

The Demand Is Real — for Software, Not for You

A vertical-intelligence read of the outsourced-bookkeeping market — where the search demand actually sits, who owns the competitive surface, what the sector's own labour economics say, and why the addressable services market is smaller than the category's raw volumes suggest.

SUBJECT

Pilot · pilot.com

VERTICAL

Outsourced bookkeeping / accounting services

WINDOW

Snapshot · Jun 2026

METHOD

Keyword-demand sizing + competitive-surface search & ranked-keyword read + sector labour economics

PREPARED BY

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THE VERDICT

The demand is real, but it is demand for accounting *software* — the outsourced-service market underneath it is small, flat, and won by capture, not by riding a wave.

This is a vertical-intelligence read of the outsourced-bookkeeping market, sized from the keyword demand, the competitive surface, and the sector's own labour economics. The headline is a reframe: the enormous search volumes the category appears to command are **software-brand searches** — people looking for QuickBooks, not for a bookkeeper. When you strip those out, the genuine outsourced-service demand is a fraction of the raw numbers, and its aggregate trend is flat. On the competitive surface, the head-term search results are owned by third-party review infrastructure — YouTube, Reddit, and comparison publishers — not by service providers; pilot.com's strongest comparison-term position is a self-referential blog ranking. And the sector's official labour statistics — flat employment, rising wages — independently corroborate a mature, fully-staffed market. All three strong layers point the same way: this is a *share-capture* market, not a demand-growth one — and the lever is precise service-intent targeting, disciplined CAC, and content that contests the reviewer surface against a small, well-defined audience.

- 1 The keyword universe is software demand wearing the category's name.** Of the 1,000-keyword universe we expanded for this vertical (1,800,250 total monthly searches), **62.6% of all volume is software-brand searches** — the QuickBooks family alone accounts for ~1.11M (QuickBooks itself caps at the platform's 1,000,000 ceiling). Genuine outsourced-service-intent terms — the thing Pilot actually sells — carry **well under 1% (on the order of ~2,600–3,200 searches a month)**. The addressable demand for the service is a sliver of the headline numbers the category markets on — so budget for heavy negative-match filtering (QuickBooks, Xero, Wave) to keep customer-acquisition cost from drowning in software shoppers.
- 2 Aggregate demand is flat, not rising.** Across the 20 head terms with measured volume, the aggregate 12-month trend shows **no statistically significant movement — essentially flat**. Every term that *is* rising is a software query ('bookkeeping software,' 'invoice software,' 'expense-tracking software'), not a service one. Size this as a stable pie to take share of, not a growing one to ride.
- 3 The competitive surface is owned by third-party review infrastructure — and Pilot ranks against itself.** Across 590 organic search results for the head terms, **181 (30.7%)** belong to third-party platforms and review/comparison infrastructure — YouTube alone holds **142**, far more than any bookkeeping firm. Your primary roadblock to capturing new intent is third-party review infrastructure, not just other bookkeeping firms. pilot.com surfaces 16 times, and its best position on the key comparison term 'pilot bookkeeping alternative' is **its own blog** — a self-referential ranking that defends the brand term but captures no new comparison-shopping intent.
- 4 The sector's own labour economics corroborate the flat-demand read.** Official labour statistics put the accounting/tax/bookkeeping/payroll-services sector at **~1.20M employees** nationally with a **flat 3-year employment level** but a **steadily rising average weekly wage (\$1,699 → \$1,825 over three years)**. A mature, fully-staffed, wage-inflating sector is the labour-market signature of stable

demand — it confirms, from a fully independent data source, that this is a share-capture market, not a growth wave.

In one line: The category's big search numbers belong to accounting *software*; the outsourced-service market is small, flat, and contested by third-party reviewers — and the sector's own labour economics confirm a mature, fully-staffed market — so win it as a share-capture play with service-intent targeting and disciplined CAC, not a demand-growth bet.

How to read this report. A **HIGH** confidence chip means a well-sampled, directly observed signal — all three findings below carry it (the demand read rests on a 1,000-keyword expansion plus a 20-term volume pull; the competitive read on 590 organic search results plus ranked-keyword profiles; the economic read on official sector labour statistics across three years). One intended layer — the buyer's own community voice — came back genuinely thin for this ultra-niche B2B vertical; we present it as a **scoped boundary** (closing section) with the exact reason and the work that recovers it, rather than dress a sparse layer as a finding. Candor about a boundary is not a hedge — it is the part that tells you exactly what you may act on now and what a deeper engagement still has to earn.

