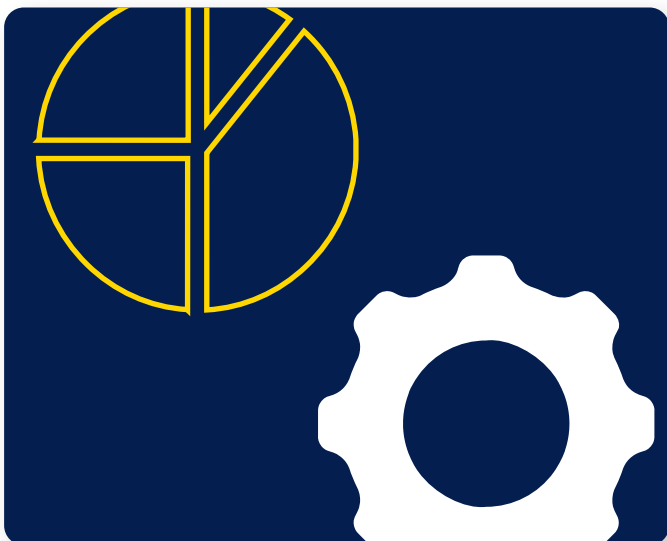
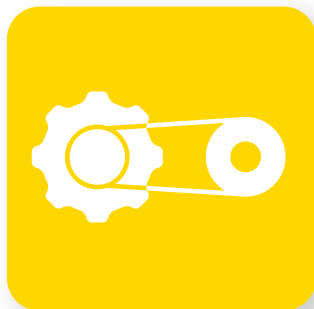
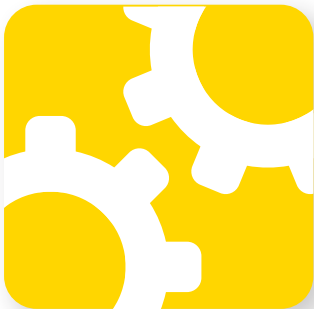
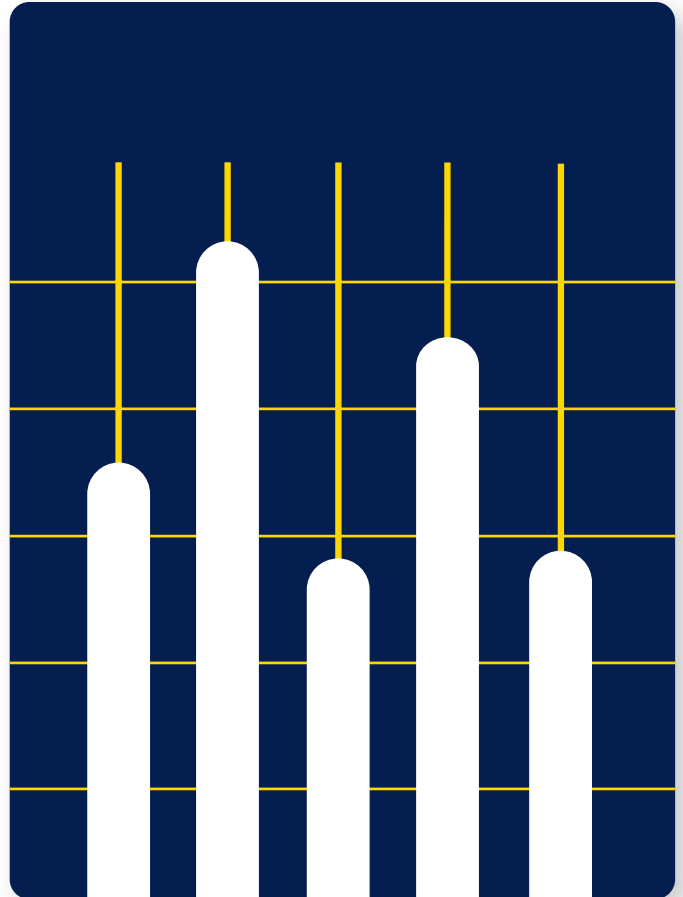


Wired for instability

How European manufacturers are
meeting the skills challenge

June 2026



Foreword

by David Cullern, Group VP Key Accounts

Across Europe, manufacturers are still operating under pressure. Costs remain volatile, supply chains are more stable but far from predictable, and the availability of skilled staff continues to challenge day-to-day operations.

