LABORARE
GROUP LIMITED

Chemical Industry Recruitment Insights

Building Capability for Tomorrow

Interpreting chemical industry developments through the lens of recruitment

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Contents

An overview of the themes explored throughout this edition

From the Editor

In our first edition of Chemical Industry Recruitment Insights, one theme appeared repeatedly.

Capability.

Investment, restructuring, innovation, regulation and changing customer expectations were all influencing the knowledge and experience organisations may require in the future.

We also observed that increasing complexity does not necessarily create demand for more people. In many cases, it increases the value of experienced people who can operate across technical, commercial and operational boundaries.

This edition takes that thinking one step further.

If capability is becoming increasingly important, how is the industry building, retaining and transferring it?

That question feels particularly relevant at a time when several forces are converging.

Parts of the European chemical industry continue to restructure. Experienced workforces are ageing. Technology is changing how work is performed. Businesses are asking people to operate across increasingly complex technical and commercial environments. And the capabilities required tomorrow will not necessarily mirror those that organisations have relied upon in the past.

Chris Straker
Managing Director
Laborare Group

> "What knowledge disappears when experienced people leave?"

None of this points to one simple workforce trend.

Instead, it raises a series of longer-term questions.

What knowledge disappears when experienced people leave?

Are enough people being developed behind them?

Which capabilities can be taught, which require experience and which may need to be found externally?

And how far ahead should organisations be looking?

That is the focus of Issue 02.

This publication reflects Laborare Group's interpretation of publicly available industry reporting. It is intended to stimulate discussion about capability and recruitment trends rather than predict the plans or hiring activity of individual organisations.

Executive Brief

Building Capability for Tomorrow

The chemical industry's workforce challenge is often described in terms of skills shortages.

The reality is more complex.

Across parts of Europe, restructuring and plant closures are changing the industrial footprint. At the same time, investment continues selectively across technologies, products and geographies.

Digitalisation, sustainability, regulation and geopolitical uncertainty are also changing the environments in which people work and the decisions they are expected to make.

Against that backdrop sits another, less visible issue.

Capability takes time to build.

Technical expertise develops through education and training, but also through experience. Commercial judgement develops through exposure to customers, markets and decisions. Leadership capability develops through responsibility. Institutional knowledge accumulates over years.

That means workforce planning cannot simply begin when a vacancy appears.

This edition considers four connected challenges:

- **Protecting capability** as experienced employees leave or organisations restructure.
- **Building the pipeline** required to create tomorrow's specialists and leaders.
- **Developing broader capability** as traditional boundaries become less distinct.

- **Planning succession earlier,** particularly where specialist expertise is difficult to replace.

The question is therefore becoming broader than:

Who do we need to hire?

It is increasingly:

What capability will we need, what do we already have, what could we lose, and how will we build what comes next?

EVIDENCE BEHIND THIS OBSERVATION

These observations are based on recruitment themes across recent publicly available reporting, including investment announcements, distributor interviews, market analysis and strategic updates from across the chemical industry.

Five Recruitment Observations

shaping future workforce capability

Our analysis of recent industry developments highlights five workforce observations with longer-term implications for capability, talent and succession planning.

> "The workforce decisions being made today will shape the capabilities available tomorrow"

1

Capacity loss can also mean capability loss

European chemical restructuring is usually measured through production capacity, sites and employment. Those measures matter. But when experienced workforces disperse, organisations and regions can also lose accumulated process knowledge, technical expertise and institutional memory.

Recruitment Perspective

Mapping critical knowledge early can help organisations identify which capabilities may be hardest to replace if experienced teams disperse.

2

Tomorrow's shortage can begin with today's development decisions

Senior specialists and leaders do not appear fully formed in the labour market. They develop through junior roles, technical exposure, mentoring, responsibility and time.
Reducing those opportunities today may therefore influence the depth of the talent pool several years from now.

Recruitment Perspective

Workforce planning needs to look beyond current vacancies. Maintaining routes through which people gain technical breadth, commercial exposure and leadership responsibility helps protect the depth of the future talent pool.

3

Hybrid capability continues to grow in value

Issue 01 highlighted the increasing value of professionals able to connect technical knowledge with commercial judgement. That trend extends beyond technical-commercial roles. Regulatory, procurement, supply chain, digital and sustainability considerations increasingly overlap with traditional functional responsibilities.