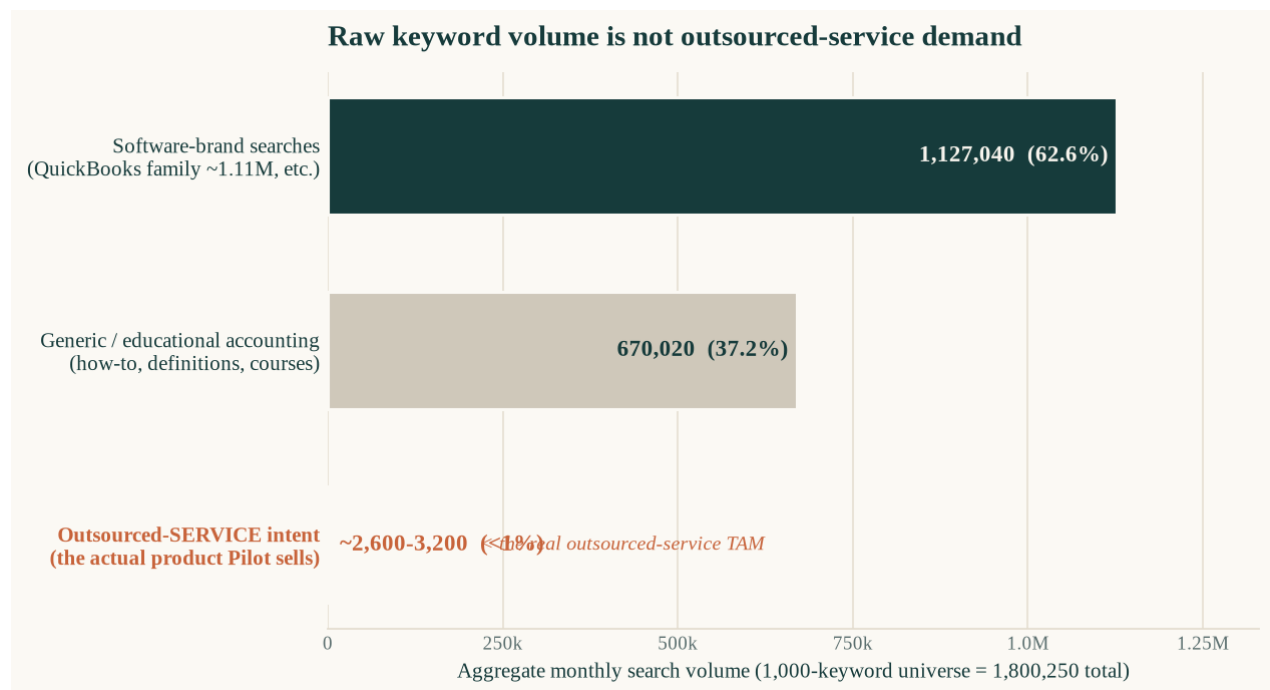
Whose demand is this, really?

CONFIDENCE: HIGH

We built the buyer-side keyword universe for the vertical — a 1,000-keyword expansion from seven head terms (outsourced bookkeeping, online bookkeeping services, startup bookkeeping, and the brand term ‘pilot bookkeeping alternative’ among them) — and pulled exact monthly volume for the 20-term head set. (Source: *third-party search-volume estimates; a 1,000-keyword expansion plus a 20-term volume read.*) The single most important pattern is what dominates that universe. Of **1,800,250 total monthly searches**, software-brand terms account for **62.6%** — the QuickBooks family alone is ~1.11M, with the QuickBooks head term pinned at the data provider’s 1,000,000 reporting ceiling. Generic and educational accounting terms (how-to guides, definitions, certifications) make up another 37.2%. The terms that express genuine intent to *buy an outsourced bookkeeping service* — ‘monthly bookkeeping services,’ ‘affordable bookkeeping services,’ ‘bookkeeping for startups’ — together carry **well under 1%** — on the order of ~2,600–3,200 searches a month.

Raw keyword volume is not outsourced-service demand

1,000-KEYWORD UNIVERSE · SHARE OF TOTAL MONTHLY VOLUME BY INTENT CLASS



Software-brand searches are 62.6% of the keyword universe; genuine outsourced-service intent is well under 1%. The headline volumes are not the addressable services market.

The trajectory reinforces the reframe. Across the 20 head terms with measured volume, the aggregate 12-month trend shows **no statistically significant movement** — the category is **essentially flat**, and the only terms with significant growth are software queries (‘bookkeeping software,’ ‘invoice software,’

'expense-tracking software,' 'financial-dashboard software'), not service ones. The implication for sizing is direct: do not extrapolate the category's million-search headline into a services TAM, and do not price the opportunity as a rising market.

