

AN INDUSTRY BRIEFING FROM GRAIL

What's Changing in the Consultant You Can Still Train

Your top fifty are getting recruiter calls. Your junior academy is teaching work agents have already absorbed. Your 2030 senior bench is being shaped by decisions you were not invited to. A briefing for Chief Human Resources Officers at mid-market European IT consulting firms.

PREPARED BY

Johan Grönstedt · GRAIL

FOR

European mid-market IT
consulting people leaders

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Every CHRO at a mid-sized European IT consulting firm has had the same Tuesday. Three things in the inbox. Your Head of Talent forwarded an exit interview from your second-most-senior platform consultant, fourteen-year tenure, four of your top-twenty client relationships, gone to an AI-native delivery boutique that offered equity and a redesigned consultant role. Your CFO attached the new pricing-architecture document to Thursday's GMT calendar invite, with a single-line note: "fixed-price migration depends on the bench you are building, not the one you have." Your Chief Delivery Officer forwarded a note from the works council opening framework-agreement consultations on three Cursor and Claude Code rollouts that shipped to delivery teams without HR in the room.

You have held this seat for four years. The pattern used to be simple. Hire the right consultants. Run the academy. Keep the works council in the loop. Protect the senior bench. The business was understandable.

Something changed. Your junior academy is operating on a 2022 curriculum: write code under supervision for five years, become a senior. The work the curriculum prepares juniors for has been absorbed by agents. Your A-players are reading every Cursor licence and Claude Code rollout as a signal about whether the firm is being redesigned around them or without them. Your second-most-senior platform consultant who left on Friday was not the first warning. Your thriving signal dropped at the last engagement survey and nobody reconstructed the account-level story. Your works council has more evidence of shadow AI use in the firm than sanctioned use.

You do not have a retention problem. You have a pathway problem. Your firm's workforce strategy is being written every week in conversations 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 top fifty read it last month. Your works council is decoding it right now. Your 2030 senior bench is being shaped by decisions that look like delivery-tooling line items and are actually the architecture of who the firm becomes.

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.

IT consulting just lost the apprenticeship the firm was built on

For a generation, the economic architecture of an IT consulting firm ran on a simple exchange. Juniors wrote the boilerplate, ran the standard integrations, did the unit tests, drafted the documentation. Seniors carried the architectural reasoning, the client-system context, the integration depth that took a decade to accumulate. Over five years the best juniors became seniors, and the firm's billable engine compounded. Your firm's pyramid model, your day rate, your Netcompany aspiration all sat on top of that exchange. Junior production is fifty percent of your billable revenue. It is also the layer most exposed to AI coding assistants.

The AI-native delivery boutiques in your category are not experimenting. Fifteen-person teams are signing reference clients in your verticals at forty percent of your rate, with outcome-based pricing and small senior pods that did not exist eighteen months ago. Copilot, Cursor, and Claude Code deliver forty to sixty percent efficiency gains on exactly the work juniors used to bill. CEE nearshore arbitrage has collapsed. Clients are running internal AI benchmarks and asking why a thousand of your hours cost what their team can do in six hundred. Netcompany sits at eighty percent fixed-price with twenty-plus percent EBIT as the visible destination, and most peers are still running the arbitrage dream.

Your junior pathway ran for a generation on supervised production work that is no longer yours to give. The question is whether the pathway gets rebuilt before the 2030 senior opening has no internal candidate.

Your CFO is already running the pricing-migration conversation with the CEO. Your Chief Delivery Officer is already running the internal-tooling conversation. Your top fifteen percent of senior consultants, the ones whose books are largest, are watching which way the firm moves. With AI-native boutiques offering equity and a redesigned consultant role, the lift-out risk is higher than it has been in a decade. The CHRO who cannot articulate a compelling firm-level workforce thesis on AI risks losing the seniors whose departure would compound. You sit alongside the pricing conversation and the tooling conversation. The third conversation has not started yet in most firms.

Your people function is feeling it every Tuesday morning

Your talent acquisition. Your second-most-senior platform consultant resigned on Friday. Your best lateral hires of the last two quarters came from AI-native boutiques whose people read your firm's hesitation as their opportunity. Your graduate offer-accept rate is holding, but the strongest computer-science graduates are asking in second-round interviews what the firm's AI strategy is, and "we are thinking about it" is not an answer that wins them. A-players do not quit on the spot. They start looking quietly. By the time retention moves on the dashboard, the news is old.

