

CONNECTED GROUP



# Talent Insights Report

## Q1 2026

A report by ConnectedGroup – February 2026

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## Introduction

As Hong Kong enters 2026, the talent market is increasingly defined by selectivity rather than volatility. After several years of disruption, organisations are moving away from hiring for growth at any cost and toward more deliberate, outcome-led workforce decisions. Across our client base, this is evident in a shift toward precision hiring: fewer roles, higher expectations, and a stronger focus on commercial impact, execution capability, and risk management.

Despite widespread commentary about an abundance of talent, this is neither a candidate-led nor a genuinely “soft” market. Instead, it is characterised by structural misalignment. There is an oversupply of generalist and legacy-skill profiles, alongside persistent shortages in specialist capabilities, particularly across AI and data, cybersecurity, regulatory finance, risk, compliance, and transformation leadership. As a result, employers often find it more difficult than expected to secure the right talent.

Cost pressure remains a defining constraint. Elevated operating costs mean every hire is closely scrutinised for return on investment, driving increased demand for “impact hires” who can improve productivity, protect margins, strengthen governance, or accelerate delivery. This dynamic is consistent across Commerce & Industry, Financial Services, and Technology.

Technology and AI adoption continue to reshape workforce demand. Automation is reducing reliance on junior and routine roles, while increasing the premium on senior judgement, governance, and cross-functional expertise. At the same time, flexible resourcing models, including interim, contract, and Statement of Work engagements, are becoming embedded in workforce strategy.

This report reflects what we at ConnectedGroup are seeing across the Hong Kong market and highlights where hiring leaders should focus their attention in the year ahead.

# Global Overview

The global labor market is showing measured yet resilient growth as employers navigate an uncertain economic climate. According to ManpowerGroup's Employment Outlook Survey for Q1 2026 (covering 39,000+ employers in 41 countries), the global Net Employment Outlook (NEO) stands at +24%, down 4% year-over-year but up 4% from the prior quarter. This "steady yet cautious" outlook reflects what ManpowerGroup calls a shift to precision hiring; employers are hiring, but very intentionally. As ManpowerGroup CEO Jonas Prising observed:

*"What we're seeing is employers responding to the economic signals with a measured and deliberate approach. Over the past nine quarters, the global Outlook has averaged 24%, reflecting a labor market that remains resilient even as the broader economic environment continues to evolve. Hiring is steady because organizations still need human skills to grow, but they are being very intentional about where they invest in additional talent."*

Globally, 40% of employers plan to increase their staff in Q1, while 16% expect to reduce headcount. The primary drivers for expansion are organizational growth (cited by 37% of those hiring) and investment in new business areas (26%). Conversely, among those planning cuts, economic challenges (29%) and reduced market demand (24%) are the top reasons – notably, only about 20% point to automation as a cause for reductions, indicating that economic conditions (not technology) are the chief source of hiring hesitation.

Asia Pacific continues to show the strongest hiring intentions globally, a trend sustained since early 2021, but with significant divergence within the region. India leads with a robust +52% outlook, whereas Hong Kong is the most cautious, at only +1% NEO, reflecting its uniquely guarded sentiment going into 2026.

## Regional Net Employment Outlook (Q1 2026)

| Region                              | NEO Q1 2026 | Quarterly Change | Annual Change |
|-------------------------------------|-------------|------------------|---------------|
| Asia Pacific                        | +30%        | 0 (unchanged)    | +3 points     |
| The Americas                        | +26%        | +1 point         | -3 points     |
| Europe, Middle East & Africa (EMEA) | +20%        | +2 points        | 0 (unchanged) |

# Hong Kong Economic & Labor Market Overview

Hong Kong's economy demonstrated remarkable resilience in 2025, navigating a complex global environment to achieve full-year GDP growth of 3.2% (outpacing the 2.5% expansion of 2024). This stronger-than-expected performance was underpinned by robust exports and domestic demand, for example, merchandise exports saw double-digit growth and inbound tourism rebounded sharply with over 41 million visitors in the first 10 months of 2025. Looking ahead, 2026 forecasts suggest a moderation to a 2.5%–2.7% GDP growth range, as the city enters what economists term a phase of "stable growth, structural adjustment, and fostering of new drivers". In other words, Hong Kong is seeking progress while maintaining stability in its economy, with steady growth tempered by strategic economic rebalancing.