The CAC directive — budget for negative-match filtering, not raw reach. Because 62.6% of the category's volume is software-brand intent and only a sliver (well under 1%) is genuine outsourced-service intent, any paid or organic plan that targets the head terms unfiltered will spend the overwhelming majority of its budget on QuickBooks shoppers who will never buy a service. The defensible move is heavy, programmatic **negative-match filtering** — exhaustively excluding QuickBooks, Xero, Wave, FreshBooks, Sage and the long tail of software-brand and software-feature terms — so spend concentrates on the small service-intent slice. Treat that negative-keyword list as a living asset, expanded continuously: it is the single highest-leverage control on customer-acquisition cost in a category where the noise outweighs the signal more than 300-to-1.

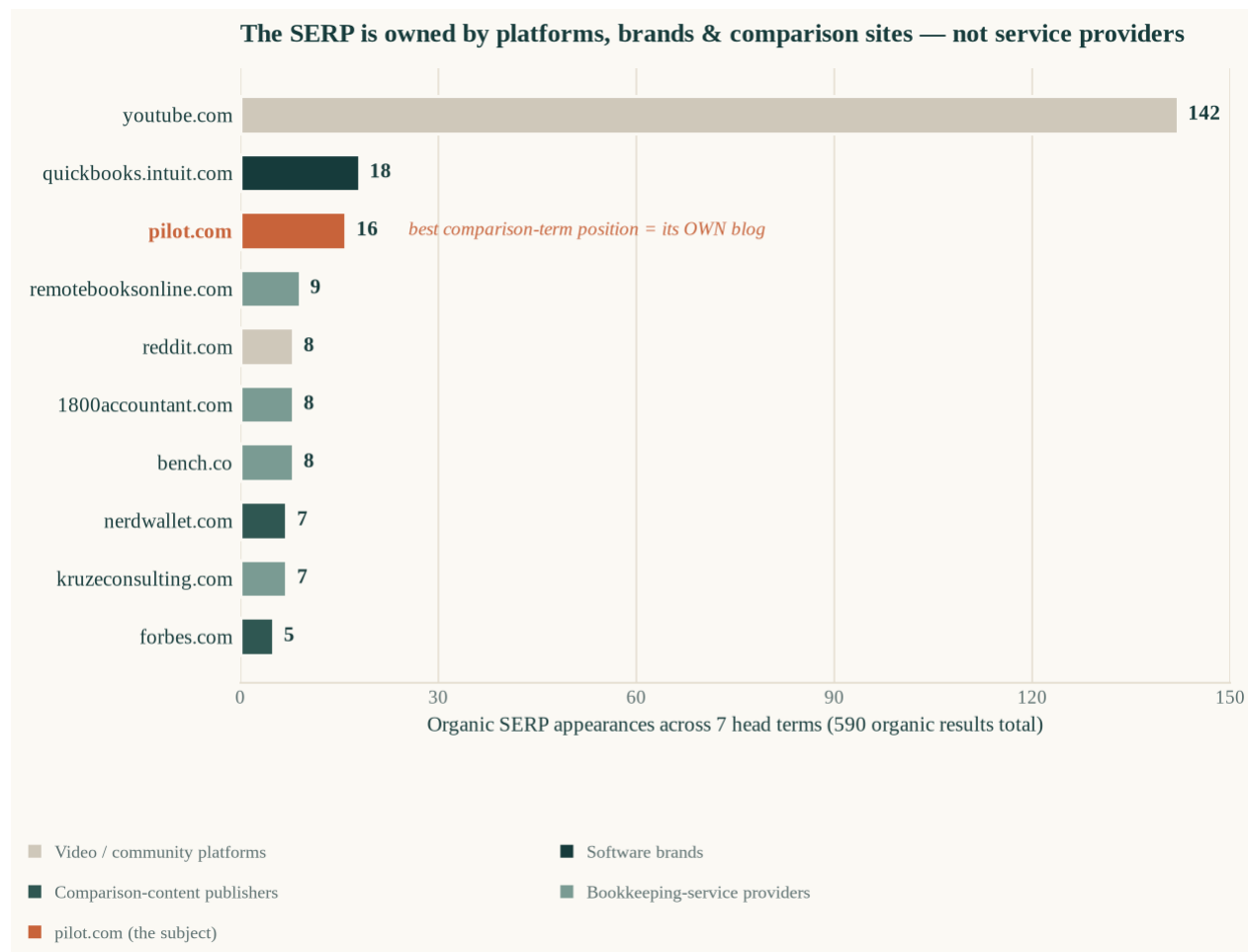
Who owns the surface — and where Pilot stands