Recruitment Perspective

Recruitment criteria may need to evolve with the roles themselves. Where functions increasingly overlap, organisations may gain more from identifying people who can connect disciplines than from searching for an exact match to a traditional job specification.

4

Experience creates something training alone cannot

Technical knowledge can be taught, experience adds context. Knowing what happened the last time a process failed, how a particular customer behaves under pressure, which supplier can solve an unusual problem or why previous strategy didn't work, represents a different form of organisational value.

Recruitment Perspective

Experience should be considered as organisational capability, not simply individual tenure. Identifying where critical judgement, customer knowledge and technical memory sit can help organisations plan how that knowledge is retained, transferred or ultimately replaced.

5

Succession planning is also a market intelligence question

Identifying an internal successor is one part of succession planning. Understanding the external talent landscape is another. Where does comparable capability exist? How mobile is it? How long might it take to attract? How does the market value it?

Recruitment Perspective

The earlier succession planning begins, the more options an organisation has. Proactive market mapping can reveal where comparable capability exists, how mobile that talent is likely to be and what the market is likely to require before an appointment becomes urgent.

INDUSTRY PERSPECTIVE

When Capacity Leaves, Does Capability Leave Too?

European chemical restructuring continues to attract attention.

Plant closures are understandably discussed through the language of production: tonnes of capacity, facilities affected, jobs at risk and changing cost competitiveness.

Those are important measures.

But they do not capture everything that disappears when a facility closes or an experienced team disperses.

A manufacturing site is also a concentration of knowledge.

- Process engineers understand how equipment behaves outside ideal operating conditions.
- Operators recognise subtle changes before they become larger problems.
- Technical teams understand products and applications.
- Commercial teams carry customer history and market knowledge
- Regulatory specialists understand how requirements have evolved
- Managers remember why previous decisions were made

Some of that knowledge sits in systems and procedures. Some sits with people - and the distinction matters.

Capability can be harder to rebuild than capacity.

Equipment can be purchased, facilities built and technology transferred. Rebuilding accumulated experience is harder.

That capability is not necessarily lost to the industry. People move between employers, sectors and regions, and expertise can be redistributed. But repeated restructuring raises a broader question: where does critical knowledge go when experienced teams disperse?

Recruitment Perspective

For organisations assessing future workforce requirements, headcount alone may provide an incomplete picture. Understanding where critical knowledge sits – and how easily it could be replaced – can reveal capability risks before they become recruitment problems.

Are We Quietly Reducing Tomorrow's Talent Pipeline?

The chemical industry's future capability challenge does not begin at senior level.

It begins much earlier.

Today's technical directors, plant managers, commercial leaders, regulatory specialists and application experts were once graduates, trainees and junior professionals.

Their expertise developed over time.

That matters because periods of economic uncertainty often place pressure on recruitment and development budgets.

- Junior vacancies can be postponed.
- Graduate intake can be reduced.
- Training can be delayed.
- Teams can become leaner.

Individually those decisions may be entirely rational. Collectively, however, they raise a longer-term question.

Who becomes the experienced specialist ten years from now?

The relationship between today's early-career recruitment and tomorrow's senior talent market is rarely immediate.

That is precisely why it can be overlooked.

A business can stop recruiting graduates this year without experiencing an immediate leadership shortage.

The consequence may only become visible several years later, when fewer people have accumulated the experience required to progress.

And restarting the pipeline does not immediately solve the problem.

A graduate can be recruited relatively quickly. Experience cannot.

Recruitment Perspective

Workforce planning therefore needs to consider talent depth, not simply current headcount. Where are people being given the technical exposure, customer experience, project responsibility and leadership opportunities that allow future capability to develop?

