BETWEEN THE CODE AND THE CUSTOMER

The customer-facing AI careers map.

FDE, applied AI engineer, AI DevRel. Understand the work, choose a direction, and build proof that gets you into the conversation.

For engineers and PMs who already ship software. No signup. No tracking.
Web edition and free download: https://jilo3t.ipsion.page/workspace/hatchery-careers-map/

01 / GET YOUR BEARINGS

Same technology. Different work.

Choose by the work you want to do, not the title. These roles overlap, and companies draw the boundaries differently.

A / BUILD IN THEIR WORLD

Forward deployed engineer

One customer, deeply

Scope, build and run AI systems inside a customer's infrastructure. Work through the messy data, integration and deployment details.

Proof: a working system, evals and a plan to operate it.

B / GET THE PILOT WORKING

Applied AI engineer

Several customers, often with sales

Turn technical discovery into pilots, prototypes and evaluation suites. Teach the customer team and defend the choices you made.

Proof: a build, demo and business case.

C / MAKE IT REUSABLE

AI developer relations

A developer community, one-to-many

Build sample apps, tutorials and talks. Help developers adopt a product, then bring their rough edges back to engineering.

Proof: code someone else can run and learn from.

Read the pay figures as a dated snapshot.
Research was checked October 24, 2026. Employer examples below are historical US posted ranges, not current vacancies or expected take-home pay. Location, level, equity and commission matter; these selected AI-company postings are not a market-wide benchmark. Verify the current posting before applying.

Forward deployed engineer

Palantir's original distinction is useful: regular engineers focus on "one capability, many customers"; FDEs focus on "one customer, many capabilities." [16]

What the work looks like

- Scope an ambiguous request, sequence the work and build on the customer's infrastructure.
- Handle integrations, security and procurement gates. Deliver a system the customer can operate. [17]
- Build agents or retrieval workflows, plus evaluation and monitoring that expose failures.
- Translate customer needs back to your own product and engineering teams.

What helps you switch

Customer-facing experience under another title can count. Decagon names solutions engineering, consulting, implementation engineering and technical product/PM backgrounds. Anthropic explicitly says side projects and prototypes count. [21] [17]

Prepare for the interview

Practice coding, open-ended scoping and explaining something you built. Palantir's hiring guidance recommends delivering a functioning idea first, then expanding it. Company loops vary. [24] [26]

> **Read past the title.** Ask how much time is hands-on coding, who owns production, whether there is a quota, and how much travel is expected. "FDE" can also mean solutions work.

YOUR PORTFOLIO SIGNAL

Show the path to production.

Make a small agent or RAG prototype useful in a realistic workflow. Show its data boundaries, failure cases, eval results and operating plan.

Posted pay examples

US research snapshot · Oct 24, 2026

Palantir · New York
$135,000–$200,000
Forward Deployed Software Engineer [3]

Anthropic · NYC / SF / Seattle
$280,000–$320,000
Staff Forward Deployed Engineer [17]

Ask the recruiter

Travel? Customer assignment length? Deployment ownership? On-call responsibilities? What counts as success?

Applied / solutions AI engineer

Titles include applied AI engineer, solutions engineer or architect, and agent engineer. The common thread: helping customer teams get from discovery to a working pilot.

What the work looks like

- Build customized pilots, prototypes and evaluation suites. [34]
- Lead hands-on workshops and code reviews with customer engineers. [34]
- Partner with sales across accounts and explain technical choices in business terms. [6]
- Send useful customer feedback to product and research teams. [6]

What helps you switch

Anthropic names product engineers, software engineers, FDEs and technical PMs among relevant backgrounds. OpenAI lists prototypes built on its API as a plus. A project that works, and a clear explanation of its value, do more than a list of tools. [34] [6]

Prepare for the interview

Databricks' researched posting explicitly included design and architecture, live coding, a "Build, Demo, Pitch!" presentation, and reference checks. Practice a demo you can defend under questions. [7]

> **Look at ownership, not just the title.** Sierra's agent engineers own customer agents from pilot through deployment and iteration. These build-heavy roles can sit between applied AI and FDE. [36]

YOUR PORTFOLIO SIGNAL

Make the pilot measurable.

Bring one prototype with a short demo: the customer problem, eval results, tradeoffs, security boundaries and what it would take to deploy.

Posted pay examples

US research snapshot · Oct 24, 2026

Anthropic · SF / NYC
$200,000–$320,000
Applied AI Engineer, Enterprise [34]

Databricks · CA / SF
$219,100–$301,300
Senior Solutions Architect [7]

Databricks says commission-based ranges are on-target earnings (OTE), without clarifying this posting's classification. Confirm base vs OTE with the recruiter.