CONFIDENCE: HIGH

We captured the organic search-results composition for the head terms and the ranked-keyword profiles of the named service competitors. *(Source: a competitive-surface read — 590 organic results across 7 head terms, plus ranked-keyword profiles for the named service competitors and a 12-month historical search-results trajectory.)* The surface is not owned by service providers. The single largest owner is **YouTube, with 142 of the 590 organic slots** — more than every bookkeeping firm in the set combined. Counting all third-party platforms and review/comparison infrastructure together (YouTube, Reddit, Quora, and comparison publishers such as Forbes, NerdWallet and ZipRecruiter), **181 of the 590 results (30.7%)** are review-and-discovery infrastructure that no single provider controls. A software brand (quickbooks.intuit.com, 18) and the bookkeeping-service providers — remotebooksonline.com (9), 1800accountant.com (8), bench.co (8), kruzeconsulting.com (7) — sit well below. The buyer journey for this category runs through reviewers, explainers and video, not through the providers' own pages.

The search results are owned by platforms, brands & comparison sites

TOP ORGANIC OWNERS · APPEARANCES ACROSS 7 HEAD TERMS (590 ORGANIC RESULTS)



YouTube alone holds 142 of 590 organic slots; third-party platforms plus review/comparison infrastructure hold 181 (30.7%). pilot.com surfaces 16 times; its best comparison-term position is its own blog — a self-referential ranking that captures no new intent.

State it plainly to the client: your primary roadblock to capturing new intent is third-party review infrastructure, not just other bookkeeping firms. A prospect researching 'outsourced bookkeeping' or 'online bookkeeping services' meets a YouTube explainer, a Reddit thread, or a Forbes/NerdWallet round-up long before any single provider's page — and these reviewers, not the providers, frame the consideration set. Pilot's standing within that surface is precise. pilot.com appears 16 times across the head-term search results and ranks at the very top for its core branded queries (it is rank 1 for 'online bookkeeping services' and rank 2 for 'startup bookkeeping' and 'bookkeeping services for startups', all via its homepage). But its single highest position on the most competitive comparison term — 'pilot bookkeeping alternative' — is **held by its own blog post** (/blog/best-bench-alternatives), sitting amid independent comparison content. That is a self-referential ranking: it deflects existing customers researching alternatives, but it does not capture the comparison-shopping intent that the independent reviewers around it own. The competitive opening is to build genuine comparison-grade content and earn

placement in the third-party review infrastructure on the service-intent terms, where the surface is currently held by platforms and publishers rather than by any single provider.

03 SECTOR ECONOMICS

What the labour market says about demand

CONFIDENCE: HIGH

We corroborated the search-demand read against the sector's own labour economics, drawn from official labour statistics for the accounting/tax-preparation/bookkeeping/payroll-services sector. (*Source: official labour statistics — national sector employment, wages and establishment counts across three annual snapshots; plus a national real-income series as macro backdrop.*) The sector employs roughly **1.20M people** nationally. Across the three most recent years the picture is consistent: employment is **essentially flat** — about 1,216,970 in the earliest year, 1,225,415 in the middle year, and 1,196,438 in the most recent — while the **average weekly wage rises steadily, from \$1,699 to \$1,737 to \$1,825**, and establishment counts climb from roughly 177,000 to 187,000. Alongside it, the national real-disposable-income-per-capita backdrop edges upward across the same window (from about \$51,106 to \$52,330), confirming there is no macro contraction pressuring the category.

Read the direction together: **flat headcount, rising pay**. That is the labour-market signature of a *mature, fully-staffed* sector — not one absorbing a surge of new demand (which would show employment growth) and not one in decline (which would show falling wages and shrinking establishment counts). Wages rising against flat employment indicate a tight, experienced workforce commanding more per hour, while modestly rising establishment counts suggest steady churn and new-firm entry rather than consolidation or collapse.

This independently corroborates the search-demand read rather than contradicting it. The keyword layer says aggregate service demand is flat and the opportunity is share-capture, not growth; the labour economics say the same thing from a completely separate data source — a sector at full employment with no demand surge in the headcount. When two unrelated instruments — consumer search behaviour and employer payroll — agree on 'mature and stable, not growing,' the conclusion is firmly grounded. The strategic implication is unchanged and now doubly supported: value this as defensible share of a stable, well-staffed market, and expect to win it by taking position from incumbents, not by riding a rising tide.

