



FREE HIRING GUIDE · 2026 EDITION

The AEO / GEO Hiring Guide

Hire the people who get your brand cited in AI answers. The four roles to know, how to interview them, a copy-paste job description, and 2026 compensation benchmarks — a professional guide for the search era after the blue links.

By the GTM recruiting team at Sloane Staffing

Sloane Staffing

Hiring top talent for top companies.

sloane-staffing.com

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INTRODUCTION

Before you start

Search changed under your feet. The blue-link era that powered a decade of demand is giving way to AI answers — and most companies don't yet have anyone whose job is to win there.

This guide is for the leaders closing that gap. It explains what AEO and GEO actually are, the four roles that deliver them, how to interview for skills that are barely two years old, and what they cost in 2026 — drawn from the work we do recruiting AI-search talent every week.

Use it end to end, or jump to what you need:

If you're building the case

Start with chapters 1–2: the market shift and what an AEO/GEO function owns.

If you're ready to hire

Go to chapters 3 and 6–8: the four roles, the interview banks, the JD, and 2026 pay.

CHAPTER 01

The State of AI Search in 2026

Search is moving from blue links to AI answers — and the brands that get cited in those answers are quietly capturing the demand that used to flow through organic rankings.

~2B

Monthly users reached by Google AI Overviews

~58%

Drop in clicks to the #1 organic result with AI Overviews (Ahrefs)

800M+

Weekly ChatGPT users sitting between you and your buyer

8%

Of searches with an AI summary end in a link click (Pew)

Answer Engine Optimization (AEO) and Generative Engine Optimization (GEO) are the practice of optimizing content so AI answer engines surface and cite your brand. As buyers move their research into ChatGPT, Perplexity, Gemini, and Google's AI Overviews, being the cited answer — not just a ranked link — is the new growth frontier.

Four signals this is now a hiring priority

AI answers are the new front page

AI Overviews appear on about half of all searches, and Google's AI Mode passed 1 billion users within a year. The answer — not the link — is what most people see first.

Clicks are collapsing

Most searches now end with no click at all. Even your top-ranked pages are losing the traffic they used to earn.

New engines, new gatekeepers

ChatGPT, Gemini, Perplexity, and Claude now mediate buyer research — and the visitors they do send convert at far higher rates than traditional organic.

The talent is scarce

Postings for GEO/AEO roles have grown several hundred percent YoY. The field is young enough that 12–18 months of real experience already reads as senior.



The search landscape is being rebuilt around AI answers — and the brands optimized to be cited are winning the new front page.

Your competitors are being recommended by name inside the tools your buyers trust most. If no one owns that, it's a hiring gap — not a tooling gap.

CHAPTER 02

What Is AEO / GEO?

AEO (Answer Engine Optimization) and GEO (Generative Engine Optimization) are the practice of optimizing your content so AI answer engines — ChatGPT, Perplexity, Gemini, and Google AI Overviews — surface and cite your brand. GEO is usually the generative-AI subset of the wider AEO umbrella.

How it differs from traditional SEO

Traditional SEO optimizes for ranking in a list of ten blue links. AEO/GEO optimizes for being retrieved, synthesized, and cited inside a single AI-generated answer — which rewards structured data, clear entities, authoritative sourcing, and content written for how LLMs reason. The two are complementary: strong SEO fundamentals still feed AI Overviews and AI Mode, but they are no longer sufficient on their own.

What an AEO/GEO function owns

MANDATE

Get cited in AI answers

Entity strategy, authoritative sourcing, and content built for how LLMs synthesize and attribute answers.
Outcome: surfaced and cited across the major engines.

MANDATE

Recover lost traffic & demand

Answer-first content and structured data that capture high-intent AI referrals. Outcome: a pipeline from AI search that grows even as blue-link clicks decline.

MANDATE

Make the site machine-readable

Schema, structured data, crawlability, clean entities, llms.txt. Outcome: the source answer engines quote, not the one they skip.

MANDATE

Measure AI share of voice

Multi-LLM monitoring, prompt-level tracking, competitive gap analysis. Outcome: a measurable AI-visibility program, not guesswork.

One discipline, four jobs. Few people are world-class at all four. The art of hiring here is knowing which mandate is your bottleneck – and hiring for that first.

CHAPTER 03

The Four Roles to Hire

"An AEO/GEO hire" is really four distinct roles. Most teams start with one and grow into the others. Knowing which you need keeps you from hiring a strategist when you needed an implementer.

ROLE 01

GEO / AI Search Strategist

Owns visibility strategy across ChatGPT, Perplexity, Gemini, and AI Overviews – from entity strategy to prompt-level share of voice. Decides what to be known for and how to get cited for it.