The labor market remains relatively tight, though signs of structural shifts are emerging. The seasonally adjusted unemployment rate held at 3.8% through late 2025. However, this headline figure masks divergent sector trends: talent demand in finance, technology, and professional services has stayed firm, while sectors like catering and construction have seen rising unemployment. These pockets of higher joblessness reflect Hong Kong's ongoing economic transformation – traditional service industries are contracting or automating, and their workers are not always aligning smoothly with the growth of new sectors. In short, cyclical pressures layered on structural changes (such as digital disruption) are creating talent mismatches across the economy.

## Regional Net Employment Outlook (Q1 2026)

| Indicator                | 2025 Actual                      | 2026 Forecast       |
|--------------------------|----------------------------------|---------------------|
| Real GDP Growth          | 3.2% (estimate)                  | 2.5% – 2.7%         |
| Unemployment Rate        | 3.8% (Sep–Nov 2025)              | ~3.8% – 3.9%        |
| Underlying CPI Inflation | 1.2% (2015 base, full-year 2025) | ~1% (low inflation) |

Key drivers of Hong Kong's economic momentum in 2025 included a significant rebound in private consumption, a strong revival of inbound tourism (the 41 million visitor arrivals marked a major post-pandemic recovery), and robust trade performance. However, heading into 2026 the hiring outlook is notably cautious. Hong Kong's Net Employment Outlook for Q1 2026 is just +1%, making it one of the most conservative

globally. This modest positive outlook is the lowest among the 41 markets surveyed, underscoring that Hong Kong employers remain guarded on adding headcount despite the economic growth. In fact, Hong Kong's hiring sentiment has ticked down from the previous quarter, reflecting lingering uncertainties and a very selective approach by employers.

# Talent Market & Sector-Specific Trends

Hong Kong's talent market in early 2026 is shaped by a growing misalignment: a perceived oversupply of experienced talent alongside acute shortages in specialized skills. Many employers, coming off several years of cost cuts and restructuring, believe there is a general surplus of candidates, especially senior, generalist professionals, available in the market. However, this apparent abundance is misleading, as it largely comprises talent from traditional or support roles, who often lack the niche skills now in demand. Meanwhile, those with highly specialized expertise (in areas like advanced tech, AI, and compliance) are in critically short supply. This coexistence of surplus and scarcity has led to a cautious, highly selective hiring environment. Employers

are exceedingly choosy about new hires, and hiring processes are protracted. Whilst about 31% of Hong Kong companies plan to increase headcount in Q1 nearly as many (29%) anticipate reductions, an essentially flat net hiring intention that reveals a market split between expansion and contraction.

Despite this caution, the majority of employers still struggle to find certain talent. A substantial 66% of Hong Kong organizations report difficulty filling roles, although notably this talent shortage level is the lowest since 2015, indicating some recent easing of pressure. The most in-demand skills in early 2026 reflect Hong Kong's pivot toward technology and new growth drivers.

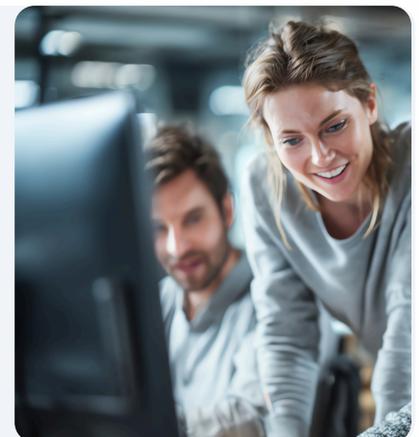


## *Artificial Intelligence (AI):*

Skills in AI model development and deployment (and general AI literacy across roles) are the top sought-after competencies. Nearly half of employers are now utilizing AI tools to optimize workforce planning and productivity. Rather than eliminating jobs outright, AI adoption is reshaping many roles; companies urgently need talent who can build, manage, and leverage AI solutions.

