Pearl Meyer

ADVISOR BLOG | MAY 2026

2026 Compensation Trends in Mission-Critical Construction Roles



Andrew Guigno

SURVEY OPERATIONS MANAGER

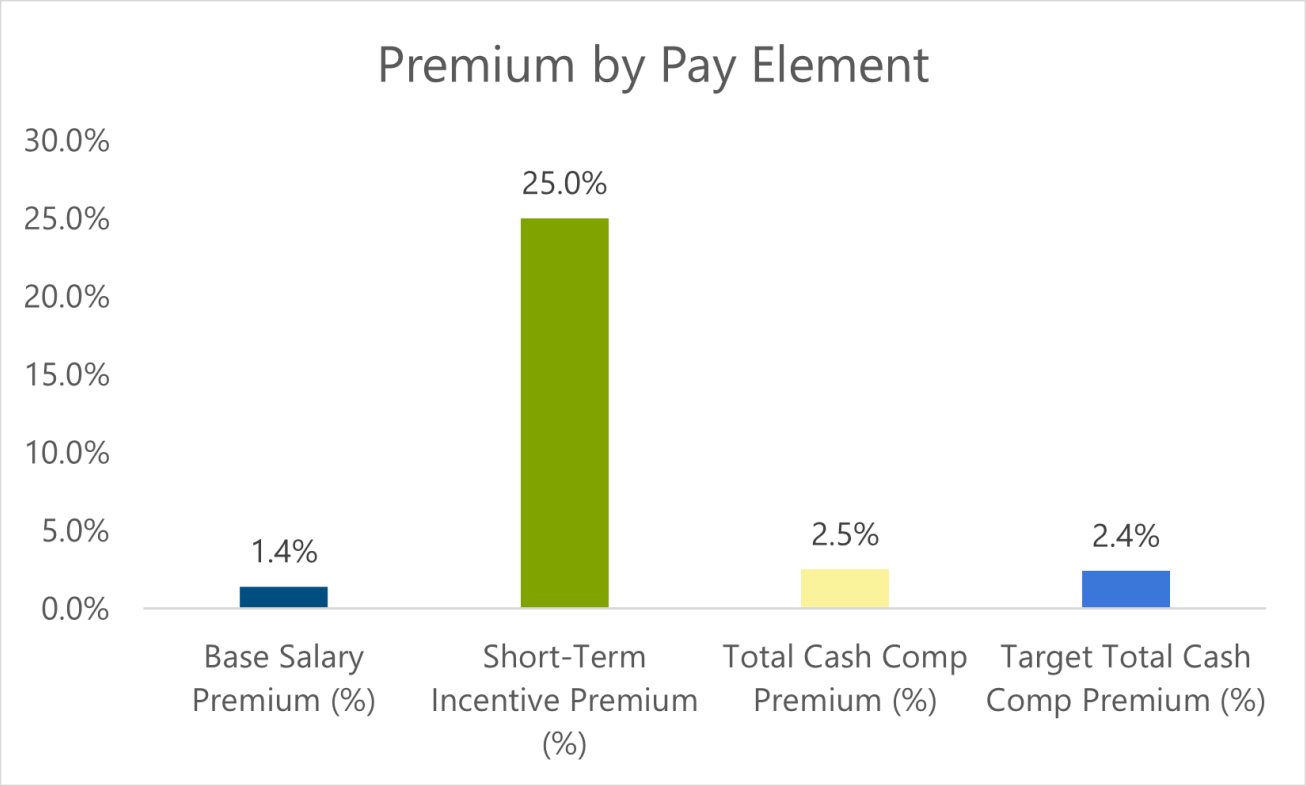
Demand for mission-critical facility construction—particularly data centers—continues to reshape the labor market for engineering and construction talent. Compensation data for these roles show a clear premium, but newly released data from Pearl Meyer's 2026 Mission-Critical Facility Compensation Survey provides a nuanced understanding of where that premium appears and how meaningful it is.

The Premium Exists—But It's Not in Base Pay

Across all roles, total cash compensation is approximately 2.5% higher than in the broader Engineering and Construction (E&C) labor market. However, this modest difference masks a more meaningful shift in compensation structure. Base pay for these same roles is only 1.4% higher, while short-term incentive compensation is roughly 25% greater.

