

# Hiring in Equipment Finance: Who's Getting Jobs — and Who Isn't

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**\$11B**

New business volume, Feb 2026 — 2nd highest ever (ELFA)

**+22%**

Year-over-year origination growth through Q1 2026

**72%**

of employers globally report difficulty filling roles (ManpowerGroup 2026)

**6–7 mo**

Average time-to-fill for AI/tech roles in financial services

## EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

**The equipment finance industry is posting near-record origination volume — and a deeply uneven hiring market.**

Deal flow has never been stronger. Yet talent acquisition tells a different story: certain professionals are fielding competing offers within days of entering the market, while others with ostensibly similar backgrounds are stalled. The divide is not cyclical — it is structural. It is being driven by three forces simultaneously reshaping the equipment finance workforce: the AI skills premium, vertical-specific credit stress, and a credentialing shift that is redefining what "qualified" means at every level of the org chart.

This report identifies the fault lines, names the profiles that are winning, and provides a clear-eyed view of who needs to reposition — and how.

✓ IN DEMAND	✗ FACING HEADWINDS
<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>▶ Sales producers with portable books</li><li>▶ Credit &amp; underwriting specialists</li><li>▶ AI/tech-fluent finance professionals</li><li>▶ CLFP-certified candidates</li><li>▶ Operations &amp; documentation analysts</li></ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>▶ Entry-level candidates without tech fluency</li><li>▶ General finance pros without leasing context</li><li>▶ Mid-level talent in transportation/small-ticket</li><li>▶ Senior executives without digital transformation experience</li></ul>

## 01 | The Market Context: Strong Volume, Fractured Labor

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Any serious analysis of the hiring environment has to begin with the deal flow, because the two are in striking tension right now.

The ELFA CapEx Finance Index recorded **\$11 billion in new business volume in February 2026** — only the second time in the industry's history that threshold has been crossed — following an all-time high set in January. Through the first two months of 2026, originations are running **22% above prior-year levels**. Independent providers led the surge; bank affiliates and captives posted healthy growth across the board.

By conventional logic, a volume run of this magnitude should produce proportional hiring. And in specific pockets, it has — originations support, documentation processing, and credit operations are all active. But the labor market is not responding uniformly. The reason is structural: the skills the industry needs most right now are not the skills the traditional pipeline produces.

### THE CORE TENSION

- ▶ Record origination volume is real — but hiring demand is concentrated, not broad-based
- ▶ The fastest-growing roles require AI fluency, digital platform literacy, or advanced credentialing
- ▶ Traditional generalist profiles are competing for a shrinking share of available seats
- ▶ Stressed verticals (transportation, small-ticket) are contracting headcount even as overall volume grows

## 02 | Who Is Getting Hired: The Five High-Demand Profiles

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### 1. Sales Producers With a Portable Book

The most reliably placeable professional in equipment finance today is what it has always been: **a proven originator with a demonstrable, transferable book of business**. The difference from prior cycles is the threshold. A transferable book of is now standard language on senior sales postings. Candidates without are competing for a narrowing set of openings against a larger pool. At or above it, the market is competitive and compensation — including uncapped commission structures — reflects that.

Geography matters here, but less than it once did for producers who can demonstrate consistent performance in a specific vertical or customer segment. Companies are willing to configure territories around a strong producer in ways they were not five years ago.

### 2. Credit and Underwriting Specialists

Credit is the perennial talent gap in this industry, and 2026 is no exception. The combination of skills required — financial statement analysis, industry risk assessment, regulatory compliance, and lease/loan transaction structuring — is narrow enough that experienced underwriters carry genuine pricing power. If you have three or more years of hands-on underwriting experience in equipment finance, you are effectively in a seller's market.

The caveat: companies are increasingly asking credit candidates to demonstrate comfort with automated decisioning tools and data analytics platforms. Pure manual underwriting experience, without any exposure to tech-enabled workflows, is a softer credential than it was.