## *Technology & Digital Transformation:*

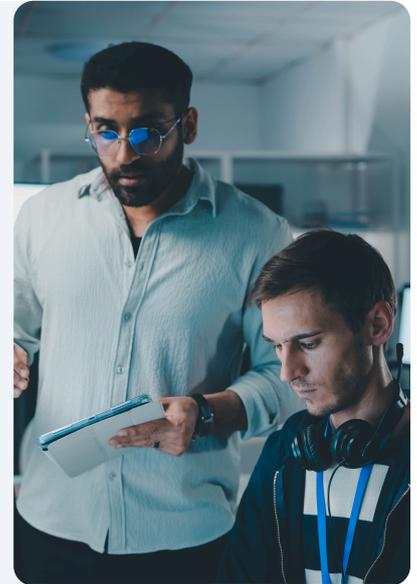
There is strong demand for data scientists, machine learning engineers, cloud architects, and specialists in digital platforms (e-commerce, CRM analytics, digital marketing). Virtually every industry is investing in digital transformation, from finance to retail, driving hiring for IT and digital talent who can implement new systems and derive insights from data.



# Talent Market & Sector-Specific Trends

## *Compliance & Cybersecurity:*

Hong Kong's push into fintech and data privacy is fueling surging demand for risk and compliance professionals. The new stablecoin licensing regime (effective August 2025) has created needs for experts in crypto compliance, blockchain engineering, and fintech risk management. At the same time, a new Personal Data Privacy Ordinance (often called the PCIO law) has tightened data governance, spurring hiring of cybersecurity specialists and privacy officers to meet regulatory deadlines. These regulatory changes are prompting banks, insurers, and tech firms alike to add headcount in compliance, audit, and IT security roles.

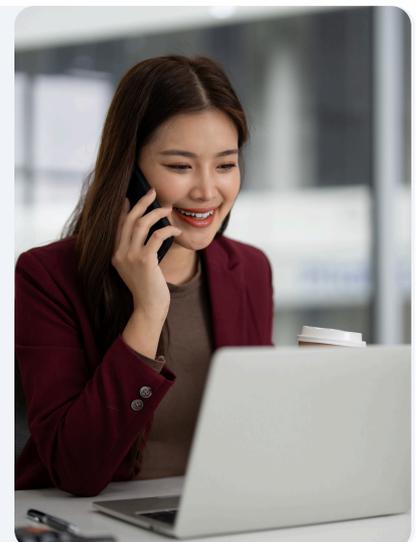


## *Financial Services:*

After a subdued few years, 2025 saw a revival in Hong Kong's capital markets, the IPO boom (the strongest since 2021) restored confidence in the financial sector. As a result, revenue-generating roles in banking and finance are back in demand. Banks and investment firms are actively hiring for front-office positions in corporate finance, ECM/DCM, wealth management, and commercial banking. The anticipation of new listings and cross-border investment deals in 2026 means top talent in deal origination, sales & trading, and asset management are being courted aggressively.

## *Multilingual Communication:*

Beyond technical skills, Hong Kong employers increasingly prioritize language proficiency as a strategic asset. In particular, trilingual ability; Cantonese, English, and Mandarin. As integration with the Mainland deepens and regional business ties grow, professionals who can seamlessly operate in both local and Mainland Chinese contexts have a distinct edge. This is more than just language proficiency however. The greatest value is in candidates who have genuine depth of experience in both business cultures and who can drive productivity in cross-border resource collaboration.



“

Excellent service from ConnectedGroup. They were very helpful in helping us put together a job specification and screening the various candidates. With the support of the team we were able to run the interview processes smoothly and find our candidate.

