

IRONBRIDGE GLOBAL

EUROPEAN MRO LEADERSHIP SERIES | PAPER 2 OF 3

02

The Certifying Cliff

Why the licensed engineer shortage is now a balance sheet risk, not an HR problem

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The operating conditions facing MRO businesses are changing faster than the leadership capabilities many organisations were built around. This series looks at three places where that gap is showing in European MRO: rationed capacity, the certifying engineer cliff, and ownership change and succession. Each paper separates the published evidence from our own view, which draws on more than 25 years of senior search across engineering-led industries.

IN BRIEF

Certifying engineers are an MRO business's sellable capacity. Every licensed B1 or B2 who retires without a replacement is hangar time you can no longer sell.

UK CAA data published by the Royal Aeronautical Society in March 2026 shows half of Part-66 licence holders are over 50 and only 4% are under 30. B1 and B2 salaries rose about 66% between 2019 and 2025.

More than half of surveyed UK Part-145 organisations regularly turn away work for lack of engineers. Some owners report active sale or closure discussions because of labour cost and availability.

The response so far, paying more to win the same experienced engineers, is a short-term fix. The businesses that come through this will treat workforce as a capacity and capital question owned at board level.

50%

UK Part-66 licence holders over 50; 22% are over 61

UK CAA data, via RAeS, March 2026

4%

UK Part-66 licence holders aged 18 to 29

UK CAA data, via RAeS, March 2026

66%

Rise in B1 and B2 licensed engineer salaries, 2019 to 2025

RAeS, March 2026

The arithmetic

The Royal Aeronautical Society's March 2026 position paper is the most detailed recent picture of the licensed engineer workforce, built on UK CAA licensing data and a survey of 48 continuing airworthiness organisations, 38 of them Part-145 MROs.

The age profile is stark. Half of Part-66 licence holders are over 50, and 22% are over 61. Only 4% are aged 18 to 29, and the number of licence holders under 29 fell by 49% between 2019 and 2026. The number under 40 has not grown at all over the same period.

Time makes it worse. It typically takes around eight years to become fully competent and effective as a Category B certifying engineer. The RAeS concludes that new hires will not reach Cat B status until 2033. The engineers who will cover the retirement wave of the next five years are, in large part, not yet in the system.

Meanwhile the pipeline is thinning. Apprenticeship registrations remain 35% below 2019 levels, two long-established independent training providers have closed in the last 18 months, and the RAeS projects a shortfall of at least 558 licensed engineers among respondents alone, which it calls a conservative underestimate.

What the UK data does and does not show

These are UK figures. They are the most detailed published picture of the licensed engineer workforce, but they do not prove that the same age profile exists across every EASA state. Read them as an indicator of direction rather than a measure of the continental shortage.

The drivers, though, are not UK-specific: retirement-heavy age profiles built up over decades, eight-year competence timelines, training capacity that has not kept pace, and post-pandemic attrition. Post-Brexit, UK and EASA Part-66 syllabi have also diverged, so engineers who want to certify under both regulators now sit duplicate exams, adding friction to a market that relied on mobility.

Defence adds new competition. EU defence spending reached €418B in 2025 and the European Defence Agency projects €454B in 2026, and military sustainment draws on the same skills. The RAeS notes the UK Ministry of Defence has already raised concern about losing military-trained engineers to higher civil salaries.

Perhaps the most telling gap is visibility. Comparable workforce data for most European markets is thin, which means few businesses can see their own retirement curve as clearly as the UK regulator now sees the national one.

Why this is a leadership problem

The financial effects are already visible. Over 55% of RAeS survey respondents regularly miss revenue because they cannot staff work, with combined losses estimated at around £79M a year. One major UK airline reports outsourcing about £58M of maintenance a year overseas for lack of domestic capacity.

Wage inflation follows. A 66% rise in B1 and B2 salaries in six years, with some now above £100,000, is outpacing what most MROs can pass through in price. Respondents told the RAeS that the pace of wage inflation threatens their financial viability and limits their ability to invest in the pipeline that would ease it. Some are discussing sale or closure. Others, mainly airlines, are buying independent MROs to secure capacity.

There is a quieter cost too. The workforce is ageing at the top and juniorising underneath. The RAeS reports 30% of mechanics are under 30, and respondents described lower productivity in specialist areas such as structural repair and maintenance planning. Human factors risk rises when experienced engineers are stretched across less experienced teams.

Put together, certifying headcount determines how much work you can sell, what it costs you, and how much safety risk you carry. That makes it a CEO, CFO and board issue.

Hiring engineers is not the same as fixing capacity

Most businesses respond to the shortage by recruiting harder for licensed engineers. That is necessary, but it treats the symptom. The lasting fix is appointing leaders who can redesign how capacity is built, and the roles that do that are often under-specified.