ROLE 02

Technical SEO / AEO Engineer

Implements schema, structured data, crawlability, and retrieval-friendly architecture so engines can parse and cite you. Often the highest-leverage first hire.

ROLE 03

AI Content Strategist

Builds citable, authoritative content designed for how LLMs synthesize answers – not just how Google ranks ten links.

ROLE 04

AEO/GEO Manager / Head of Organic

A senior owner who unifies traditional SEO and emerging AEO/GEO into one growth motion – and owns the number.

How to sequence the hires

- 1 Fix the foundation first**
If your site isn't machine-readable, lead with the Technical SEO / AEO Engineer — nothing else compounds until engines can parse you.

- 2 Earn the citations**
If your content can't earn citations, the AI Content Strategist is the unlock — authority and answer-first structure.

- 3 Own the channel**
When AI search is a company priority, hire the Head of Organic to set strategy, own share of voice, and build the rest of the team.

Hire for your bottleneck, not the buzzword. The right first hire is whichever one unblocks the others.

CHAPTER 04

A Traditional SEO Hire Isn't an AEO/GEO Hire

Optimizing for AI answers is a different discipline from ranking blue links. The people who win it blend technical SEO, an understanding of how LLMs retrieve and cite, content strategy, and AI-visibility measurement.

Traditional SEO hire	Modern AEO/GEO specialist
Optimizes to rank in ten blue links	Optimizes to be the single cited answer
Chases keywords and positions	Builds entities, citations, and AI share of voice
Writes for Google's crawler	Structures content for how LLMs retrieve and synthesize
Reports sessions and rankings	Tracks how often models mention and cite you
Treats AI search as a side experiment	Owens visibility across ChatGPT, Perplexity, Gemini, and AI Overviews

This doesn't make SEO obsolete. Strong fundamentals still feed AI Overviews. But screening an AEO/GEO candidate purely on rankings-and-sessions experience will pass over exactly the skills that matter now.



What this means for interviewing

Don't anchor on years of SEO experience. Anchor on whether the candidate understands *why* a model cites one source and skips another — and whether they can prove they've measured it.

A curious mid-level SEO with genuine LLM literacy often beats a senior traditional SEO who treats AI search as a fad.

CHAPTER 05

What to Look For: Skills

Strong candidates blend technical SEO (schema, structured data, entities, site architecture) with a real understanding of how large language models

retrieve and cite sources, plus content strategy. The best also measure brand visibility across answer engines and iterate against it.

Area	What good looks like
Technical foundation	Schema / structured data, crawlability, site architecture, clean entity modeling, llms.txt
LLM literacy	Understands retrieval and citation – why a model quotes one source and skips another
Content strategy	Answer-first structure, authoritative sourcing, entity coverage that earns citations
Measurement	Multi-LLM monitoring, prompt-level share of voice, competitive gap analysis
Iteration	Treats AI visibility as a measurable program and improves it deliberately

The tell. Ask how they'd know whether their work is working. Weak answers stop at "rankings went up." Strong answers describe tracking citations and mentions across specific engines, at the prompt level, against named competitors.

Red flags

"It's just SEO with a new label"

Can't articulate what's actually different about being cited vs. being ranked.

No measurement view

Can't tell you how they'd track AI share of voice across engines.

All theory, no shipping

Can't talk through schema or site changes they've actually implemented.

Single-engine tunnel vision

Optimizes only for Google and ignores ChatGPT, Perplexity, and Gemini.

CHAPTER 06

Interview Questions by Role

Tailor the bank to the archetype you're hiring. Across all four, you're listening for someone who understands why models cite sources – not just that they do.

Foundations (all roles)

- How is optimizing to be cited in an AI answer different from ranking #1 in classic search?
- Walk me through why an LLM might cite one source over another for the same query.
- How would you measure whether our AI-search visibility is improving?

Technical SEO / AEO Engineer

- What schema and structured data would you prioritize to make our content citable, and why?
- How do you make a site retrieval-friendly for answer engines specifically?
- What's your read on llms.txt – useful, hype, or it depends?

AI Content Strategist

- What makes a page more likely to be quoted in an AI answer? Show me with an example.
- How do you structure content "answer-first" without hurting the human reading experience?
- How do you build entity authority for a brand that's currently invisible to the models?

GEO Strategist / Head of Organic

- If we wanted to be the cited answer for our category in ChatGPT and Perplexity, what's your 90-day plan?
- How do you unify traditional SEO and AEO/GEO into one motion rather than two competing teams?
- How would you report AI-search performance to a CMO who only knows rankings and sessions?