Rachel, Employer

“

It is always my pleasure to work with ConnectedGroup for the job search, they demonstrated an exceptional level of professionalism and authenticity that set them apart from other recruiters I have encountered.

Vienna, Employer

“

We had a great experience working with ConnectedGroup. They thoroughly understood the role requirements and provided a well-curated pool of candidates. Their communication was always clear and prompt, and remained highly responsive throughout the process. Even after the candidate was onboarded, they followed up to ensure everything was progressing smoothly. Overall, they were a pleasure to work with and truly professional.

Peter, Employer

## Build your team with ConnectedGroup



**Mathew Gollop**

CEO & Head of Market  
Development



+852 3972 5874



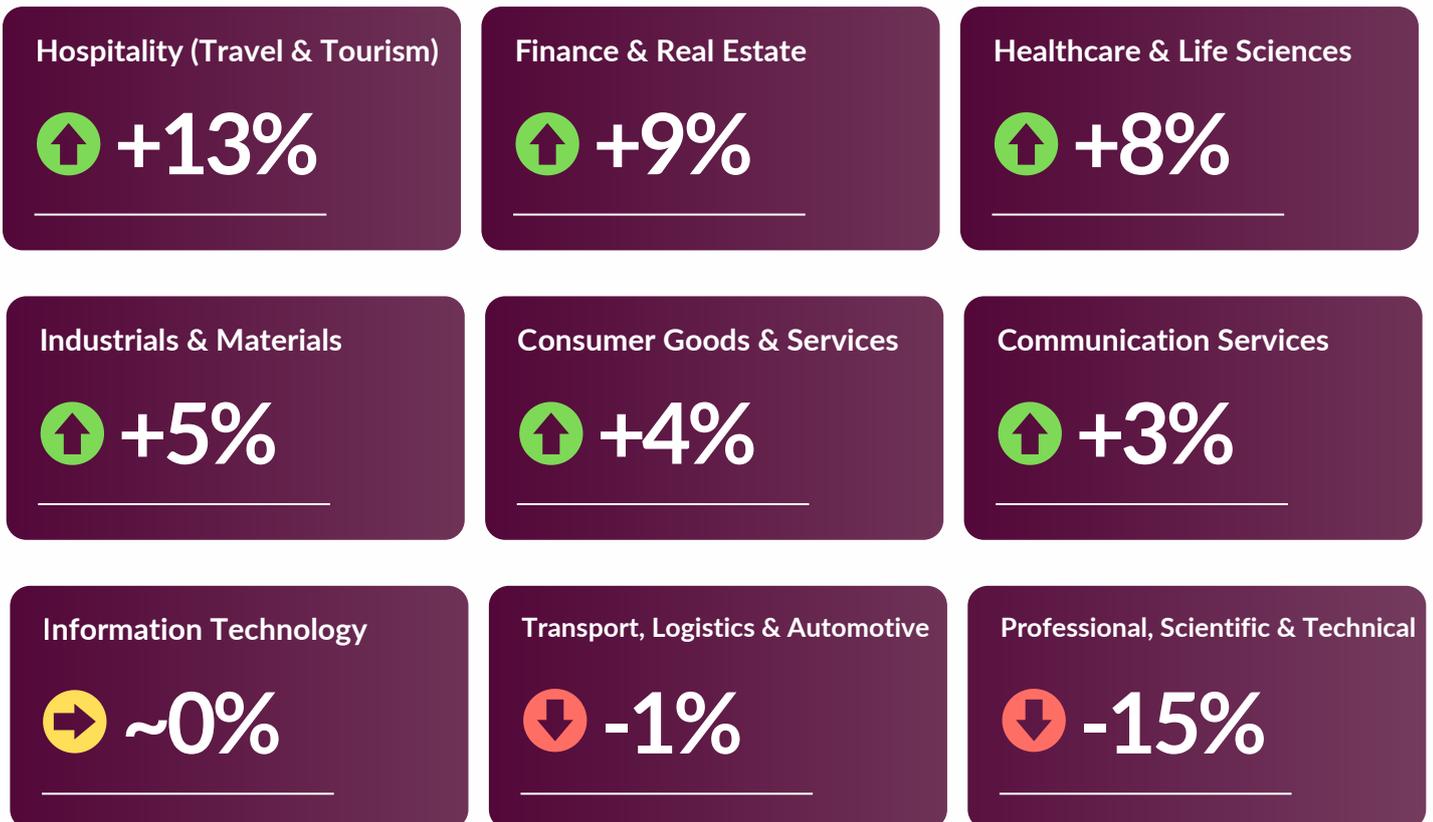
[www.connectedgroup.com](http://www.connectedgroup.com)