Yet despite this, confidence is rising. The Rubix Uptime Index has increased from 70 to 75 over the past six months.

But this is not a story of recovery.

It is a story of adaptation. Manufacturers are no longer waiting for stability. They are learning how to operate without it, tightening processes, improving visibility, and making smarter use of the resources available to them.

In this wave of the Uptime Index, we explore one of the most important and complex factors shaping uptime: the availability of skilled staff.

Because while skills challenges haven't gone away, they've changed. And the manufacturers pulling ahead are not those avoiding the problem, but those responding to it proactively.



About our research

Context and objectives

The Rubix Uptime Index provides a periodic health check on the performance of European manufacturing. It tracks confidence across manufacturers today – revealing how well they're keeping production lines running, how much they're investing in the future of their companies, and how well they are responding to issues causing costly machine downtime across the sector. It highlights how the picture is shifting in manufacturing, what's driving decision-making and what it means for manufacturers' ability to protect uptime.

Mind the gap

In this third instalment of the Uptime Index, we're taking a deep dive into a leading cause of machine downtime: the widening skills gap.

From an ageing workforce to a lack of talent entering the market and the rapidly changing skills required to meet the digital demands of the modern factory, businesses find themselves competing for a shrinking pool of talent. It leaves many lacking the skills and knowledge needed to keep their production lines running safely and with seamless efficiency.

To get a better understanding of how human resource constraints are impacting performance, we asked our research group the following questions:

1. Do you have enough skilled staff to run smoothly and safely, with minimal downtime?
2. What's causing pressure on your workforce and problems attracting the right skills?
3. Where is the biggest impact of skills shortage felt on your day-to-day operations?
4. How are you reacting to cope with the increased pressure on skills?
5. How will you get the right skills in place to protect uptime in the years ahead?

Method

We partnered with market research agency, We Live Context, to develop the Rubix Uptime Index. As with our last survey, the Uptime Index analyses confidence across four key areas: Operations, Business, Supply, and Skills, with our new module exploring the skills gap in manufacturing in more detail.

