



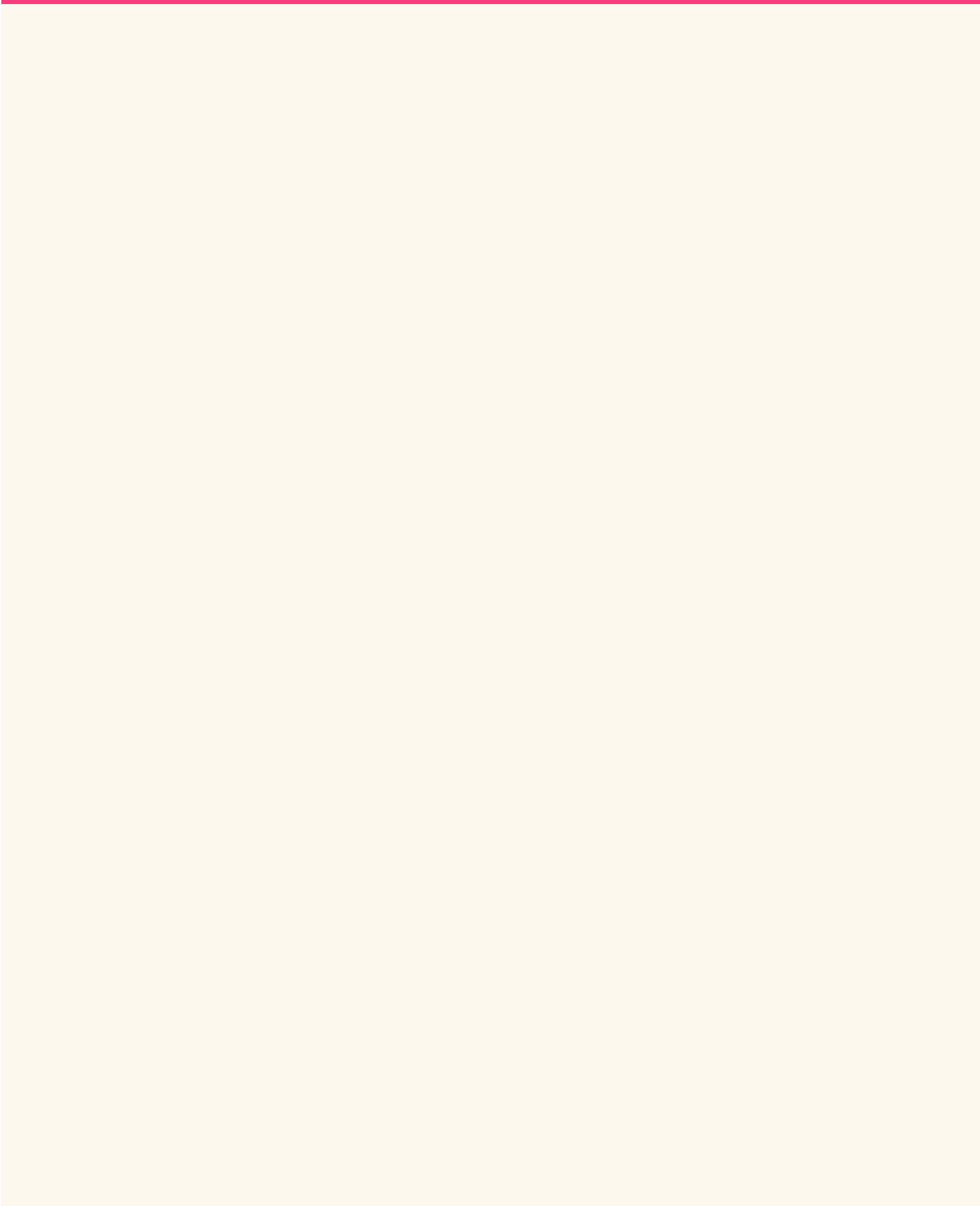
SIDE HUSTLE · MARKET DATA

QUARTERLY BRIEF · Q2 2026 · CC BY 4.0

Side income market data.

Side Hustle's quarterly read of the freelance economy. **Live rate data across 24 gig categories.** Direct vs. platform deltas. **The breakout categories of Q2.** Open access. Cited freely.

Side Hustle Research · **The market desk**



The quarter, in numbers.

Five headline metrics. Each one tells you something different about where freelance income is moving.