[Mat@connectedgroup.com](mailto:Mat@connectedgroup.com)

## Sector Hiring Outlook

Different industry sectors in Hong Kong are experiencing uneven hiring outlooks, illustrating where the growth and challenges are most pronounced. Table 3 summarizes the Net Employment Outlook by sector for the upcoming quarter:



The Professional, Scientific & Technical services sector stands out with the weakest outlook at -15%. This sharp contraction is largely due to AI-driven automation encroaching on junior and routine roles in fields like accounting, basic legal work, and administrative support. Many firms in these fields have widely adopted AI for tasks such as document drafting, data analysis and content generation, reducing the need for entry-level staff. However, it is important to note that even in this sector, demand remains high for senior talent who have strategic judgment and AI mastery. On the other end, the hospitality sector (hotels, tourism, F&B) shows the most optimistic hiring at +13%, buoyed by Hong Kong's continued tourism recovery and a rush of visitors. With the city expecting a busy Lunar New Year travel season in early 2026, hospitality and retail employers are ramping up staffing to meet rebounding demand.

# Detailed Sector Insights

## Commerce & Industry

Recruitment activity across Commerce & Industry in 2025 was shaped by sustained cost pressure, supply chain reconfiguration, and geopolitical uncertainty. While demand conditions improved in parts of retail and consumer goods, hiring remained highly selective, with most organisations prioritising productivity, margin protection, and execution capability over headcount growth.

The evolving global trade environment, particularly increased tariff complexity and heightened compliance scrutiny, has accelerated demand for professionals in trade compliance, supply chain strategy, procurement optimisation, and regulatory risk. Organisations are placing greater value on candidates who can manage multi-country sourcing models, navigate rules of origin, and build operational resilience across ASEAN and broader Asia-Pacific markets.

In Hong Kong specifically, elevated operating costs continue to act as a hiring filter. Employers are consolidating generalist roles and investing selectively in commercially minded profiles with cross-functional skill sets, such as supply chain leaders with analytics capability or finance professionals with automation and process improvement experience. Retail hiring has recovered, but demand is concentrated in operations, inventory planning, merchandising analytics, and e-commerce enablement rather than store expansion.

Looking into 2026, hiring across Commerce & Industry is expected to remain disciplined and outcome-led. Organisations that invest in talent aligned to supply chain resilience, regulatory readiness, and operational efficiency, rather than scale, will be best positioned to manage uncertainty and protect margins.



# Detailed Sector Insights

## Insurance

The insurance sector experienced steady recruitment activity in 2025 across Finance, Internal Audit, Risk Management, and Operations. Finance teams focused on strengthening reporting capability, particularly with continued demand for IFRS 17 expertise and familiarity with systems such as Power BI and SAP. Internal Audit functions saw sustained hiring at the Manager to Head level, driven by the increasing need for risk-based audit planning, data-enabled controls testing, and a growing emphasis on IT and cyber governance.

Risk Management recruitment remained consistently strong across financial, enterprise, and operational risk, with insurers prioritising ALM, liquidity, market and credit risk oversight, alongside ORSA and RBC compliance. Operations teams continued hiring in underwriting and customer service while accelerating automation and process redesign across claims and policy administration.