Your L&D. Your junior academy curriculum was designed in 2022 around supervised production work. The work it prepares juniors for has been absorbed by agents. Your firm's L&D budget runs on compliance modules, mandatory programmes, and an annual conference. Almost none of it is allocated to continuous in-the-work coaching, agent-paired practice, or deliberate cohort rotation. Two populations are forming inside your firm whether you designed it or not. The top decile is using Claude Code and Cursor daily and building intuition that compounds weekly. The rest is practicing not-knowing. Both groups are becoming who they practice being.

Your compensation architecture. Your rate card and senior-track compensation reward billable hours and utilisation. Agents are compressing the hours. Your top fifty senior consultants see the math earlier than your committee does. With AI-native boutiques offering equity and the cost of going independent at a decade low, every quarter's compensation run is a signal about whether the firm is being redesigned around senior judgement or whether judgement is being asked to subsidise a billing model the firm has not migrated. The compensation committee that met last month did not see this.

Your employee relations and works council. Your works council has opened framework-agreement consultations on three Cursor and Claude Code rollouts that shipped without HR in the room. The regulatory load on people functions has stacked: AI literacy documentation, high-risk recruiting and performance-management systems, framework agreements on agentic tools, data-minimisation in client-code pipelines. None of it shows up on the cost-reduction deck on the CFO's desk. All of it lands on you.

Your workforce planning and succession. Your 2030 senior-bench list has names on it. Most of them came through the junior production work that agents have already absorbed. You have not replaced the pathway. The external senior hire in 2030 will cost a thirty to forty percent premium, take eighteen months to integrate, and bring the previous firm's context. On a long enough horizon, the CHRO who cut the junior layer in 2024 is the CHRO the board blames for the 2031 senior opening with no internal candidate.

The apprenticeship clock was always the architecture

Your sector is repricing from below because the junior production layer is compressing. Your people function is stretched because every tooling decision, every headcount line, every framework-agreement consultation 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. There is a third thing happening that most mid-market IT consulting CHROs have not named yet.

Your firm's workforce strategy is being written every week. The Cursor licence approved by a delivery lead. The headcount line cut in the integration practice. The pricing architecture drafted by the CFO with the CEO. The framework agreement opened by the works council. Your two seniors who took the recruiter call last month read the strategy first. Your works council is decoding it right now. Your 2030 senior bench is being shaped by decisions that look like delivery-tooling line items and are actually architecture.

The craft economies before the industrial revolution had a workforce architecture that worked. The apprentice did the master's setup work for years and watched every judgement call in real time. The journeyman moved between masters to see the same work done four different ways. Graduation was earned on a piece of work the journeyman authored, not by time in seat. The industrial revolution unbundled all three. Two centuries later, agents have just made the master-apprentice proximity model affordable again. The CHRO who rebuilds the junior pathway as senior-plus-agent pairing from week one is rebuilding the architecture the firm always pretended its junior academy was.

You can tell which camp a firm is in from a single question. Of the successors on your 2030 bench, which ones came through work that still exists? Most mid-market 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 cost-reduction deck on the CFO's desk and the Copilot adoption dashboard on the CTO's wall write it for you. Same technology. 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 AI tools for safety and compliance

Sixty-nine percent of consultants use AI on client work anyway. A-players read restriction as mistrust and start looking quietly.

Cut the junior layer for this year's number

Cheaper function in Q1. Empty senior bench by 2031. External senior hire at a premium the firm cannot absorb.

Announce a firm-wide redesign to the GMT vote

Senior consultants whose comp gets compressed have the power to kill it. Vote stalls. Lift-out risk rises.

Run the annual engagement survey as your main HR deliverable

Your cadence is slower than the CFO's quarterly deck. Cost-reduction writes the workforce answer. You inherit the damage.

THE WINNERS' PATH

Publish three rules that defend real trust

Routing by deliverable sensitivity, not tool. Audit trail writes itself. The top fifty watch the rule when something goes wrong.

Ship one role redesigned as a triad unit

Senior, junior, and agent ensemble as one delivery unit. Junior sits inside every judgement call from week one. Apprenticeship compresses five years to two.

Six of your top fifty author their own redesigns first

Eight-week council cadence. They bring the redesign to the firm as work they authored. Lift-out risk converts to ownership.

Publish the people-and-AI memo in first 100 days

Two pages, co-signed by the CEO, referenced every quarter. Every Cursor or Claude Code rollout gets decoded against it.

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

THREE QUESTIONS

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 A-players staying because of you, or despite you?

Your second-most-senior platform consultant resigned on Friday to an AI-native boutique. Your best lateral hire last quarter came from the same place. Your top fifty are reading every Cursor licence and Claude Code rollout as a signal about whether the firm is being redesigned around them. The two seniors who took recruiter calls last month already decided. By the time the dashboard moves, the news is old.