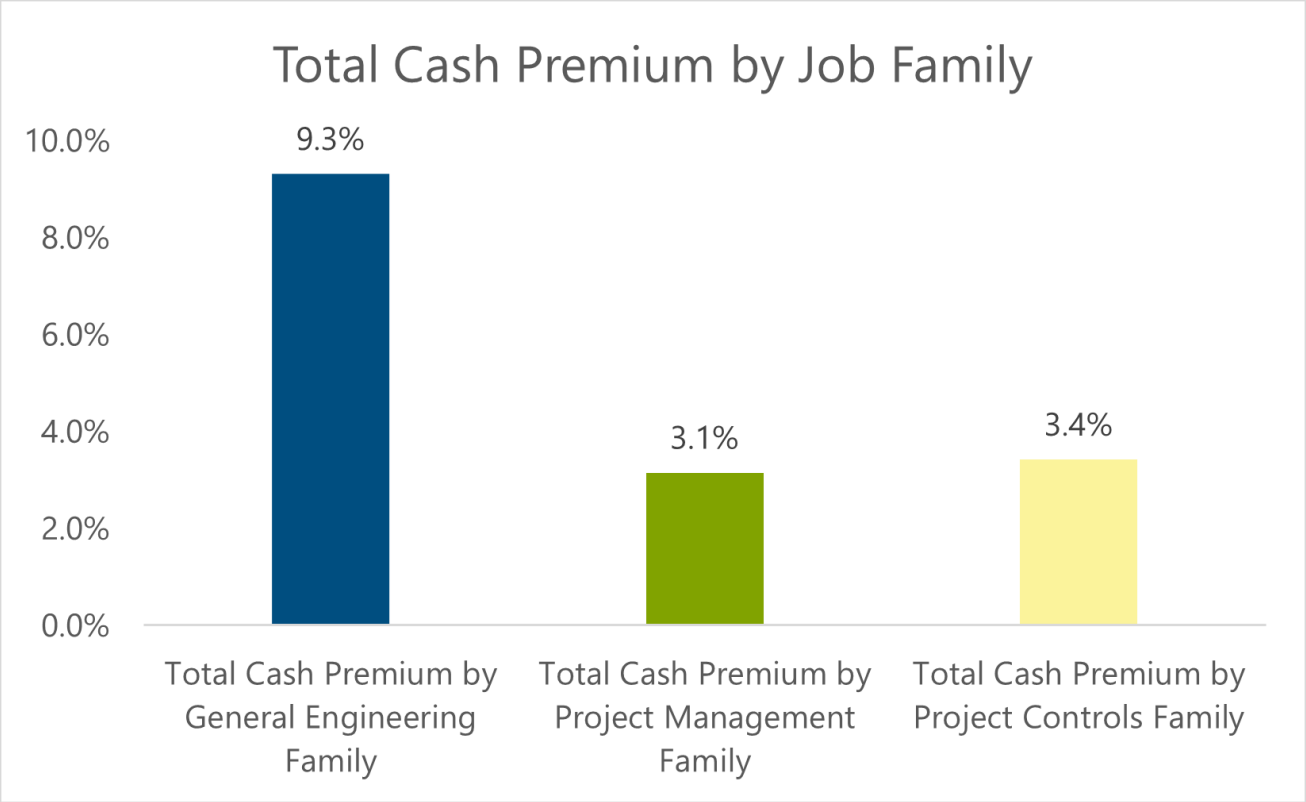
This pattern suggests that organizations are relying more heavily on variable compensation, rather than base salary, to differentiate mission-critical roles. However, as the labor market evolves, this may change. Notably, nearly one-third of surveyed

organizations are considering maintaining a separate salary structure for these roles.



