

India's largest IT company, Tata Consultancy Services (TCS), wants to hire 8,900 (Forward Deployed Engineers) FDEs this year, while Infosys targets up to 6,000. HCLTech plans to have 15-20% of its fresher hiring as FDEs, while Wipro has a target to deploy 10,000 FDEs in the next 18 months.

Data from staffing firm Quess Corp suggests that just around 1,300-1,500 'narrowly defined' FDEs are available for hire currently.

Indian IT services companies may have joined the global chase behind the hottest job in the tech ecosystem: the FDE. But where does one shop for this rare talent? The silver lining is that for Indian IT services companies, an FDE may not necessarily be the same person that companies such as Palantir, OpenAI or Anthropic have in mind. For services companies, the difference comes from the nature of the work. Traditional services delivery separated business analysts, architects, developers, testers and infrastructure teams. An FDE compresses some of those roles into one person who stays close to the customer.

"What a forward-deployed engineer tries to do is collapse multiple roles into one or a few. A FDE needs to work directly with customers. So, they are business-aligned or domain-aligned, and they need to understand the business problem before building a solution," said Navin Nair, vice president of digital engineering, data & AI at Mindsprint, now acquired by Wipro.

The idea of an FDE pod also reflects a change in the services model itself. Temasek-backed UST, for instance, sees

Everyone wants FDEs, but where are these specialised engineers? IT firms turn to reskilling & adjacent talent pools as FDE demand outpaces supply, writes Shristi Achar

customers increasingly asking service providers to take responsibility for an outcome rather than simply supply people against a project. "In today's world, customers want a firm that can come in, own an outcome for better pricing and honour a (service level agreement) SLA and provide tools from managing productivity to managing services," said Manu Gopinath, president at UST.

Data from hiring platform Indeed shows that FDE job postings in India grew nearly 19-fold between June 2025 and June 2026, an impressive 1,807% YoY increase. Growth accelerated notably from March 2026, with companies moving from AI experimentation to implementation.

While the existing talent pool is limited, Kapil Joshi, Quess' IT staffing CEO, said the roles can be filled through a combination of hiring and reskilling, with a larger adjacent pool of 12,000-15,000 engineers in IT services carrying a 55%-65% skill overlap with what FDE roles demand.

"There's a much larger adjacent pool of engineers already working across backend engineering, cloud platforms, APIs, and enterprise integration, in roles like GenAI Engineers, MLOps Engineers, Cloud ML Engineers, and Data Engineers," he said, adding that this is the pool IT services firms are realistically drawing from to hit their FDE targets.

hiring a few experienced FDEs to learn from. Frontier-model companies and consulting firms pay a premium of at least 2 to 2.5 times to hire FDEs, compared to what services companies can afford, as per UearthInsight's data.

The source of such talent is more likely to exist within sectors like banking, retail etc, rather than the services industry, Gaurav Vasu, CEO of UearthInsight, said. "To build authentic FDE talent, you need people with industry-domain and functional consulting expertise...the tech services industry does not sell functional skills," he said.

AI makes the hire-and-train model more practical because engineers no longer need to spend as much time writing code. The more important skill becomes knowing what needs to be built and making the choices around it. This is also why services companies do not necessarily need to hire FDEs as a ready-made category, given that the skill set doesn't exist as a defined pool in the market. Its approach is to assess existing employees, hire selec-



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OUTCOME OVER OUTPUT

A New Army of Forward Deployed Engineers Are Rewriting the Playbook at Indian IT Services Companies

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6,000
No of FDEs Infosys targets to hire

15-20%
HCLTech's fresher hiring to be FDEs

10,000
FDEs Wipro looks to hire over the next 18 months

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narrowly defined FDEs are currently available for hire in India: Quess Corp

12,000-15,000
engineers has an estimated 55-65% skill overlap with FDE roles

1,807%
Rise in FDE job postings in India between June 2025 and June 2026: Indeed

These talent pool extends beyond IT services, with banking, retail and other industries offering engineers with domain expertise

No industry-standard FDE certification exists yet, making reskilling, internal talent conversion key to build workforce

For Indian IT services firms, an FDE is increasingly an engineer, domain expert and client-facing problem solver

Demand for this combination of skills also makes employees in the middle layer of an IT services firm important. Mid-sized IT services firm Apexon, for instance, is identifying employees among the mid-management layers of organisations to hire and train. "If I go to the market and say I want to hire an FDE, that's a premium talent right now. That's going to bust the economics. But I have a lot of people who can use our training machinery to turn raw, semi-finished material into FDEs," said Sriniketh Chakravarthi, chief executive officer of Apexon, while

tively and then provide the missing training. Mohit Joshi, chief of India's fifth largest software services firm, Tech Mahindra, echoed the point. The term 'forward-deployed engineer' came into being with Palantir specifically. The company found that the implementation at client organisations was difficult because clients were not comfortable with the tools and needed to build their own data ontology. If you look at the cost system, it is about a \$1-1.5 million per FDE, which is very different from the cost structures that we are comfortable operating in.

"I have no doubt that a lot of the people who are there in the Indian IT services industry, a significant proportion of them would be upskilled and trained to become FDEs because many of them will already have a detailed industry knowledge," said Joshi.

US COMPENSATION BANDS

US market median	Annual total compensation
\$156,000-\$244,000	
Frontier labs, typical	\$235,000-\$485,000
Frontier labs, typical	\$560,000-\$785,000
Labs, principal or staff level	\$750,000-\$1 million