The market read, in priority order

- **1 • Size the services TAM from service-intent terms, not headline volume — and defend CAC with negative-match filtering.** The million-search category numbers are software demand. Build your demand model on the small service-intent slice (well under 1% of category volume), and run heavy, programmatic negative-match lists (QuickBooks, Xero, Wave, FreshBooks, Sage and the software-feature long tail) so paid and organic effort lands on service buyers rather than software shoppers. In a category where noise outweighs signal more than 300-to-1, that negative-keyword discipline is the single highest-leverage control on acquisition cost.
 - **2 • Price this as a share-capture play, not a growth bet.** Aggregate search demand is essentially flat, and the sector's own labour economics confirm it — flat employment with rising wages is the signature of a mature, fully-staffed market. Value the opportunity as defensible share of a stable pie; the upside comes from taking position from incumbents, not from a tide that lifts late entrants.
 - **3 • Contest the third-party review infrastructure, not just other firms.** Your biggest roadblock to new intent is the reviewer-and-platform surface — YouTube, Reddit, and comparison publishers own 30.7% of the head-term search results. Build decision-grade comparison content and earn placement in that review infrastructure on the service-intent terms, where today no single provider holds the surface.
 - **4 • Treat the self-referential 'alternative' ranking as defense, not reach.** Ranking your own blog for 'pilot bookkeeping alternative' protects retention but adds no new top-of-funnel. Measure it as a defensive asset and invest reach budget against the independent-publisher and platform surface instead.
 - **5 • Recover the buyer's own voice before sizing a full go-to-market.** The community-language layer is genuinely thin for this ultra-niche B2B vertical (closing section) — a named boundary, not a finding. Commission the deeper forum/Reddit clustering pass so the plan rests on the buyer's actual language, not the SEO surface alone.
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The deliberate edges of this read

This Vertical Intelligence Standard issue reads three layers at HIGH confidence — demand sizing, competitive concentration, and the sector's labour economics — all directly observed. One further layer came back genuinely thin and is named here as a scoped boundary, with the specific reason and the work that closes it. It is a diligence boundary, not a finding, and is never presented as such.

- **Buyer-archetype / community voice — genuinely thin for this vertical.** The community-language layer was attempted across the developer and Q&A communities and the open web, and returned no usable *buyer* discourse. The technical founder community returned **0 results** across five queries, and the personal-finance Q&A community returned only generic double-entry-accounting and personal-tax questions — not SMB owners discussing whether to outsource their books. The social-listening pull returned **no usable data** this run. Web-content search did return **100 items**, but they are SEO / supply-side content from low-authority domains (bookkeeping vendors' own marketing and PR, plus link-farm pages) — the category's marketing surface, not its buyers' voice. This is not a tooling failure: outsourced-bookkeeping-for-SMBs is an ultra-niche B2B topic that is genuinely sparse on the public developer-and-forum surface, where small-business owners simply do not congregate to debate the decision. It is therefore an honest boundary. A deeper engagement adds a targeted Reddit/forum-clustering pass plus review-site mining (G2, Capterra, Trustpilot) to recover genuine buyer language from where these buyers actually are.
- **AI-citation answer set — out of scope for this tier.** Which engines cite which providers when a buyer asks an AI assistant for bookkeeping help is a separate, higher-tier read; it is not part of the Vertical Intelligence Standard scope and is named here so its absence is explicit, not an oversight.

This is a public-surface demand, competitive & sector-economic snapshot at the Vertical Intelligence Standard tier. The natural next step is a deeper engagement that turns this read into a go-to-market plan: (1) recover the genuine buyer-community voice via advanced forum/Reddit clustering and review-site mining, so messaging rests on your buyers' actual language; (2) map a precise service-intent keyword blueprint with the negative-match architecture that defends your acquisition cost; and (3) — now that the sector's economic layer resolves — layer in firm-formation and competitive-density mapping to size the share-capture opportunity by geography and segment. To commission it, reach the ForIntel desk directly at

forintel@foragentis.com

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Confidential, prepared for the named client only. Findings reflect a keyword-demand sizing, a competitive-surface search & ranked-keyword read, and a sector labour-economics read captured in a snapshot window. The demand, competitive and economic layers are HIGH confidence and directly observed; the buyer-community layer came back genuinely thin for this ultra-niche vertical and is carried as a named scoped boundary by design rather than presented as a finding. Not for redistribution.