



AN INDUSTRY BRIEFING FROM GRAIL

What's Changing in the Bench You're Building

Your senior application engineers are aging out. Your graduate pathway has quietly closed. Your 2030 senior bench is being shaped by Copilot rollouts you were not invited to. A briefing for Chief Human Resources Officers at mid-market European industrial automation firms.

PREPARED BY

Johan Grönstedt · GRAIL

FOR

European mid-market industrial
automation people leaders

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Every CHRO at a mid-sized European industrial automation firm has had the same Monday. Three things in the inbox. Your COO forwarded a note from your Head of Application Engineering: the senior application engineer who has held the Volvo account for nine years took a phone call from a competitor on Friday. Your CFO attached the quarterly engineering-workforce report to the GMT calendar invite, with a single-line note: "need your read on productivity-per-engineer before this lands with the board." Your works council representative emailed: framework-agreement consultations have been formally requested on the Schneider EcoStruxure pilot the engineering management approved without HR in the room.

You have held this seat for four years. The pattern used to be simple. Hire the right engineers. Train them well. Keep the works council in the loop. Protect the senior bench through the retirement window. The business was understandable.

Something changed. Your standard automation work compressed quietly through 2024 and 2025 because Siemens TIA Copilot and Schneider EcoStruxure AI now sit inside the standard PLC environment. Your graduate engineer who joined in 2023 was supposed to do eighteen months of commissioning to learn how a real plant breathes. She has done six commissioning weeks. The rest is now agent-generated. Your senior application engineers are reading every Copilot rollout as a signal about whether the firm is being redesigned for them or around them. Your most experienced commissioning specialist is sixty-one and has flagged retirement next year.

You do not have a Copilot rollout problem. You have a pathway problem. Your firm's workforce strategy is being written every week in decisions you were not invited to. The question is not whether to have one. It is whose handwriting the one you already have is in. Your A-players are reading it right now. Your works council is decoding it. Your 2030 senior-engineer bench is being shaped by decisions that look like project-budget items and are actually architecture.

This briefing covers what is happening in your sector, what it means for the people function you run, and the three questions your leadership team should answer before the next GMT.

Industrial automation just lost the apprenticeship that ran it for a generation

For thirty years, the economic architecture of an automation firm ran on a simple progression. Graduate engineers did commissioning weeks under supervision. Mid-level engineers did standard PLC programming and structured text on real client projects. Seniors carried complex integration, legacy-equipment patterns, and the safety-critical judgment calls. Over six to ten years, the best graduates became senior application engineers, and the firm's bench compounded. The work itself was the apprenticeship. The commissioning weeks taught how a real plant breathes. The standard programming hours taught what good looks like.

The vendors are not experimenting any more. Siemens Engineering Copilot TIA generates structured text, documentation, testing scripts, and HMI screens autonomously, with announced 50% time savings on programming and 30% on commissioning. Schneider PLC Code Generation Copilot in EcoStruxure runs at 30 to 50% faster on standard delivery. SPS 2025 ran Industrial AI sessions to the largest crowds at the trade fair. The dedicated PLC Copilot product is in the market. Every mid-market firm is making the same quiet decision about what its juniors will do this year. Almost none are rebuilding the pathway.

Your apprenticeship ran for a generation on commissioning weeks and standard programming hours that are no longer yours to give. The question is whether the pathway gets rebuilt before your 2030 bench loses its first senior with no internal candidate.

Two long pressures stack on top. A quarter of the manufacturing workforce in major European economies is over fifty-five. Eighty-five percent of European industrial firms report insufficient technical talent. Your senior application engineers carry irreplaceable client knowledge: the legacy line, the undocumented workaround, the relationship with the plant manager who asks for them by name. Some of them are also retirement-window. Some of them are the engineers a client would rather hire directly. You are running two clocks at once, and the apprenticeship clock that used to refill the bench is the one that just stopped.