***“Insurers are shifting from implementation to performance insights, increasing the need for deeper data analytics and improved disclosure quality.”***



Entering 2026, the sector remains cautious yet committed to strengthening regulatory-critical capabilities. New regulations, particularly the Cybersecurity Ordinance effective January 2026, have increased expectations around operational resilience and incident governance. The second year of RBC implementation continues to drive demand for capital modelling, solvency monitoring, and high-quality financial reporting. As IFRS 17 moves into maturity, insurers are shifting from implementation to performance insights, increasing the need for deeper data analytics and improved disclosure quality.

Salary adjustments remain conservative at 3–4%, though specialists in areas such as IFRS 17, RBC, and operational resilience may still negotiate increases of up to 15%. Overall, insurers are expected to prioritise replacement hiring, focusing investment on governance, reporting, resilience, and transformation roles.

# Detailed Sector Insights

## Banking

The banking sector in 2025 was characterised by a strong focus on cost discipline and productivity enhancement. With weakened loan growth and ongoing margin pressure, banks continued to prioritise financial accuracy, efficiency, and optimisation across Finance and mid-back office functions. Hiring remained steady for roles within regulatory reporting, financial control, business finance, KYC/AML, and cyber transformation, with most activity being replacement-driven or linked to restructuring initiatives. Legal recruitment saw a slight uptick, supported by the gradual return of IPO and M&A activity, while Relationship Manager hiring across private and commercial banking remained consistently strong throughout the year.

Entering 2026, hiring confidence is recovering slowly, with banks placing increasing emphasis on AI, technology, and data-driven transformation. The rise of enterprise-scale AI adoption is creating new expectations across risk, compliance, and internal control functions, particularly around AI governance, financial crime risk, data governance, and ESG-related oversight. While the sector remains prudent, demand is expected to continue across AML/FCC, front-office relationship roles, and transactional legal hires.

## Asset Management

Hong Kong's asset and wealth management sector experienced a strong year in 2025, supported by significant AUM expansion—rising 13% to approximately HK\$35 trillion—and an 81% surge in net inflows, reaffirming the city's status as a leading global cross-border wealth hub. The industry saw material shifts toward alternatives and multi-asset strategies, with hedge funds, private credit, private equity, and multi-strategy platforms attracting substantial capital inflows. This rotation, coupled with improved regulatory clarity around virtual assets, strengthened demand for investment talent across alternatives, multi-asset portfolios, and digital-asset related specialisms.

Front-office hiring picked up meaningfully across wealth management product sales, private banking RMs, and product specialist roles, while legal and compliance teams remained lean due to ongoing cost considerations. Looking into 2026, demand across investment, risk, compliance, digital assets, and AI/data roles is expected to remain strong, though hiring may be tempered by widening gaps between compensation expectations and employer budgets. Specialist talent—particularly those with Mandarin capability, cross-border market experience, and data or digital-asset literacy—will remain the most competitive and sought after in the market.

# Detailed Sector Insights

## Technology

***“There is an oversupply of generalist technology profiles, while demand remains acute for highly specialised capabilities.”***

The technology hiring market has stabilised following several years of volatility. Organisations are moving away from broad-based expansion and toward a more selective, impact-driven approach to recruitment. Headcount growth is constrained, but demand remains resilient for specialist skills that directly support revenue, scalability, risk management, and AI-enabled transformation.

The talent market is increasingly polarised. There is an oversupply of generalist technology profiles, while demand remains acute for highly specialised capabilities, particularly in AI and machine learning, data engineering, cloud architecture, cybersecurity, and FinOps. Employers are placing greater emphasis on proven delivery experience and immediate business impact, reflecting heightened scrutiny on technology investment returns.

Across industries, digital and AI-led transformation continues to drive demand for technology talent that can combine engineering expertise with strong governance and commercial execution. Regulatory requirements, cyber risk, and data governance expectations are reinforcing the need for senior-level expertise rather than junior build capacity.