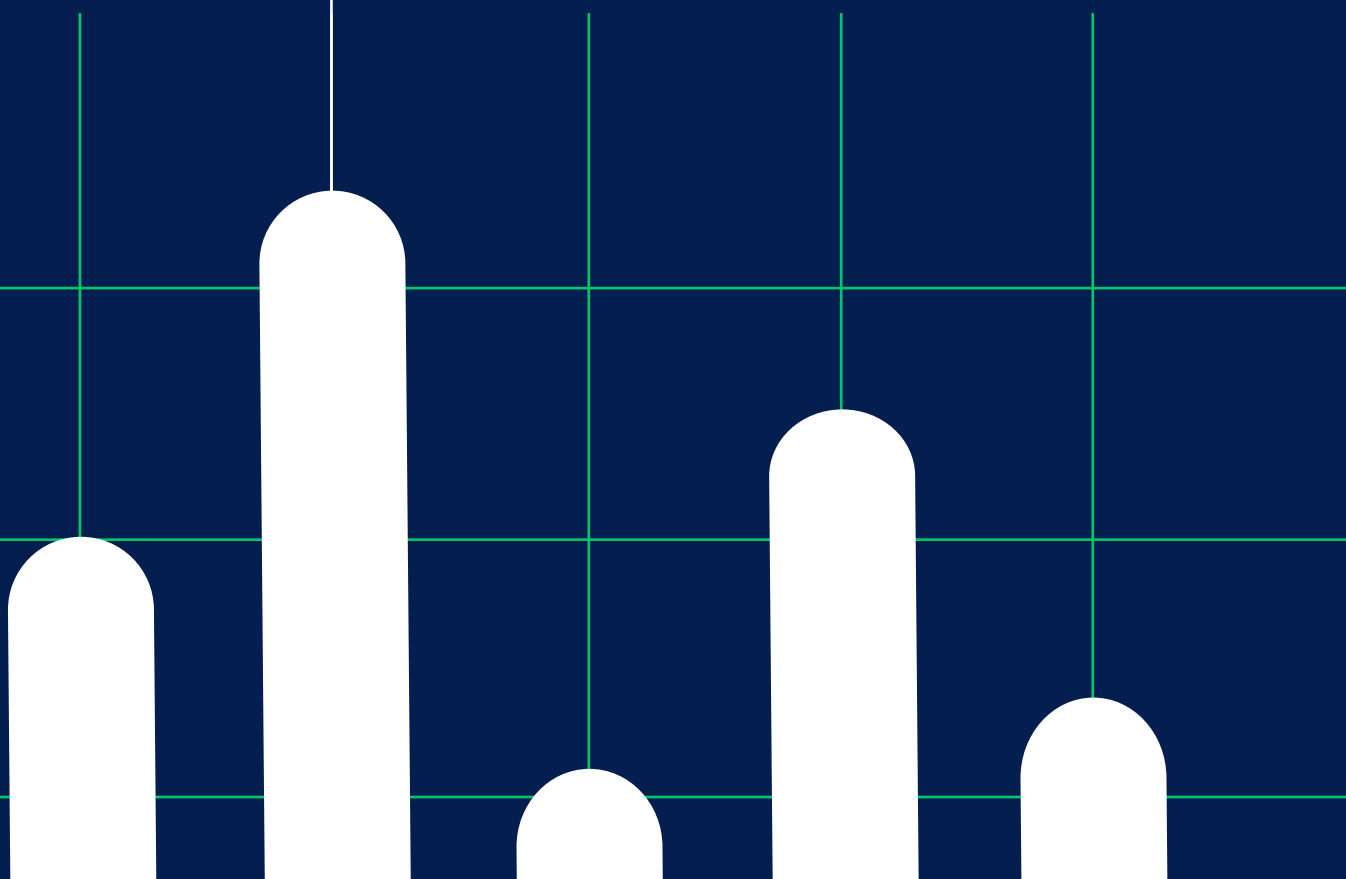
Sample

Our research included a survey of 6,800 manufacturing professionals across 20+ European markets, followed up with in-depth customer interviews for further context.





The Uptime Index



The Uptime Index

Grappling with uncertainty

From a volatile geopolitical landscape and surging energy prices to technological disruption, rising tariffs and weakening demand, manufacturers continue to face a series of complex and interconnected challenges. Disruption is the new norm.

Taking control

This ability to cope with rising volatility is reflected in a five-point rise in the Uptime Index, from 70 to 75. The macro environment has not improved. Far from being a return to more stable conditions and renewed optimism, the increase is underpinned by businesses managing volatility better, mitigating external shocks and learning to maintain machine uptime in unstable conditions.

Rubix Uptime Index for June 2026: 75

So what steps are organisations taking to protect themselves? Our research identified four key areas businesses are addressing to improve confidence in maintaining uptime:

1. Tightening operational discipline
2. Improving visibility over maintenance and inventory
3. Strengthening supplier relationships
4. Embedding digital tools and AI into everyday workflows

While the index has risen to 75, the story is not one of blanket recovery. Maintenance understanding remains high but below wave one of the Uptime Index. Management, investment and spare parts confidence have recovered to previous levels.



We hear AI everywhere and everybody is using it all the time, but there is no clear roadmap yet, so we're in a state of flux, and in a learning cycle



Senior Manager, Electrical Equipment, Germany

Skills have made the biggest leap, rising five points since wave two, not because the skills gap has disappeared, but as we'll see, because businesses are improving how they respond.





How manufacturers are meeting uncertainty head-on

Tightening operational discipline

Manufacturers that get a tighter grip on internal processes are more likely to navigate difficulties and maintain uptime in the face of external shocks.

Improving maintenance and inventory visibility

Businesses implementing better systems and controls understand their needs more clearly, see problems before they arise and can take proactive steps to keep production running.

Strengthening supplier relationships

Reliable supplier relationships help weather instability. Closer dialogue and a better understanding of supply chain bottlenecks and shortages allow manufacturers to plan repairs, source from other suppliers and make equipment and inventory last longer.

Embedding AI

As AI becomes more sophisticated, it can take up more human roles, improve oversight and predict when equipment will fail, helping plan repairs and maintain uptime.

A shrinking talent pool

While manufacturers have long grown accustomed to skills shortages, it is one area that threatens confidence in maintaining uptime.

As more people retire, highly skilled people are leaving the sector. At the same time, fewer young people are entering the industry and the skills needed in manufacturing are evolving, meaning businesses face a growing challenge to keep production lines running smoothly.