Your people function is feeling it every day

Your talent acquisition. Your best application engineer took a call from a competitor on Friday and you do not know it yet. Your best lateral recruit of the last two quarters came from a competitor that read your firm's hesitation on the Copilot rollout as opportunity. Your graduate offer-accept rate is holding, but the strongest graduates are asking what the apprenticeship looks like when half of commissioning is agent-generated. A-players do not quit on the spot. They start looking quietly.

Your L&D. Your L&D budget runs on vendor certifications, mandatory safety training, and a yearly engineering conference. None of it is designed for continuous in-the-work coaching, agent-paired practice, or cohort rotation across client accounts. Two populations are forming. The control engineer using Siemens TIA Copilot daily builds intuition that compounds weekly. The one whose team blocked the rollout practices not-knowing. Both are becoming who they practice being.

Your compensation architecture. Your rate card and project pricing reward billable engineer-hours. Agents are compressing the hours. Your senior application engineers see the math earlier than your committee does. With clients hiring engineers directly and competitors making visible apprenticeship investments, the senior tier reads every quarter's compensation run for a signal about whether the firm is being redesigned around them or without them.

Your employee relations and works council. Your works council has opened framework-agreement consultations on the Copilot rollout the COO authorised without HR in the room. The regulatory load has stacked: AI literacy documentation across the engineering workforce, framework agreements on agent-assisted work, data minimisation for client-environment data flowing through vendor agents. None of it is on the project deck. All of it lands on you.

Your workforce planning and succession. Your 2030 senior-engineer bench has six names. Four are over fifty-five. Of the two younger, one came through commissioning weeks agents have absorbed, the other through standard PLC programming vendor Copilots now generate first-draft. You have not replaced the pathway. The CHRO who cut the graduate intake in 2024 is the CHRO the board blames for the 2031 opening with no internal candidate.

The apprenticeship clock was always the architecture

Your sector is repricing from below because the standard automation work is compressing. Your people function is stretched because every Copilot rollout, every project-budget line, every framework-agreement opening is a fragment of a workforce strategy that somebody is writing and you are not always in the room when they do. Same force, two altitudes. But there is a third thing happening that most mid-market industrial automation CHROs have not named yet.

Your firm's workforce strategy is being written every week. The Siemens TIA rollout the Head of Engineering authorised. The Schneider EcoStruxure pilot the COO scoped. The fifteen percent cut to the graduate intake the CFO penciled in for next year. Your A-players are reading the handwriting right now. Your works council is decoding it. Your 2030 senior-application-engineer bench is being shaped by decisions that look like project-budget items and are actually architecture.

The pre-industrial maritime apprenticeship took half a century to redesign around steam. The shipping companies that survived rebuilt the master-and-apprentice pairing around real engine-room problems from week one: junior officers next to chief engineers on every breakdown, pattern-exposure redesigned around boiler-pressure decisions and bunker logistics, graduation moved from time-at-sea to specific judgment-tested competencies. The companies that hoped the old apprenticeship would still hold lost their senior bench within twenty years. That same redesign moment is open to your firm now, on a faster clock. Agents make it affordable to put graduates next to senior application engineers on real client decisions from week one, instead of next to commissioning checklists for eighteen months.

You can tell which camp a firm is in from a single question. Of the successors on your 2030 senior-engineer bench, which ones came through work that still exists? Most mid-market automation firms cannot answer. The ones that can have already rebuilt the pathway.

You have twelve to eighteen months to author the answer deliberately, or the project-budget deck on the COO's desk writes it for you. Same Copilot. Same workforce. Different outcome depending on whose handwriting the answer is in.

What most firms are doing. What the winners are doing instead.

Every CHRO has had the AI conversation. Most are making the same four decisions. A smaller group is making different ones.

THE DEFAULT PATH

Restrict the engineering Copilot for safety

Engineers use it anyway through workarounds. Senior engineers read restriction as mistrust.

Cut the graduate intake for this year's number

Cheaper function in Q1. Empty senior bench by 2031. External senior hire at a premium.

Treat senior retirement as a six-month replacement event

Senior leaves with the client knowledge. Graduate has not been paired. Eighteen-month rebuild.

Ship the engineering survey as your main HR deliverable

Your cadence is slower than the COO's project deck. Project budget writes the answer.

