Heidrick & Struggles

2026
Skills Index

The interim expertise organizations need to turn strategy into execution

Executive Summary

Execution is becoming the defining business challenge.

Based on proprietary Heidrick & Struggles data, the 2026 Skills Index reveals the most in-demand skills and those gaining momentum as organizations navigate change and execute multiple strategic priorities at once.

Demand remains anchored in operational reliability.

Financial controls, accounting, and audit is the most in-demand skill, followed by project management and FP&A, with PMO, process optimization, and technology implementation also ranking highly—reflecting ongoing needs for financial clarity, execution, and stability during leadership change, transactions, and transformation.

Momentum is rising in areas that enable change.

The fastest-growing skills include advanced analytics, brand strategy, digital marketing, clinical operations, and database architecture and data management. Strong growth in process optimization, strategy, post-merger integration, PMO, and organizational design signals continued investment in linking strategy to execution.

8 priorities shaping demand

Across the data, several recurring business priorities emerge:

- Orchestrating change at scale
- Turning AI ambition into operating results
- Taking out cost without impeding growth
- Equipping finance for change and complexity
- Raising the bar on commercial performance
- Creating value in complex transactions
- Modernizing the backbone without interrupting the business
- For life science companies, bringing health innovation to market

These priorities frequently create needs that are urgent, highly specialized, or inherently temporary. Interim leaders and experts can provide additional capacity, objective perspective, and skilled execution at the moments when organizations need them most—without requiring permanent capability build-out within the organization.

Contents

From strategic intent to business impact

Organizations in 2026 find themselves with no shortage of priorities. They are working to convert AI investment into business value and productivity, modernize systems and data, pursue growth, navigate transactions, and respond to changing geopolitical and market conditions. The challenge lies in executing several interdependent priorities at once, often with limited leadership bandwidth and little margin for disruption to the core business.

When critical priorities converge, interim leaders and experts help absorb that operational strain by providing the leadership, capacity, execution discipline, and capabilities that organizations need to sustain business momentum and move complex work forward. They bring capabilities suited to pivotal moments without requiring companies to build them permanently into the organization.

In this annual examination of Heidrick & Struggles proprietary data, we reveal the skills most in demand and those gaining momentum among clients at enterprise and mid-market companies, private equity firms, and global nonprofits. These findings offer a snapshot of where organizations are adding specialized expertise and flexible leadership capacity to address their most important business priorities.

The top 15 most in-demand skills right now

The skills most frequently requested by clients, based on the total number of client requests between July 2025 and June 2026

1. Financial controls, accounting, and audit
2. Project management
3. Financial planning, analysis, and modeling
4. Program management office (PMO)
5. Process optimization and transformation
6. Technology and systems implementation
7. Strategic planning
8. Growth strategy
9. Global HR
10. Market access and value
11. Organizational design and workforce planning
12. Post-merger integration
13. Operational excellence
14. Clinical operations
15. Corporate and business unit strategy

The top 15 skills with momentum

The skills experiencing significant growth in client demand, based on a comparison of client requests between January–June 2026 and July–December 2025

Advanced analytics	+350%
Brand strategy	+333%
Digital marketing	+180%
Clinical operations	+150%
Database architecture and data management	+150%
Process optimization and transformation	+147%
Corporate and business unit strategy	+138%
Market access and value	+125%
Post-merger integration	+118%
Program management office (PMO)	+106%
Organizational design and workforce planning	+100%
Treasury	+100%
Global HR	+80%
Regulatory strategy, process, and submissions	+80%
Portfolio strategy	+75%

KEY TRENDS

Orchestrating change at scale

Leaders largely know what they need to accomplish. The challenge lies in maintaining momentum while executing multiple strategic priorities simultaneously.

AI technology adoption, major transactions, regulatory change, and cost transformation are all competing for leadership attention and organizational capacity. Increasingly, companies are seeking experienced interim leaders and experts to establish the governance, coordination, and execution discipline needed to keep complex initiatives moving without permanently expanding the organization.