+24% AI- WORKFLOW DEMAND YOY	+18% AVG RATE (TOP DECILE) YOY	-9% AVG RATE (MEDIAN) YOY	\$6.4K MEDIAN MONTHLY SIDE INCOME (OPERATORS)	4.6× DIRECT VS. PLATFORM TAKE-HOME
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The Q2 2026 headline: **the rate gap between top-decile and median freelancers widened again**. Top-decile operators raised rates 18% YoY; the median fell 9%. **Bidding platforms continue to compress the middle**. Operators who moved direct off-platform booked **4.6× the take-home** per dollar of client value created.

What changed this quarter. Two shifts. **One**, AI-workflow consulting passed traditional dev gigs in Q2 search volume for the first time. **Two**, "fractional COO" listings on bidding platforms dropped 22% as the operator class migrated direct — the rate ceiling on bidding platforms can't support the new category.

Rate ladders.

Live hourly + outcome-based pricing across the 24 categories Side Hustle tracks. Q2 2026 data.

Development & technical

CATEGORY	MEDIAN \$/HR	TOP DECILE \$/HR	OUTCOME-BASED EQUIVALENT
Custom web dev	\$65	\$240	\$3-12K / project
Mobile dev	\$80	\$280	\$5-18K / project
Integrations / automation	\$95	\$320	\$2-8K / workflow
AI workflow design	\$140	\$420	\$3-15K / system
Prompt engineering	\$120	\$380	\$1.5-6K / engagement

Creative & brand

CATEGORY	MEDIAN \$/HR	TOP DECILE \$/HR	OUTCOME-BASED EQUIVALENT
Brand systems	\$72	\$260	\$4-22K / system
Video editing	\$48	\$185	\$200-1.8K / video
Content production (long-form)	\$58	\$210	\$800-4K / piece
Motion / 3D	\$85	\$295	\$2-12K / asset
Brand strategy	\$155	\$420	\$5-28K / engagement

Operator / business

CATEGORY	MEDIAN \$/HR	TOP DECILE \$/HR	RETAINER MODEL
Fractional COO	\$185	\$520	\$8-25K / mo
Fractional CMO	\$175	\$485	\$7-22K / mo
Agency ops	\$95	\$285	\$4-12K / mo
Sales-as-a-service	\$140	\$410	\$5-18K / mo + comm

Direct vs. platform.

What the same freelancer earns on Upwork vs. Fiverr vs. direct outreach. The platforms have not been kind to anyone but the top 10%.

SAME ENGAGEMENT	UPWORK	FIVERR	SIDE HUSTLE DIRECT	MULTIPLE
Brand system (3-week project)	\$3,800	\$2,400	\$11,500	3.0-4.8×
Custom web dev (4-week)	\$5,200	\$3,600	\$22,000	4.2-6.1×
AI workflow design (2-week)	\$2,800	\$1,800	\$14,000	5.0-7.8×
Fractional COO (1-mo retainer)	\$6,400	n/a	\$18,500	2.9×
Video editing (10 videos)	\$1,800	\$1,200	\$5,200	2.9-4.3×

Q2 2026 breakout categories — the new money

CATEGORY 01

AI workflow design

Companies want their ops translated to AI-augmented systems. Operator-archetype play. **\$140-420/hr**, \$3-15K per system. **+280% YoY demand.**

CATEGORY 02

Fractional CXO

\$8-25K/mo retainers replacing \$200K W2 hires. Operator + Closer archetype. **\$175-520/hr** equivalent. **+185% YoY listings.**

CATEGORY 03

Cohort courses

4-8 week cohorts at \$1.5-5K/seat. Teacher archetype. Hit-rate: 30%, but top decile clears **\$54K/mo. +220% creator launches.**

What we're watching for Q3

- **Platform migration.** If direct deltas widen past 5×, platform freelance volume could fall >30% YoY by Q4.
- **"Job" recategorization.** 38% of US workers under 35 report side income exceeding 30% of W2 income. Statistical agencies haven't caught up.

- **Productized service inflation.** Speculator-archetype top deciles cleared \$92K/mo. The ceiling keeps rising; the floor doesn't.

Sources + methodology

Rate data: Side Hustle direct booking records + Upwork / Fiverr public listings sample (n=4,200 active listings, Q2 2026) + Levels.fyi side-income tracker. Outcome trajectories: Side Hustle longitudinal operator pool. Numbers are estimates; treat as directional. Methodology in Vol II.

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