Flexible resourcing models are playing a growing role in technology hiring. Interim, contract, and project-based resources are being used to deliver transformation initiatives, manage delivery peaks, and access niche expertise without increasing long-term fixed costs.

During 2026, technology hiring is expected to remain disciplined and specialist-led. Roles tied to AI, data, cloud resilience, cyber security, and cost governance should remain in demand, while organisations continue to favour quality, flexibility, and execution over volume.



# Enterprise Interim Resourcing

Enterprise consumption of interim resources in Hong Kong remains stable. Demand continues to be driven less by growth and more by how organisations are managing uncertainty, delivery risk, and cost control. Interim resourcing is now a core operating tool, rather than a short-term fix.

## *Key Demand Drivers*

Interim demand is being supported by ongoing transformation and regulatory activity, particularly across Finance and ERP transformation, Data, digital, and technology programmes, and Risk, compliance, and ESG initiatives. These programmes remain time-bound and specialist-led, making interim resources a natural fit.

## *Permanent Hiring Context*

Permanent hiring across enterprise customers remains constrained. Headcount approvals continue to be cautious, with a clear preference for flexible resourcing models. Interim hiring is being used to maintain momentum, cover skill gaps, and deliver priority initiatives without increasing fixed cost.

## *How Enterprises Are Using Interim*

Interim resources are viewed as a risk-managed delivery model. Enterprises value speed to hire, flexibility, and the ability to scale resources up or down as priorities change. Many interim roles continue beyond initial terms, becoming embedded within delivery teams.



Interim resourcing is embedded in workforce strategy, with strongest demand where there is regulatory pressure, transformation activity, or ongoing uncertainty. This dynamic is expected to continue into the next quarter.

Ross Carter - ConnectedGroup Managing Director



# Tactical Insights

## *Emerging Employer Hiring Archetypes in 2026*

In response to these hiring trends, Hong Kong employers are adopting a range of talent strategies. We observe four hiring archetypes in the market, defined by how organizations balance caution with opportunity.

# Tactical Insights

## 1

### *The Precision Hirer:*

This archetype epitomizes the "precision hiring" approach. These companies hire very selectively, focusing only on critical roles that fill essential skill gaps or drive key initiatives. They often maintain a lean workforce and deploy extensive due diligence for each hire. Every addition to the team must demonstrate clear ROI.

In the current climate, many large multinationals and financially conservative firms in Hong Kong fit this profile. They are hiring sparingly, aiming to do more with less and only investing in talent that will clearly elevate organizational performance.

***Our Recommendation:*** *More senior, complex, regional/global, or confidential search assignments often require a more comprehensive approach. With our retained ConnectedSearch framework you can secure research driven insights and candidate assessments.*

CONNECTED<sup>®</sup>SEARCH

## 2

### *The Automation Embracer:*

Organizations in this category are aggressively leveraging AI and automation to streamline operations. They may be reducing or redeploying junior roles as technology takes over routine tasks. However, they are simultaneously investing in new, tech-savvy talent, for example, hiring data engineers, AI specialists, and automation experts, to drive innovation.

Their hiring strategy is to replace quantity with quality: rather than backfill every role lost to automation, they seek a smaller number of highly skilled employees who can oversee automated systems and implement new digital solutions. These employers view technology as a means to enhance productivity and are restructuring their workforce accordingly.

***Our Recommendation:*** *ConnectedSolutions delivers flexible interim and managed technology services, providing access to job-ready specialists through a structured, outcome-focused model that supports immediate delivery while building long-term internal capability.*

CONNECTED<sup>®</sup>SOLUTIONS

# Tactical Insights

## 3

### *The Agile Workforce Adopter:*

This archetype prioritizes flexibility above all. Such companies (common among Hong Kong's consultancies, startups, and project-driven firms) maintain a core team of key full-time employees but fulfill other needs through a contract, freelance, or temporary workforce. They might scale headcount up for a big project or new client contract and scale down when work slows.