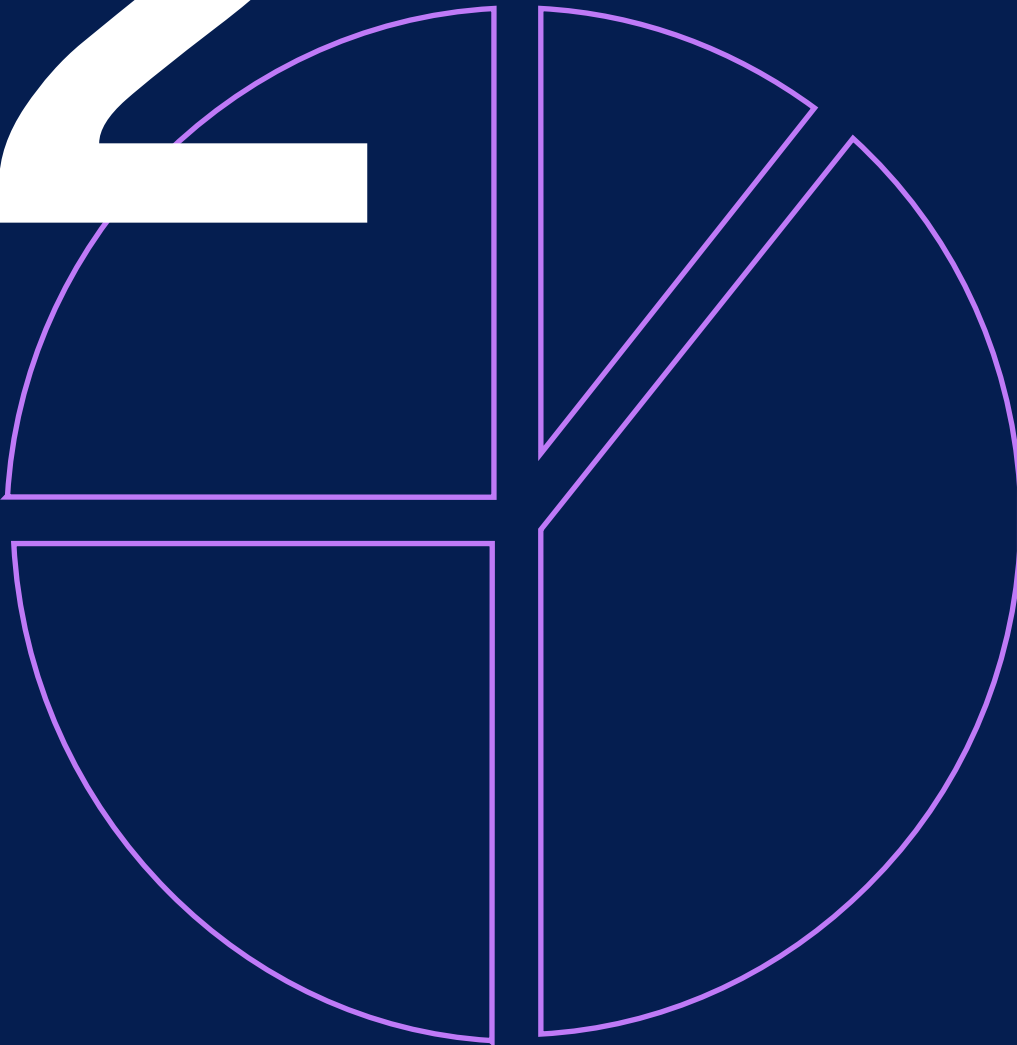
Manufacturers are being forced to achieve more with less and make the most of the skills and people already at their disposal.

We wanted to understand the challenge and how they are responding in more detail.



Causes of the skills shortage

2



Causes of the skills shortage

A universal conundrum

The ongoing pressure on skills is not an isolated experience, felt by individual companies or only seen in pockets of manufacturing. It is a challenge felt across the board. Even those that are well-staffed cite problems attracting staff when the need arises. A quarter of businesses say skills shortages are damaging uptime confidence.

25%

of manufacturers aren't confident they have enough skilled staff to maintain uptime

As more skilled people reach retirement age and leave the industry, they take valuable expertise with them. It's the top cause of skills shortfall.

» About a third of our technical workforce will retire in the next 7-10 years

Head of Resourcing and HR, Baking, UK

Not having enough people with the right skills was an issue threatening uptime for a quarter of businesses we surveyed.

