job description you're tolerant on if they're not up to speed in year one?”

“ Bad hires aren't a sign a leader doesn't know what they're doing. Every organization makes one occasionally — it's part of hiring.

WHY SPEED & CLARITY WIN RIGHT NOW

14–21

Days top AI & Data candidates stay on the market before signing an offer

62%

Of job seekers plan to ghost a slow-moving employer in their next search

114 days

Average time-to-fill for senior AI hires priced below a \$200K base floor

Source: nitruc Q3 2026 Candidate Behavior Report

Tracking market trends, stuck on a search, or curious where senior talent is landing?

Reach out — always glad to compare notes.