Core skills

- Project management (**#2**)
- Program management office (PMO) (**#4** / **+106%**)
- Process optimization and transformation (**#5** / **+147%**)

Supporting skills

- Corporate and business unit strategy
- Financial planning, analysis, and modeling
- Organizational design and workforce planning
- Strategic planning
- Technology and systems implementation

Recent mandates for interim talent

- Stand up or remediate a PMO
- Define decision rights and milestones for a transformation
- Serve as an execution-focused Chief Transformation Officer
- Establish a program and transition it to permanent internal ownership

KEY TRENDS

Turning AI ambition into operating results

Organizations are under pressure to turn AI investment into measurable business value.

That requires more than new tools or isolated pilots. Successful AI transformation depends on stronger data foundations, redesigned processes, clear governance, and disciplined implementation. Interim transformation leaders can bring deep experience across data, workflows, and adoption as companies move from experimentation to scaled deployment, driving meaningful results while reducing execution risk.

Core skills

- Advanced analytics (**+350%**)
- Database architecture and data management (**+150%**)
- Process optimization and transformation (**#5** / **+147%**)

Supporting skills

- Corporate and business unit strategy
- Program management office (PMO)
- Technology and systems implementation

Recent mandates for interim talent

- Identify and prioritize high-value AI use cases
- Redesign business processes for AI-enabled workflows
- Build the data foundation for AI adoption
- Lead a data or technology organization
- Develop enterprise analytics and decision support systems

KEY TRENDS

Equipping finance for change and complexity

In a highly selective and uncertain capital environment, organizations need stronger forecasting, cleaner reporting, and greater discipline around investment decisions.

Finance transformations frequently coincide with periods of significant organizational change, creating a need for both continuity and specialized expertise. Interim finance leaders provide experienced leadership during periods of heightened complexity, strengthening financial operations while providing the visibility, controls, and confidence leaders need to make critical business decisions.

Core skills

- Financial controls, accounting, and audit (**#1**)
- Financial planning, analysis, and modeling (**#3**)
- Treasury (**+100%**)

Supporting skills

- Database architecture and data management
- Program management office (PMO)
- Technology and systems implementation

Recent mandates for interim talent

- Serve as an interim CFO, controller, or head of FP&A
- Rebuild reporting and forecast cadence
- Establish a standalone finance function for a carve-out
- Implement a new ERP system or capabilities
- Prepare for an audit, financing, IPO, or sale

KEY TRENDS

Raising the bar on commercial performance

Commercial growth is becoming harder to achieve and sustain.

That's driving demand for hands-on support to improve e-commerce performance, activate brand strategies, strengthen customer acquisition, and connect marketing activity more directly to customer and revenue outcomes. Interim commercial leaders and operators provide the fresh perspective and been-there-done-that experience needed for launches, turnarounds, and periods of accelerated growth—enabling teams to turn commercial priorities into measurable business results.

Core skills

- Brand strategy (**+333%**)
- Digital marketing (**+180%**)
- Growth strategy (**#8**)

Supporting skills

- Advanced analytics
- Corporate and business unit strategy
- Project management

Recent mandates for interim talent

- Serve as an interim CMO during a transition
- Identify and prioritize new growth opportunities
- Lead an e-commerce or digital performance turnaround
- Translate brand strategy into a practical rollout plan
- Improve marketing measurement and performance reporting

KEY TRENDS

Taking out cost without impeding growth

Companies must strengthen performance while continuing to fund growth, innovation, and transformation.

Durable cost savings depend on redesigning how work gets done—not in making one-off reductions. Organizations are bringing in experienced interim leaders and experts to challenge long-held assumptions, redesign operating models, and lead complex transformation efforts with the objectivity and accountability needed to deliver sustainable improvements.

Core skills

- Financial planning, analysis, and modeling (**#3**)
- Process optimization and transformation (**#5** / **+147%**)
- Organizational design and workforce planning (**#11** / **+100%**)

Supporting skills

- Financial controls, accounting, and audit
- Global HR
- Operational excellence

Recent mandates for interim talent

- Redesign critical processes
- Establish savings governance and KPI accountability
- Serve as an interim transformation or turnaround leader
- Restructure a functional team or business unit reporting

KEY TRENDS

Creating value in complex transactions

Longer hold periods and more demanding deal environments are raising the execution burden on sponsors and portfolio companies.