Recruitment is another big challenge for 18% of manufacturers. And 14% of businesses cite fewer young people entering engineering and manufacturing as a key problem.

The challenges of a changing world

Attracting the right skills has become a structural capability problem that reflects the realities of a changing world.

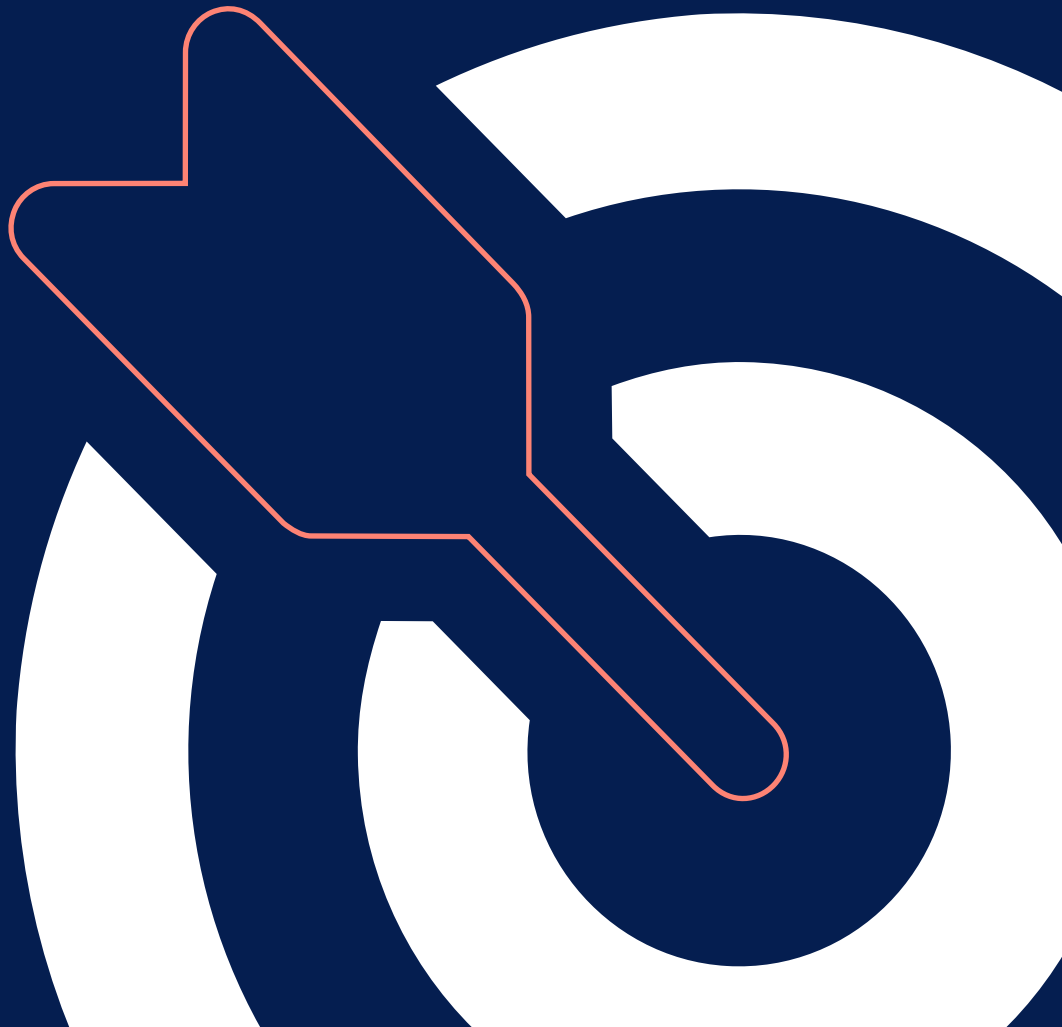
As manufacturing becomes more automated and digitised, demand for software, automation and data skills is increasing. Manufacturers now compete with technology and service sectors for the same talent pool, often at a disadvantage on flexibility and working conditions.

It is an intractable problem that will only continue to deteriorate without attention.



3

The impact of
skills shortage



The impact of skills shortage



A problem shared

Skills pressures have inevitable knock-on effects. And just as the causes are felt across the board, so too is the impact.

From delays and planned maintenance cancellations to repairs taking longer to complete when they take place, the results all point to one costly end: increased downtime.