### 3. Technology and AI-Adjacent Finance Professionals

This is the highest-growth category and the most consequential hiring challenge facing the industry. **ManpowerGroup's 2026 Talent Shortage Survey** — drawing on 39,000 employers across 41 countries — found that for the first time in the survey's history, AI skills have surpassed engineering and traditional IT as the hardest category to fill globally. In financial services specifically, average time-to-fill for AI-related roles has reached **six to seven months**.

Equipment finance firms are competing for this talent against banks, fintechs, and technology companies with materially larger compensation infrastructure. The winning strategy for most leasing organizations is not to recruit pure AI engineers — it is to identify professionals who combine lease origination, portfolio analytics, or credit modeling experience with demonstrated AI tool fluency. That hybrid profile commands a significant premium and is genuinely scarce.

#### THE AI SKILLS GAP — BY THE NUMBERS

- Global AI talent demand outpaces supply by 3.2:1 across critical roles
- 71% of the current AI workforce are men — a significant untapped pipeline gap
- Financial services and healthcare report 6–7 month average time-to-fill for AI positions
- AI roles now pay approximately 67% more than comparable traditional finance/tech positions
- Only 9% of organizations have reached true AI maturity — demand will intensify

### 4. CLFP-Certified Professionals

The January 2026 formal affiliation between ELFA and the CLFP Foundation is the most significant structural development in industry credentialing in years. The combination creates **clear pathways from university programs into certified roles**, with global expansion underway including a Canadian CLFP designation and pursuit of ANSI accreditation.

The practical hiring implication is straightforward: the CLFP designation is increasingly functioning as a filter, not just a differentiator. Candidates with the credential access roles and compensation bands that non-certified peers with equivalent experience do not. For candidates in the pipeline: sitting for the exam now is one of the highest-ROI professional investments available in this market.

### 5. Operations and Documentation Specialists

Record origination volume creates proportional back-office demand, and that demand is real and active right now. Documentation operations analysts, contract processors, loan and lease processors, and credit administration specialists are all moving through hiring cycles quickly. The skill requirements are specific — prior experience in finance company documentation or credit administration, working knowledge of Excel and UCC law — but attainable.

These roles are also among the most remote-friendly in the industry, which has meaningfully expanded the candidate pool and the geographic optionality for both employers and candidates.

## 03 | Who Is Struggling: Four Profiles Facing Headwinds

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### 1. Entry-Level Candidates Without Technology Fluency

The entry-level compression is structural, not cyclical. **NACE data projects a 1.6% increase in employer hiring for the Class of 2026** — which, adjusted for graduating class size, represents a functional contraction in opportunity. In equipment finance, the dynamic is consistent: companies are reluctant to invest in training cycles for candidates who arrive without demonstrated digital tool literacy.

The historical on-ramp — analyst learns lease accounting fundamentals, moves toward credit or originations over two to three years — remains theoretically intact. In practice, the entry gate has narrowed. Candidates who can demonstrate AI tool proficiency, data fluency, or exposure to lease management platforms arrive with a material advantage. Those who cannot are competing for fewer seats against a larger pool.

## 2. General Finance Professionals Without Leasing Context

Equipment finance is a specialized discipline, and that specialization is being enforced more rigorously than in prior cycles. Candidates with strong commercial lending or general banking backgrounds who cannot articulate lease structures, residual value mechanics, UCC filing requirements, or end-of-term options are being screened out early — often before the first substantive interview.

The path forward for this cohort is clear: ELFA's Principles of Equipment Leasing & Finance workshop and the CLFP credentialing pathway exist precisely to bridge this gap. Candidates who invest in the credential differentiate themselves meaningfully. Those who do not are competing on a tilted field.

## 3. Mid-Level Professionals in Stressed Verticals

Transportation and small-ticket lending are the two segments where industry confidence data is most concerning. **The ELFA Monthly Confidence Index has held below the 50-point threshold throughout early 2026**, with survey participants specifically citing delinquency trends in transportation and credit quality deterioration in smaller-ticket segments.

Companies concentrated in those verticals are in risk-reduction mode. Hiring freezes and selective headcount reductions are more common than additions. For professionals whose entire career arc sits within transportation or small-ticket, the search is materially harder — not because they lack skill, but because their segment of the market is contracting.