CHAPTER 07

Job-Description Template (Copy-Paste)

Written for the GEO / AI Search Strategist; adapt the ownership list for the Engineer or Content roles.

Title

GEO / AI Search Strategist

About the role

Search is moving from blue links to AI answers. We're hiring an AEO/GEO specialist to make our brand the cited answer across ChatGPT, Perplexity, Gemini, and Google AI Overviews — and to build a measurable AI-visibility program around it.

What you'll own

- Entity and citation strategy across the major answer engines
- Structured data, schema, and retrieval-friendly architecture (with eng/dev partners)
- Answer-first, citable content in partnership with our content team
- Multi-LLM monitoring and prompt-level share-of-voice reporting
- Competitive gap analysis and a roadmap to close it

Must-have

- Technical SEO depth: schema, structured data, entities, site architecture
- A genuine understanding of how LLMs retrieve and cite sources
- Experience measuring brand visibility across AI answer engines

Nice-to-have

- Content strategy background
- Experience unifying SEO and AEO/GEO into one motion
- Familiarity with AI-visibility tooling and multi-LLM tracking

CHAPTER 08

2026 Compensation Benchmarks

US ranges, blended from public salary aggregators. AI-search skills now carry a clear premium — director-tier organic-search pay grew roughly 11% year over year, driven largely by that premium.

Role	Typical base (US)
Technical SEO / AEO Engineer	\$85k–\$130k
AI Content Strategist	\$85k–\$145k (senior to ~\$158k)
GEO / AI Search Strategist	\$110k–\$160k
AEO/GEO Manager / Head of Organic	\$150k–\$220k+ (Director of SEO median ~\$172k; Head of SEO median ~\$182k, top \$300k+)

What moves the range

The AI-skill premium

GEO/AEO appears in roughly a third of senior SEO listings, and named AI-search roles show up at premium pay bands.

Scarcity rewards early movers

The field is young: 12–18 months of genuine AEO/GEO experience can justify a senior title and senior pay.

Breadth pays

Specialists who combine technical, content, and measurement skills sit at the top of every band.

Sources: First Page Sage US SEO Salary Ranges; tryanalyze.ai SEO Salary Survey 2026; Built In; Glassdoor; ZipRecruiter; Webflow Jobs; Robert Half. Accessed June 2026.

CHAPTER 09

How to Measure Success + FAQ

The fastest way to know you hired well: within a quarter, you should have a dashboard you didn't have before — one that shows how often, and how accurately, the models mention you.

What "working" looks like

Citations tracked

Brand mentions and citations measured across ChatGPT, Perplexity, Gemini, and AI Overviews.

Share of voice trending up

Prompt-level share of voice vs. named competitors, improving over time.

Machine-readable site

Structured data and entity coverage measurably improved.

AI-sourced pipeline

A growing slice of pipeline attributable to AI-search referrals.

Frequently asked questions

Is AI search really big enough to hire for?

Yes. AI Overviews reach around 2 billion monthly users and appear on roughly half of all searches; ChatGPT alone has 800M+ weekly users. Meanwhile AI Overviews have cut clicks to the top organic result by more than half. Buyers are researching inside AI answers — and the brands optimized to be cited are capturing that demand.

Can't our existing SEO person just do this?

Sometimes – if they're genuinely curious about how LLMs retrieve and cite, and willing to be measured on AI share of voice. But the skill set is different enough that many strong traditional SEOs are not the right fit, and screening for it explicitly matters.

How quickly can Sloane deliver candidates?

After a kickoff call to define the role, we go outbound to pre-qualified, pre-interviewed specialists – so you typically see a vetted shortlist within days, not weeks. That speed matters in a field where qualified people are scarce and move quickly.

Be the answer, not the afterthought. As AI answers replace blue links, the brands that get cited win share of voice. Book a consultation at sloane-staffing.com/contact and we'll hire the specialist who gets you there.

ABOUT

About Sloane Staffing

We're a go-to-market and technical recruiting firm that places the people who build and grow modern companies – from marketing, sales, and GTM engineering to the specialized data and AI talent behind them.

Specialist, not generalist

We recruit within focused practice areas and qualify candidates on the problems they've solved – not keyword-matched résumés.

We reach the people who aren't looking

We go outbound to pre-qualified, pre-interviewed candidates, so you typically see a vetted shortlist within days, not weeks.

Contract & permanent

One partner for both — whether you need a project-based resource or a long-term hire.

Founder-led expertise

Built by operators from the GTM and martech world who know these roles from the inside.

Let's find your next hire. Book a free consultation at sloane-staffing.com/contact — tell us who you need, and we'll show you how we'd source them.