02 · CAPABILITY COMPOUNDING

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

Two populations are forming in every firm. The top decile is using Claude Code and Cursor daily and building intuition that compounds weekly. The rest is pushing agent-generated tickets through with shallow review. Your L&D budget funds compliance modules and an annual conference. Neither moves the median. The firms pulling ahead are making the 90th-percentile workflow the firm's default workflow.

03 · SUCCESSION READINESS

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

Most of the names on your successor list came through the junior coding production work that agents have already absorbed. 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 architecture 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 people-and-AI memo in your first 100 days**

Two pages, signed by the CEO. What this firm believes its consultants are for. Which investments are being made in consultants becoming more capable. Which roles are being redesigned around senior judgement and agent partnership. What happens to a senior whose role changes materially. Referenced every quarter. Every Cursor or Claude Code rollout after that gets decoded against this memo. Without it, every rollout is decoded against rumour.

2**L&D: ship one consultant role redesigned as a triad unit this quarter**

Senior, junior, and agent ensemble as one inseparable delivery unit on live client work. The junior does not fetch research for the senior. The junior operates the agent ensemble in front of the senior on real client code from week one. The senior watches the judgement calls in real time. Your exposure-to-judgement hours for that junior go from two hundred a year on the old academy to fifteen hundred on this one. The apprenticeship clock compresses from five years to two. Start with one role. Template the next three from the learning.

3**Succession: six of your top fifty author their own redesigns first**

Do not ship a firm-wide redesign to the GMT vote. That vote stalls because the seniors being asked to approve it are the ones whose comp gets compressed. Invert. Assemble six senior consultants — the ones whose books are largest and whose lift-out risk is highest — as the authoring council. Their first assignment is to redesign their own practice at the task level in eight weeks. They bring it to the GMT as work they authored. The six loudest possible critics become the six loudest possible defenders.

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

Three rules about what consultants can do with AI on client work without asking permission. One rule about what requires senior review before it leaves the firm. One rule about what never goes to an agent at all. Published. Defended to the board when an experiment fails. Your top fifty watch which way you lean the first time something a Claude Code session shipped causes a client incident. Published rules create real capability. A thousand small, sensible no's create the illusion of control and the reality of drift.

The fifth option for the IT consulting CHRO authoring this decade

The IT consulting CHRO has four places to go. None can do what we do.

The Big Four human-capital practices (Deloitte Human Capital, Mercer, Korn Ferry, Willis Towers Watson) run survey-benchmark models with audit-relationship conflicts. Every firm's workforce thesis under AI compression is different. A benchmark smooths the differences that actually matter.

The MBB people-and-organisation practices (McKinsey People & Org, BCG People Strategy, Bain Org) sell partner-led diagnostics at quarterly cadence. They write the deck. They cannot sit with a junior academy curriculum, a Cursor rollout, and a senior-attrition list at task level inside a quarter.

The HR-tech vendors (Workday, SuccessFactors, Eightfold, Gloat, Phenom, Personio) sell platform software. The data encoding which seniors carry which client systems IS your apprenticeship architecture in machine-readable form. Building on the vendor stack licenses it back to the vendor.

The L&D platforms and HR academies (LinkedIn Learning, Coursera, Sana Labs, Josh Bersin Academy) sell content libraries. The senior-track pathway is a pattern-exposure problem, not a content-library problem. A platform that sells modules cannot rebuild the pattern-exposure architecture agents have collapsed.

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 consultant role redesigned at task level

A people-and-AI 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 product 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

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 the people-and-AI memo in the room, with your CEO present. Your leadership team leaves with a shared view of what the firm believes its consultants 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. Senior-council facilitation architecture. 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 consultant role redesigned as a triad unit with the incumbent in the room. The published memo, co-signed. The senior-council kickoff agenda. The CFO conversation with numbers the CEO can check: external-hire premium math, cohort-retention forecast, successor-readiness count.

Three weeks. No IT project. No board approval 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 senior consultants privately tomorrow whether the firm's AI strategy is being done for them or to them, what would they say? Do you know the names, and can you describe the evidence?

Walk me through one consultant 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 names on your 2030 senior bench, how many came through the junior coding production work that 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 tooling decisions, headcount lines, 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 top fifty senior consultants — the ones whose books are largest and whose lift-out risk is highest — have any of them been asked to author the redesign yet, or are they waiting to be presented with a vote on yours?

If any of these produces a disagreement in your people leadership, that is the conversation worth having before the next pricing-architecture review.

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