Integrations, carve-outs, and value creation initiatives present leadership needs that are both highly targeted and inherently temporary. Interim leaders and experts bring practical insights gained across multiple transactions, helping companies establish transaction management offices (TMO/IMO/SMO), coordinate complex workstreams, achieve critical milestones, and remain focused on running the business.

Core skills

- Program management office (PMO) (#4 / **+106%**)
- Post-merger integration (#12 / **+118%**)
- Portfolio strategy (**+75%**)

Supporting skills

- Corporate and business unit strategy
- Financial controls, accounting, and audit
- Financial planning, analysis, and modeling
- Organizational design and workforce planning
- Process optimization and transformation
- Technology and systems implementation

Recent mandates for interim talent

- Lead integration or separation planning and execution
- Coordinate transition services agreement (TSA) exit
- Track value-creation targets
- Prepare reporting and operations for a sale
- Add experienced leadership during transactions

KEY TRENDS

Modernizing the backbone without interrupting the business

Modernization requires stronger coordination across technology, data, and business operations.

Legacy systems, fragmented data, and unclear ownership can weaken reporting, cybersecurity, customer experience, and productivity—while limiting the organization's ability to adopt new capabilities. Interim leaders and experts bring the experience to connect architecture, implementation, and business operations to enable modernization without compromising day-to-day performance.

Core skills

- Project management (**#2**)
- Technology and systems implementation (**#6**)
- Database architecture and data management (**+150%**)

Supporting skills

- Advanced analytics
- Financial controls, accounting, and audit
- Financial planning, analysis, and modeling
- Program management office (PMO)

Recent mandates for interim talent

- Lead a major enterprise platform implementation
- Modernize legacy systems and move data to the cloud
- Stand up a data function or center of excellence
- Provide temporary leadership in technology or AI
- Design stronger data architecture, governance, and ownership

KEY TRENDS

Bringing health innovation to market

Life sciences companies face a more demanding path from innovation to commercialization.

As reimbursement, regulatory, and evidence requirements become more complex, organizations increasingly need cross-functional leadership to align clinical execution, market access, regulatory strategy, and commercial planning. Interim life sciences leaders provide deep domain expertise at critical points in a product's lifecycle, accelerating progress through complex commercialization milestones without requiring permanent additions to the organization.

Core skills

- Clinical operations (**#14** / **+150%**)
- Market access and value (**+125%**)
- Regulatory strategy, process, and submissions (**+80%**)

Supporting skills

- Advanced analytics
- Portfolio strategy
- Program management office (PMO)
- Project management

Recent mandates for interim talent

- Develop payer, pricing, and reimbursement strategies
- Generate evidence for market access
- Lead clinical operations or trial execution
- Coordinate regulatory submissions and launch readiness
- Provide interim clinical, medical, or commercial leadership

Note on methodology

The 2026 Skills Index is based on an analysis of requests submitted by Heidrick & Struggles clients for interim leaders and experts between July 2025 and June 2026.

The most-in-demand ranking reflects the total number of client requests associated with each skill during the 12-month period. The skills-with-momentum ranking compares request volume in January–June 2026 with volume in July–December 2025. To avoid overstating percentage changes from small starting points, skills were required to meet a minimum request threshold to qualify for the momentum ranking.

In the course of drafting this report, Heidrick & Struggles utilized AI to assist with data analysis. The resulting AI outputs and analyses were reviewed, validated, and refined by the research team before publication. Client names, confidential engagement details, and personally identifiable information were not used in generating this report.

Tap experienced interim leaders and experts on a flexible, as-needed basis. Heidrick & Struggles delivers on-demand access to top independent talent to solve significant business problems, drive major transformations, and fill urgent leadership and capability gaps.

Whether you're facing market volatility, fending off competition, or leveling up your technology and operational capabilities, strong leadership and in-demand skills are essential. Gaps at any level can sap momentum, throw organizations into disarray, and stall progress on important initiatives. When you're short a key player, undergoing an extended search, or building out new capabilities, even temporary solutions can be transformative.

We offer critical talent for critical moments, including:

• Interim executives spanning C-suite to director

• Management consultants and subject matter experts and advisors

• Special project leaders for moments of innovation, transformation, and change

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