Maintenance tasks that previously would have taken three days now often take five days

Plant Director, Metal Fabrication, Spain



With fewer skilled and knowledgeable people on the shop floor, standards slip and problems are spotted later than they should be, with 19% of businesses citing this issue.

22%

maintenance and repairs
take longer

Counting the cost

These issues indirectly affect uptime, reducing efficiency, undermining planned repairs and creating a reactive approach to maintenance and a higher risk of downtime. It all erodes profitability.

How businesses react to skills shortages determines how damaging they can be and to what extent costly downtime creeps in. And while the causes and effects of skills shortages are shared amongst manufacturers, their approaches to the problem are not.

4

Rising to
the challenge





Rising to the challenge



From skills shortages to coordinated capabilities

A key shift in the conversation is taking place, moving from “Do we have enough people?” to “Do we have the right capability system?”.

27%

of businesses are working on training and upskilling their workforce

One quarter of businesses are focused on improving the skills of their teams, and a quarter cite the need to improve coordination between business units. 18% of businesses are aiming to join systems and information better, highlighting the need for a combination of improving their people’s skills and supporting that with a better

use of technology. Manufacturers also need robust hiring pipelines to ensure a constant flow of new talent entering their business.

These longer-term approaches make companies more dynamic and less vulnerable to skills gaps.

They can help manufacturers reduce costs and become more efficient, mitigating the dependency on a shrinking pool of expertise.

Thinking outside the box

By making stronger partnerships with external specialists, organisations can source staff to fill immediate needs and build relationships to handle key business functions in the long term.

External partners are no longer just a stopgap solution. They’re an integral part of the long-term operating model, improving confidence and protecting uptime and sourcing the right skills without having to continually recruit.

A diverging approach

Two diverging responses to the skills gap are emerging:

1. Confident businesses are those that feel they have enough skilled staff to ensure sites run smoothly and safely, with minimal downtime. They are taking proactive steps to maintain operations.
2. Unconfident businesses are those struggling to address the challenge adequately, and do not feel they have enough skilled staff to ensure sites run smoothly and safely.

Confident manufacturers are more likely to invest in long-term capabilities like training and upskilling their workforce. They understand the widening skills gap and they are taking steps to mitigate the risk, improve efficiency and protect uptime.



Training and upskilling staff

37%

confident

VS

20%

unconfident



We tried to pull people out of retirement, without much success, but often this seems like our only option

Plant Manager, Food & Beverage, Italy



They're also more focused on targeted recruitment to plug skills gaps.

Putting tech to the task

Manufacturers are turning to digital tools to fill the skills void. Automation, predictive analytics

and AI are replacing outdated systems and driving efficiency, improving transparency and creating better connections across factories. Businesses investing in technology are more confident that they can keep their production lines operating.

The squeezed middle

Businesses with revenue of €500M+, leveraging bigger budgets, are understandably able to invest more. It's opening a technological advantage that will insulate their businesses, ensuring production continuity, increasing efficiency and improving operational resilience. Interestingly, at the other end of the scale, smaller businesses with revenue of <€5M also over-index in this area. More agile, less dependent on entrenched processes and faster to adopt emerging technologies, smaller manufacturers move fast to punch above their weight.

Building resilience

Confident manufacturers, big or small, share a few clear defining principles:

1. They act early rather than reactively
2. They invest in long-term capability, not just immediate fixes
3. They combine people, processes, and technology rather than relying on recruitment alone

Short-term thinking breeds a reactive maintenance culture, reinforcing problems. Reactive manufacturers are never far from crisis, fighting fires and are unable to get to grips with the skills needed to maintain uptime.