Hiring is characterized by use of contractors and SOW agreements to bring in skills on demand. These employers value agility in uncertain times, by avoiding over-commitment to fixed salaries, they can adapt quickly to market changes. For candidates, this means more short-term and project-based opportunities, but fewer traditional stable positions at such firms.

***Our Recommendation:*** *ConnectedSolutions delivers flexible interim and managed technology services, providing access to job-ready specialists through a structured, outcome-focused model that supports immediate delivery while building long-term internal capability.*

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## 4

### *The Growth Accelerator:*

Companies in this category are bullish and opportunity-driven despite the broader caution. Often found in high-growth niches (for example, certain fintech startups, health tech firms, or hospitality groups capitalizing on tourism recovery), these employers are aggressively hiring to capture market share. They see 2026 as a window for expansion and are willing to invest ahead of demand in talent.

A Growth Accelerator will add headcount in sales, product development, or market expansion roles to seize emerging opportunities. Their hiring strategy is bold: secure talent to drive rapid growth, even if it means outbidding competitors on salaries. While riskier, this approach can pay off if the anticipated market growth materializes and the company establishes a strong first-mover advantage.

***Our Recommendation:*** *The ConnectedRecruit model is the foundation for our contingent (fee on success) engagement terms. A quality driven approach utilising our extensive candidate database and wide industry and functional expertise.*

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# Key Takeaways & Strategic Recommendations

The market isn't "soft", it's misaligned. Hong Kong has an oversupply of generalists, but ongoing shortages in AI/data, cyber, risk, regulatory finance, and specialist compliance.

**Recommendation:** Hire by skills + outcomes, not job titles. Build targeted pipelines for scarce capabilities and move fast when you find them.

Flex resourcing is a strategic lever, not a stopgap. Interim, contract, and SOW models are being used to deliver transformation under headcount constraints.

**Recommendation:** Build a flex bench for time-bound needs (data, cyber, regulatory, & ERP/finance transformation) with clear accountability and knowledge transfer.

AI is compressing junior demand but raising the premium on senior judgment and governance. Automation is shifting work, not removing the need for talent.

**Recommendation:** Hire and develop "AI translators" (domain + AI literacy), and strengthen data governance, AI risk, and controls.

Precision hiring is now the default operating model. Employers are investing in fewer roles, with higher scrutiny on ROI and immediate impact.

**Recommendation:** Introduce clear "impact criteria" for approvals (revenue, cost, risk, delivery) and prioritise "impact hires" over backfills.

Cost pressure is redefining 'good talent'. In Hong Kong, hiring is increasingly filtered through margin impact, productivity, and execution discipline.

**Recommendation:** Prioritise commercially minded, cross-functional profiles (e.g., supply chain + analytics; finance + automation) and consolidate low-ROI generalist roles.

Top candidates are cautious — but still selective. Decision cycles are longer, and offer acceptance depends on stability, clarity, and credible progression (not just pay).

**Recommendation:** Tighten the process (speed-to-offer), benchmark comp for scarce skills, and sell a clear EVP: stability, scope, and growth path.

# How Can ConnectedGroup Help?

For more information about how ConnectedGroup can support your organization's talent strategy in the current environment, please contact our CEO, Mathew Gollop at [Mat@Connectedgroup.com](mailto:Mat@Connectedgroup.com).



**Mathew Gollop**

CEO & Head of Market  
Development



+852 3972 5874



[www.connectedgroup.com](http://www.connectedgroup.com)



[Mat@connectedgroup.com](mailto:Mat@connectedgroup.com)

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## Contact Us



+852 3972 5888



[www.connectedgroup.com](http://www.connectedgroup.com)



[infoHK@connectedgroup.com](mailto:infoHK@connectedgroup.com)



Unit 2708, Wing On Centre, 111 Connaught Road  
Central, Sheung Wan, Hong Kong

CONNECTED GROUP