- **Chief People Officer as capacity officer.** Owns the retirement curve, the pipeline and retention as a capacity programme, with targets the CFO and board recognise, not just time-to-hire.
- **Head of training or academy leader.** Builds the route from apprentice to licence, in-house or with Part-147 partners, and runs it as an investment with a payback case.
- **Workforce planning lead.** Models certifying headcount by licence, type rating and retirement date against the commercial plan, so shortfalls show up years early rather than as lost work.
- **Accountable Manager and quality leadership.** Carries the human factors risk of a stretched, juniorising workforce, and needs a voice in how fast the business grows.

The difference matters when you brief a search. A CHRO hired to fill vacancies will fill vacancies. A CHRO hired to build sellable capacity will change the shape of the business.

THE IRONBRIDGE LENS

The Undefined Brief

Brief the workforce problem as an HR hire and you recruit a recruiter. Brief it as a capacity problem and you hire someone who can model the retirement curve, build a pipeline and make the investment case to the CFO. The brief decides the outcome before the search starts.

Commercial Blindness, the Undefined Brief and the Scale Illusion are the three recurring risks Ironbridge tests for in every senior appointment. This is how one of them shows up in an assessment.

ASSESSMENT IN PRACTICE

THE QUESTION	***A people leader cut time-to-hire for licensed engineers by a third at their last MRO. Did they build capacity, or win a bidding war?***
CAPABILITY TESTED	Workforce capacity design: building certifying headcount the business can sell, at a cost it can sustain.
EVIDENCE WE LOOK FOR	Apprentices and mechanics they took through to licence; retention of certifying staff over three years; wage cost per certifying hour; a training investment the CFO approved and its payback.

What the best-run businesses are doing

01	**Putting the retirement curve in the risk register**	Modelling certifying headcount by licence, type rating and retirement date, and reporting it to the board alongside capacity and revenue plans. The RAeS recommends workforce skills sit in safety management systems and risk registers.
02	**Building, not just buying**	Funding apprenticeships, academies and modular licensing pathways as capacity investment with a business case the CFO can underwrite, rather than as an HR cost line.
03	**Opening new routes in**	Recognising military training and experience, which the RAeS reports is already shortening timelines, and recruiting experienced technicians from adjacent sectors into structured conversion programmes.
04	**Retention by design**	Training agreements, licensing support, flexible shift patterns and, in some cases, accommodation. The aim is to keep the engineers you develop, not train them for a competitor.
05	**Strengthening the people leadership**	Appointing people and training leaders with the authority and commercial grounding to run workforce as a capacity programme, reporting into the executive team.

FIVE QUESTIONS FOR YOUR BOARD

1. How many of your certifying staff will retire by 2030, by licence category and type rating?
2. Is that number in your board risk register, or only in an HR spreadsheet?
3. What revenue did you turn away last year because you could not staff the work?
4. Is your training spend treated as cost or as capacity investment?
5. Does your head of people have the mandate and the seat to run this as a business programme?

About Ironbridge

Ironbridge Global is an executive search firm for engineering-led industries: construction and infrastructure, aerospace and defence. We place C-suite, board and programme leadership into the businesses that build, fly and defend, across the Middle East, the UK and Europe, and the Americas.

Every mandate is partner-led. We assess leaders against the operating reality they will inherit: the programme risk, the commercial pressure, the regulator and the board, not just the job description.

The argument running through this series is simple. The operating conditions facing MRO businesses are changing faster than the leadership capabilities many organisations were built around. Where that gap opens, it shows up first in delivery, margin and safety, and later in a leadership change nobody planned for.

THE IRONBRIDGE MRO LEADERSHIP RISK REVIEW

A confidential, one-hour discussion with a CEO, chair or investor, at no charge, built around three questions:

- **Is the current leadership team equipped for the next phase of capacity, workforce and capital pressure?**
- **Where are the most material leadership and succession vulnerabilities?**
- **Which roles or capabilities should be benchmarked against the external market before 2030?**

It is a conversation, not a recruitment proposal. Adrian Mansfield will be at MRO Europe, RAI Amsterdam, on 28 and 29 October 2026, and is holding time for these discussions there and in the weeks after.

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SOURCES

- Royal Aeronautical Society, Addressing Civil Aviation Engineering and Maintenance Personnel Shortages, Position Paper, March 2026 (including UK CAA Part-66 data)
- European Defence Agency, EU defence spending €418 billion in 2025, projected €454 billion in 2026, 16 July 2026

Figures are as reported by the sources listed. Market estimates vary by methodology; where a figure is global or UK-specific, the text says so.