### REPOSITION TOWARD TAILWIND VERTICALS

- Construction equipment — replacement demand driven by aging fleets and infrastructure activity
- Manufacturing equipment — reshoring investment and Section 179 dynamics sustaining demand
- Technology/IT equipment — AI hardware buildout creating a new, high-velocity financing category
- Healthcare equipment — resilient demand, favorable credit quality, growing lease penetration

## 4. Senior Executives Without Digital Transformation Credentials

The C-suite search market is active — CFO, Chief Sales Officer, and technology leadership roles are all in circulation. But the evaluation criteria have shifted in ways that catch some experienced executives off guard. Organizations are no longer looking primarily for operators who have managed the existing business well. They are looking for leaders who can credibly narrate how they have driven or navigated technology change.

A VP-level originator with a strong production record but no story around platform modernization or digital workflow implementation is a harder placement than five years ago. The same is true for financial executives who have not engaged with AI governance, data infrastructure, or automated decisioning. This is not a permanent disqualifier — but it requires a deliberate repositioning narrative.

## 04 | Geography and Compensation Benchmarks

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### Where the Jobs Are

Active hiring clusters in traditional financial centers — the Midwest, Texas corridor, mid-Atlantic, and Northeast — but the geography of opportunity has meaningfully shifted for non-origination roles. Remote and hybrid arrangements are now standard for operations, documentation, and technology functions, creating genuine access for candidates in secondary markets who previously had to relocate to participate.

Originations and relationship management roles remain geographically anchored. Companies want producers proximate to their markets and customers. For everything else, the field is broader than it has ever been.

## 05 | Strategic Implications

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### For Companies Hiring

#### THREE PRIORITIES FOR TALENT LEADERS

- ▶ Invest in internal upskilling first — training existing staff on AI tools and digital workflows is materially more cost-effective than competing for scarce external AI talent
- ▶ Raise the credentialing bar — formally incorporating CLFP certification into hiring criteria signals seriousness and filters for committed professionals
- ▶ Broaden geographic sourcing for non-origination roles — remote-eligible positions that recruit only locally are leaving the best candidates in the market

### For Candidates

#### THE THREE MOVES THAT DIFFERENTIATE RIGHT NOW

- ▶ Earn or pursue the CLFP — the ELFA/CLFP Foundation affiliation makes the credential more visible and more valued than at any prior point
- ▶ Build a technology narrative — identify one specific AI tool, automation workflow, or platform implementation you have driven or can speak to credibly
- ▶ Quantify everything — books of business, transaction complexity, portfolio size, error rates, processing volume; the generalist pitch does not land in this market

## Bottom Line

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**Equipment finance is a strong industry in a bifurcated talent market. The companies that understand the fault lines will hire well. The candidates who understand them will land faster and negotiate from strength.**

Record origination volume is real. The opportunity is real. But the market is rewarding specificity — specific skills, specific credentials, specific track records — and penalizing generalism in a way that prior cycles did not. The gap between who companies need and what the traditional pipeline delivers is the defining talent challenge of 2026. Firms and candidates who close that gap first will have a durable structural advantage.

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## ABOUT THE AUTHOR

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Ken Lubin is a Managing Director at ZRG Partners, where he leads executive search engagements across equipment finance, commercial lending, and specialty finance. With deep practitioner-side and search-side experience spanning the full spectrum of the equipment leasing industry, Ken advises companies and senior candidates on talent strategy, market positioning, and organizational build-outs. He is a regular contributor to Leasing News and a recognized voice on workforce trends in commercial finance.

*Sources: Equipment Leasing and Finance Association (ELFA); ELFA/CLFP Foundation Affiliation Announcement, January 2026; Equipment Leasing & Finance Foundation 2026 Economic Outlook; ManpowerGroup 2026 Talent Shortage Survey; ELFA CapEx Finance Index; National Association of Colleges and Employers (NACE); ZipRecruiter compensation data; industry practitioner and recruiter interviews.*