Ask the recruiter

Pre-sales or post-sales? Quota or commission? How many accounts? Pilot-to-production handoff? Rules on AI tools in each interview?

AI developer relations

Developer advocate, DevRel engineer and developer experience engineer are common titles. The audience is a community, not only one customer account.

What the work looks like

- Turn products into runnable demos, templates and open-source projects. [11]
- Teach through tutorials, video, talks and technical documentation.
- Support communities and office hours, and notice where developers get stuck. [8]
- Hit rough edges early and get them fixed or documented before more people hit them. [11]

Get in without the title

Build public proof: a sample repo with a clear README, a tutorial, a short recorded talk, and documentation contributions. Vercel's researched posting required a link to something that taught developers something. [55] [11]

Community and ambassador programs can give you practice, not a job guarantee. Explore Claude Community Ambassadors and LangChain community programs; check their current terms and availability. [57] [58]

Prepare for the interview

Practice teaching a technical topic to a mixed audience in 15–20 minutes, then taking questions. Some companies add coding or a take-home. PostHog's published process uses a paid workday with a repo and tutorial. [50] [53]

YOUR PORTFOLIO SIGNAL

Help a stranger succeed.

Make a small repo someone else can run. Add a README, one useful tutorial, troubleshooting notes, and a recorded walkthrough.

Posted pay examples

US research snapshot · Oct 24, 2026

Pinecone · San Francisco
$140,000–$240,000
Developer Advocate · plus equity [8]

Vercel · San Francisco
$168,000–$252,000
DevRel Engineer, Agentic Infrastructure · base [11]

Ask the recruiter

Who is the audience? How much code vs content? Travel and events? Who acts on developer feedback? How is adoption measured?

Which work would you choose?

Pick the work you would enjoy doing repeatedly. This is a conversation starter, not a validated career assessment. Your answers stay in this browser and are not saved or sent.

1. Who do you want to help?

- ○ **A.** One customer, deeply, for months.
- ○ **B.** Several customers, each to a working pilot.
- ○ **C.** Many developers through reusable examples.

2. What is the best part of your week?

- ○ **A.** Shipping a fix into a customer's system.
- ○ **B.** Walking a team through a demo you built.
- ○ **C.** Publishing a tutorial or giving a talk.

3. Where would you spend a workday?

- ○ **A.** Inside a customer's systems and workflows.
- ○ **B.** With an account team and customer engineers.
- ○ **C.** At a meetup, in a community or on camera.

4. Which commercial work suits you?

- ○ **A.** Owning a scoped customer deployment.
- ○ **B.** Working next to sales on technical discovery.
- ○ **C.** Helping developers adopt a product at scale.

5. You hit a rough edge in the product…

- ○ **A.** Unblock the customer and get the deployment live.
- ○ **B.** Explain the cross-customer pattern to product.
- ○ **C.** Fix or document it before more developers hit it.

6. What proof would you enjoy making?

- ○ **A.** A system integrated with a messy existing codebase.
- ○ **B.** A build, demo and pitch for a customer panel.
- ○ **C.** A repo, talk or video that teaches something.

Count your answers: mostly A → FDE; mostly B → applied AI; mostly C → AI DevRel. A mix is normal. Read the responsibilities in individual postings.

Read your answers: mostly A → FDE; mostly B → applied AI; mostly C → AI DevRel. A tie is useful: compare the actual responsibilities and try a portfolio project before choosing.

All three roles need technical skill, communication and an understanding of customer value. FDEs can work with sales; DevRel can support commercial goals. These are tendencies, not hard boundaries.

Your next 30 days.

Pick one direction. Finish one useful thing. Rehearse the part of the interview that makes that role different.

WEEK 1

Read five live postings.

Choose one role. Mark the responsibilities, experience, stack, location, travel and deployment ownership. Check whether pay means base or OTE.

Output: a short list of repeated requirements and one skill to demonstrate.

WEEKS 2–3

Build one public proof.

- **FDE:** an agent or retrieval workflow with integrations, failure cases and an operating plan.
- **Applied AI:** a pilot with an eval and a demo that explains the customer value.
- **DevRel:** a runnable repo and tutorial that help another developer solve a real problem.

Output: one link you can put on an application.

WEEK 4

Rehearse the unique round.

- **FDE:** scope a vague request out loud, including data, interfaces, edge cases and tradeoffs.
- **Applied AI:** build, demo and pitch. Defend the evals, security and path to deployment.
- **DevRel:** teach one topic to a mixed audience in 15–20 minutes. [50]

Output: a recording, feedback and one improved version.