THE WINNERS' PATH

Publish three rules that defend real trust

Routing by task sensitivity, not by tool. Audit trail writes itself.

Ship one client account redesigned as a triad unit

Senior + graduate + agent as one delivery unit. Apprenticeship compresses eight years to four.

Run senior succession as a 36-month design

Senior + graduate + knowledge-encoding agent for eighteen months. The client mental map becomes infrastructure.

Publish the workforce memo in your first 100 days

Two pages, co-signed by the CEO. Every Copilot rollout gets decoded against it.

Same workforce. Same twelve months. Opposite outcomes. The difference is whose hand is on the pen.

Talent Gravity. Capability Compounding. Succession Readiness.

Three questions every CHRO is tracking. None of them used to be the same question. They are now.

01 · TALENT GRAVITY

Are your senior engineers staying because of you, or despite you?

Your best application engineer just took a call from a competitor and you do not know it yet. Your best lateral hire last quarter came from a firm that read your hesitation as opportunity. Your strongest graduates are asking what the apprenticeship looks like now. A-players watch which way you lean the first time the Copilot rollout breaks something on a live client site. The ones who start looking quietly have already decided.

02 · CAPABILITY COMPOUNDING

Is the median engineer sharper in December than they were in January?

Two populations are forming in every automation firm. The control engineer using Siemens TIA Copilot daily is building intuition that compounds weekly. The one whose team blocked it is practicing not-knowing. Your L&D budget funds vendor certifications and a conference. Neither moves the median. The firms pulling ahead are making the top engineer's workflow the firm's default workflow.

03 · SUCCESSION READINESS

Of your 2030 senior bench, how many came through work that still exists?

Your successor list has six names. Four are over fifty-five. The two younger came through commissioning weeks and standard PLC programming that vendor agents now generate first-draft. You have not replaced the pathway. The external senior hire in 2030 costs a thirty to forty percent premium and brings the previous firm's context. The apprenticeship gets rebuilt now or gets inherited as a gap.

What the firms winning this play are actually doing

Four concrete moves any CHRO can start this quarter. Each addresses one sub-function. Pulled together, they become one answer the firm compounds on.

1

Talent: publish the workforce memo in your first 100 days

Two pages, signed by the CEO. What this firm believes engineers are for. Which investments are being made in engineers becoming more capable, not cheaper. Which roles are being redesigned around judgment and agent partnership. What happens to the engineer whose role changes materially. Referenced every quarter. Every Copilot rollout after it gets decoded against this memo. Without the memo, every rollout is decoded against rumour.

2

L&D: ship one client account redesigned as a triad unit this quarter

Senior application engineer, graduate, and agent ensemble as one inseparable delivery unit on a single client. The graduate does not do six commissioning weeks then disappear into structured-text production. The graduate sits next to the senior on every architecture decision from week one, operating the agent ensemble in real time, watching the senior intervene at safety-critical and legacy-equipment moments. Exposure-to-judgment hours go from one-fifty a year on the old pathway to twelve hundred on this one. Apprenticeship compresses from eight years to four. Start with one client. Template the next three.

3

Succession: treat each over-55 senior as a 36-month design problem

Do not run senior retirement as a six-month replacement event. The senior with nine years on a client account leaves with the mental map of the legacy environment in his head. The client goes to tender. You spend eighteen months rebuilding what you had. Invert. Pair the senior with the graduate AND with a knowledge-encoding agent that shadows the work for eighteen months. By the retirement date, the client's environment is queryable infrastructure, the graduate has been there for every architecture decision, and the relationship transfers without a tender.

4

Trust: publish three rules, one escalation, one red line

Three rules about what engineers can do with the Copilot without asking. One rule about safety-critical code that requires senior review before deployment. One rule about client-specific legacy environment work that never goes to a vendor agent without the engineer who owns the relationship in the loop. Published. Defended to the works council. Defended to the board when an experiment fails. Your A-players watch which way you lean the first time something goes wrong. Published rules create real capability. A thousand small, sensible no's create the illusion of control and the reality of drift.