Premiums Are Concentrated in Execution Roles

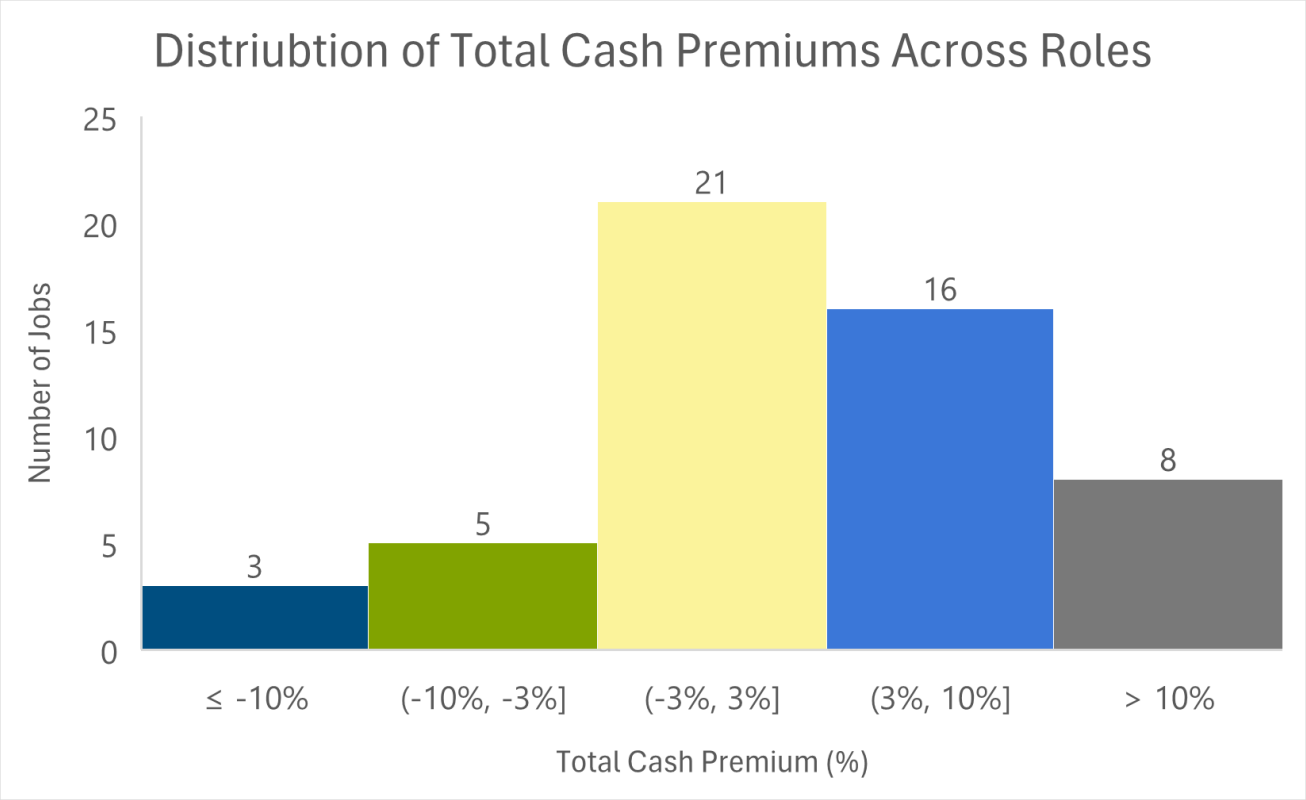
While an overall premium exists, it is not evenly distributed across all job families. The survey spans a broad range of positions across 18 job families, and the data shows that premiums are concentrated in roles most closely tied to project execution. In particular, General Engineering, Project Management, and Project Controls roles demonstrate the strongest premiums in total cash compensation.



In contrast, several other job families show limited differentiation—or in some cases, compensation levels that fall at or below the broader market. As shown below, total cash compensation for a meaningful portion of mission-critical roles is flat or even below that of the broader E&C market. Organizations are not uniformly increasing compensation across all roles; instead, they are targeting higher pay toward positions that have the greatest impact on project execution and delivery.

The chart below shows the number of roles whose total cash falls within the indicated percentage range versus the broader market. For example, based on our survey data, 8 mission-critical jobs have premiums greater than 10% when compared to the broader

market, while 3 jobs lag the broader market in total cash by -10% or less.



A More Targeted Approach to Pay

As demand for mission-critical facilities continues to grow, so will the competition for talent that can deliver them. Organizations are not responding with broad pay increases but with more targeted, performance-oriented compensation strategies. They are placing greater emphasis on incentive compensation and focusing that investment on roles that matter most to execution. This pay-for-performance strategy helps companies control year-over-year fixed base-pay expenses and encourages a high-performance culture.

For compensation professionals, this reinforces the importance of looking beyond base salary when assessing market competitiveness. In the mission-critical space, how pay is structured may matter just as much as how much is paid.

About the Survey

The 2026 Mission-Critical Facility Compensation Survey, published in April 2026, is available exclusively from Pearl Meyer. It provides insights on US employees supporting mission-critical facility projects—including data centers, operational control centers, and

other high-reliability environments—and examines how organizations differentiate pay in this specialized labor market. The survey includes compensation data and HR practices across a broad set of job families, offering a comprehensive view of how firms are structuring rewards amid ongoing labor pressures.

About the Author

Andrew Guigno is a survey operations manager. In this role, Andrew manages client accounts as well as assists in the survey process.

About Pearl Meyer

Pearl Meyer is the leading advisor to boards and senior management helping organizations build, develop, and reward great leadership teams that drive long-term success. Our strategy-driven compensation and leadership consulting services act as powerful catalysts for value creation and competitive advantage by addressing the critical links between people and outcomes. Our clients stand at the forefront of their industries and range from emerging high-growth, not-for-profit, and private organizations to the Fortune 500.