Before you apply

- Can someone else run or understand your project from the README?
- Can you explain when it fails, not only when it works?
- Can you connect your existing experience to the role's actual responsibilities?
- Have you checked the current posting and asked about the interview's AI-tool rules?

Use synthetic or public data in portfolio projects. Do not publish customer data, employer code, credentials or confidential work.

Sources & scope.

Adapted from The AI Hatchery's careers research, checked October 24, 2026. Reference numbers match the original research. Job pages are historical examples and may change, redirect or close.

Salary examples are posted US ranges from selected employers, not offers or a compensation survey. Interview formats differ by company, role and date. Preparation suggestions and the 30-day plan are guidance, not hiring guarantees. No paid-product launch promises or live-vacancy claims are included.

[3] Palantir job posting: Forward Deployed Software Engineer, New York

checked 2026-10-24. Historical research reference, not an open-job guarantee.
https://jobs.lever.co/palantir/dab396d4-2f14-4796-aac0-0d82883dccf0

[16] Palantir blog: Dev versus Delta: demystifying engineering roles at Palantir

2019 · checked 2026-10-24. Publisher may require browser verification. Historical research reference, not an open-job guarantee.
https://blog.palantir.com/dev-versus-delta-demystifying-engineering-roles-at-palantir-ad44c2a6e87

[17] Anthropic job posting: Staff Forward Deployed Engineer

checked 2026-10-24. Historical research reference, not an open-job guarantee.
https://job-boards.greenhouse.io/anthropic/jobs/5449229008

[21] Decagon job posting: Agent Deployment Engineer

checked 2026-10-24. Historical research reference, not an open-job guarantee.
https://jobs.ashbyhq.com/decagon/8c40fb7a-5f25-4112-a1df-f1c22b81042c

[24] Palantir careers: The phone interview

checked 2026-10-24. Historical research reference, not an open-job guarantee.
https://www.palantir.com/careers/getting-hired/the-phone-interview/

[26] Palantir careers: Navigating open-ended questions

checked 2026-10-24. Historical research reference, not an open-job guarantee.
https://www.palantir.com/careers/getting-hired/navigating-open-ended-questions/

[34] Anthropic job posting: Applied AI Engineer, Enterprise

checked 2026-10-24. Historical research reference, not an open-job guarantee.
https://job-boards.greenhouse.io/anthropic/jobs/5057647008

[6] OpenAI job posting: Applied AI Engineer, Startups

checked 2026-10-24. Historical research reference, not an open-job guarantee.
https://jobs.ashbyhq.com/openai/71e7252f-abb1-4b74-8e69-318413042357

[7] Databricks job posting: Sr. Solutions Architect, Digital Native Business (Strategic Accounts)

checked 2026-10-24. Historical research reference, not an open-job guarantee.
https://www.databricks.com/company/careers/field-engineering---fe-direct-enterprise/sr-solutions-architect---digital-native-business-strategic-accounts-8567963002?gh_jid=8567963002

[36] Sierra job posting: Software Engineer, Agent

checked 2026-10-24. Historical research reference, not an open-job guarantee.
https://jobs.ashbyhq.com/sierra/e9f5fdb6-91ee-4c55-9230-41ec8865650e

[11] Vercel job posting: DevRel Engineer, Agentic Infrastructure

posted 2026-07-22, updated 2026-10-20 · checked 2026-10-24. Historical research reference, not an open-job guarantee.
https://job-boards.greenhouse.io/vercel/jobs/6122437004

[8] Pinecone job posting: Developer Advocate

posted 2026-10-20 · checked 2026-10-24. Linked page now titled Staff Developer Advocate; the pay example retains the researched historical title. Historical research reference, not an open-job guarantee.
https://jobs.ashbyhq.com/pinecone/4433b308-1ff4-4b5f-9184-810e5d9844f6

[50] DevRelJobs: Acing the DevRel interview

dated 2026-02-15 · checked 2026-10-24. Historical research reference, not an open-job guarantee.
https://www.devreljobs.com/guides/acing-the-devrel-interview

[53] PostHog handbook: DevRel hiring process

checked 2026-10-24. Historical research reference, not an open-job guarantee.
https://posthog.com/handbook/people/hiring-process/devrel-hiring

[55] DevRelJobs: Building a DevRel portfolio

dated 2026-02-10 · checked 2026-10-24. Historical research reference, not an open-job guarantee.
https://www.devreljobs.com/guides/building-a-devrel-portfolio

[57] Claude Community Ambassadors (Anthropic)

checked 2026-10-24. Historical research reference, not an open-job guarantee.
https://claude.com/community/ambassadors

[58] LangChain community programs

checked 2026-10-24. Historical research reference, not an open-job guarantee.
https://www.langchain.com/community