The only firm that joins workforce authorship to working infrastructure

The industrial automation CHRO has four places to go. None can do what we do.

The Big Four and strategy human-capital practices (Deloitte, Mercer, Korn Ferry, Willis Towers Watson, McKinsey People & Org) run survey-benchmark models. A benchmark smooths the differences between a systems integrator, a process firm, and a control specialist that actually matter.

The HR-tech vendors (Workday, SuccessFactors, Personio, Eightfold, Gloat) sell platform software. The data encoding which engineers carry which client environments is your firm's most defensible asset. Building it on the vendor's stack licenses it back to the vendor.

The L&D platforms and engineering academies (LinkedIn Learning, Coursera, Pluralsight, Siemens / Schneider / Rockwell certification) sell content libraries. The senior-engineer pathway is a pattern-exposure problem. A certification cannot rebuild the eight-year apprenticeship.

The vendor-led Copilot enablement programmes (Siemens TIA, Schneider EcoStruxure AI services) sell the tool plus the training to use the tool. The vendor's incentive is platform adoption. Your mandate is the workforce as an end.

The market offers four things you have already said no to. GRAIL is the fifth option.

WHAT YOU GET

Senior advisory that speaks GMT, not HR-deck

Working infrastructure your team uses the same week

One client account redesigned as a triad unit

A workforce memo the CEO co-signs in 100 days

No vendor lock-in at any phase of the engagement

WHY IT MATTERS

Founded by operators who have carried people-adjacent seats

Business first, technology second

Three weeks from first meeting to working infrastructure

Your team keeps the infrastructure, you own the IP

Every next step earned by what just shipped, never assumed

Three sessions with your people leadership. Working infrastructure from week one.

We start with your people leadership team because the change cannot outrun the team's personal understanding of what is possible. Three workshops. Each delivers standalone value. Each earns the right to the next.

WORKSHOP 01

How to think

Walk through what is happening in your sector and inside your people function. Draft the first page of your workforce memo in the room, with your CEO present. Your leadership team leaves with a shared view of what the firm believes engineers are for and the first draft of the document the CEO will co-sign.

WORKSHOP 02

Your people infrastructure

A half-day build. Your Head of Talent, Head of L&D, Head of Compensation, and Head of Employee Relations each leave with working infrastructure tuned to their function. Task-level role-mapping agent for senior engineering roles. Knowledge-encoding agent for over-55 succession. Framework-agreement drafting for the works council. Three-rules trust document. Infrastructure your team is using the same week.

WORKSHOP 03

Ready to run

Refined infrastructure based on real use. The first client account redesigned as a triad unit with senior, graduate, and agent ensemble. The published workforce memo, co-signed. The senior-succession kickoff for the over-55 commissioning specialist. The CFO conversation with numbers your CEO can check: external-hire premium math, bench-readiness forecast, productivity-per-engineer-wage-dollar.

Three weeks. No IT project. No board vote needed to start. The infrastructure your people function is already running on when we finish.

For your next GMT

The questions where your people leadership cannot agree on an answer are the ones worth an hour on the agenda. Ask these honestly.

If you asked three of your best engineers privately tomorrow whether the firm's Copilot rollout is being done for them or to them, what would they say? Do you know the names, and can you describe the evidence for what they would say?

Walk me through one engineering role in your firm that has been redesigned at the task level in the last twelve months. Who did the redesign, what did it change, and what does the incumbent do with their week that they did not do before?

Of the six names on your 2030 senior-application-engineer bench, how many came through commissioning weeks and standard PLC programming that vendor agents have already absorbed? What is replacing the pathway for the ones whose pathway is gone?

Your workforce strategy is being written this quarter in Copilot rollouts, project-budget cuts, and framework-agreement openings. How many of those fragments are you the author of, and how many are you decoding after they ship?

Of your over-55 senior application engineers, the ones who carry your largest client relationships in their heads, how many have a paired graduate and a 36-month succession design? How many are running on a six-month open requisition?

If any of these produces a disagreement in your people leadership, that is the conversation worth having before the next project goes to budget.

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