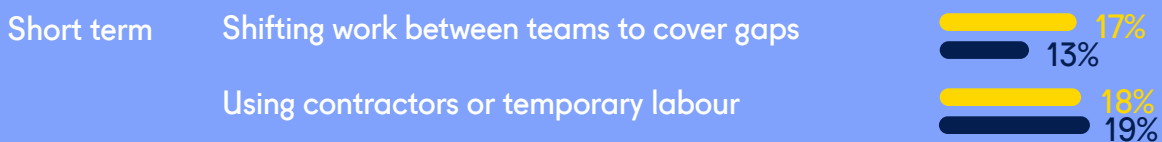
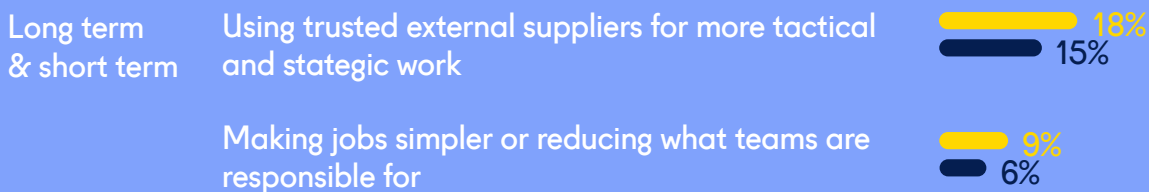
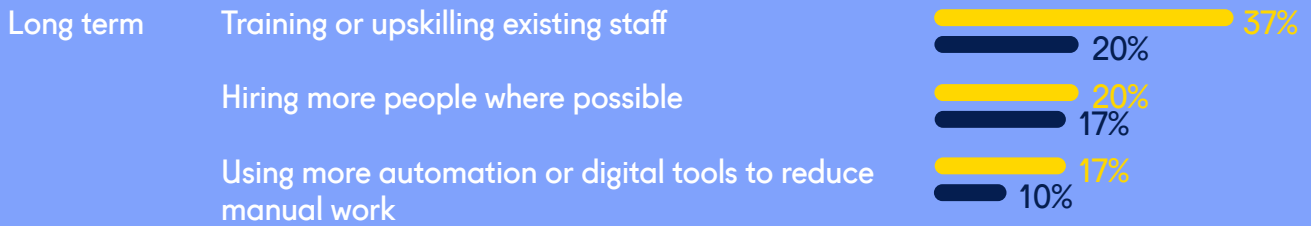
The long and short of it

Manufacturers must balance short-term needs to maintain operations today with longer-term investment and training to advance future capabilities, working across two-time horizons simultaneously.



Strategies to avoid pressure on resourcing

% split by confidence of manufacturer in skilled staffing



● More confident manufacturers
● Less confident manufacturers



Without the right people and skills, day-to-day, factories become unsafe, essential repairs are delayed, and vital tasks are missed.

Temporary labour and external expertise can help meet shortfalls. Solutions from Rubix, like repair services, Insites and stores management, can give companies access to parts and expertise needed to keep the wheels of industry turning.

15%

are looking to contractors and temporary labour to plug gaps

These short-term approaches are often essential, helping create capacity, improve flexibility, and avoid costly downtime.



We're building sustainable links with local colleges and universities, and developing options for apprenticeships, but it is a long-game that will take time to build and drive impact



Head of Resourcing and HR, Baking, UK

But businesses must also look further forward to bridge the long-term skills gap.

In the long term, manufacturers need to anticipate problems and understand how their needs will evolve, developing systems, training and investment strategies for future performance.

New technologies need new skills. And as people leave, expertise must be replaced.

The most readily available pool of talent lies within an organisation's existing workforce.

Rubix can help here too. Its scale and supplier relationships mean manufacturers can access structured training arranged directly with technical partners, building capability on the factory floor without having to source it elsewhere.



Conclusion

Putting it into practice

Simply having the right technical skills is no longer enough. They need to be paired with better communication, transparency and organisational efficiency, creating seamless collaboration between teams.

The skills gap is not going away. But far from simply being a constraint, with the right response, it can become a competitive advantage.

Better use of data, smarter, more adaptive systems, and integrating technology and people more effectively can help overcome skills shortages. It's not about using technology to replace people, but instead finding new ways to amplify the skills at your disposal.



Five steps to success

Here are five key steps organisations can take to protect uptime and build confidence.

1. Strengthen your core, not just your headcount

Confident manufacturers invest in the people they already have. Upskilling and cross-skilling teams builds resilience that lasts beyond today's pressures.

2. Don't wait for perfect – simplify and standardise

Complexity is the enemy of uptime. The more processes, systems and roles can be simplified, the less you rely on hard-to-find specialist skills.

3. Close the gaps between teams

Many of the biggest delays come from a lack of coordination. Bringing teams closer together improves decision-making and reduces friction.

4. Use external expertise more intelligently

The best businesses blend in-house capabilities and outsourced specialists, bringing in support to bridge gaps quickly.

5. Build systems that do more of the heavy lifting

Better-connected data, AI, automation: the goal isn't to replace people, it's to make every hour of skilled time go further.