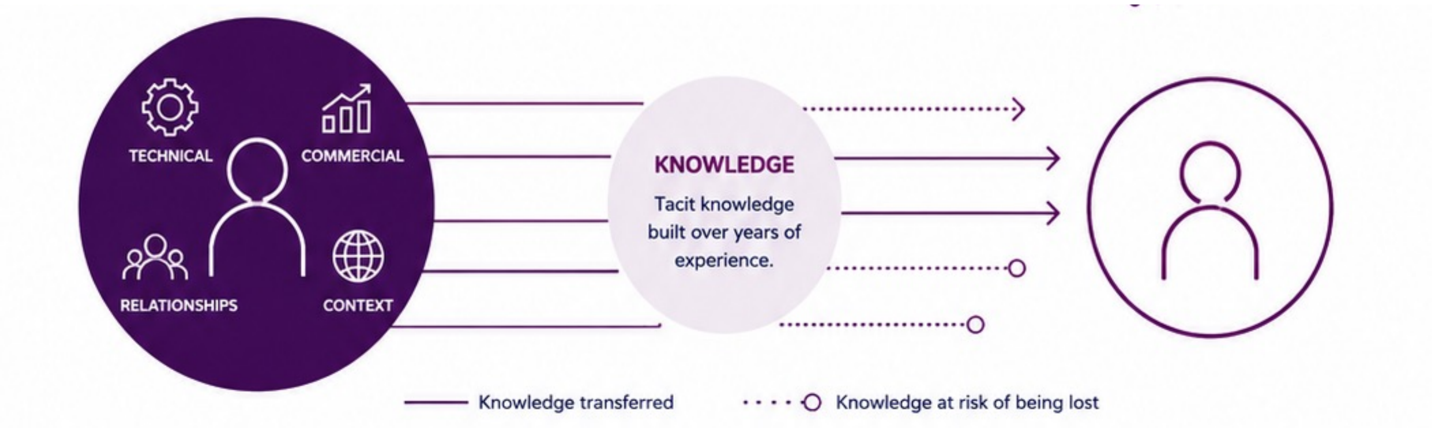
Because tomorrow's experienced talent market is being created now.

When Experience Walks Out of the Door

Retirement makes the distinction between headcount and capability particularly visible.

When someone leaves after twenty or thirty years, an organisation can fill the position.

Replacing the accumulated experience is harder.



They know not only what happens, but why.

- Why a particular customer relationship needs careful handling.
- Why one production route works better than another despite what the process sheet suggests.
- Why a previous product launch struggled.
- Why a supplier that appears expensive can sometimes be the safer choice.
- Why a particular market behaves differently from another.

This is often described as **tacit knowledge** – knowledge acquired through experience that can be difficult to capture fully in manuals, systems or formal settings.

That makes knowledge transfer more than a handover exercise.
It can involve mentoring, overlapping responsibilities, deliberate exposure to decision-making and giving less experienced employees enough time to understand not only the role, but the judgement behind it.

Recruitment Perspective

The earlier organisations identify where critical knowledge is concentrated, the more opportunity they have to build overlap, develop successors and transfer experience before a departure creates a capability gap. **A vacancy can be filled. Experience has to be rebuilt.**

FUTURE CAPABILITY

The Rise of Hybrid Talent

Issue 01 observed that technical-commercial professionals are becoming increasingly valuable as organisations bridge product knowledge with commercial decision-making.

The wider trend may be more significant still.

Many roles across the chemical industry are becoming harder to define within traditional functional boundaries.

Technical expertise remains fundamental.

But increasingly it sits alongside other forms of understanding.

01 **A chemist** may also need confidence with data

02 **A commercial professional** may require meaningful applications knowledge

03 **A regulatory specialist** may need to understand how regulation influences portfolio and commercial strategy

04 **A procurement leader** may need to balance cost against supply resilience, sustainability and geopolitical exposure

05 **A technical leader** may increasingly need to translate innovation into customer and commercial value

“These are not necessarily entirely new jobs.
Often they are existing roles operating in a more complex environment.”

And that distinction is important.

Hybrid talent does not mean replacing specialists with generalists.

Deep expertise
remains valuable

The shift is towards specialists who can understand how their expertise connects with other parts of the organisation.

The value lies in the combination.

From Expertise to Judgement

As roles broaden, another capability becomes increasingly important.

Judgement.

Organisations have access to more information than ever before.

Data, market intelligence, digital tools and AI can all improve visibility.

But information does not make the decision. People do.

And in complex markets, the right answer is not always obvious.

A procurement decision may require balancing immediate cost against supply security

A commercial decision may involve customer value, margin, strategic importance and long-term relationships

A regulatory issue may change the attractiveness of a product or market.

A technical decision may carry commercial consequences

Judgement Determines which consideration should carry the greatest weight

Expertise informs the decision. Judgement determines how competing considerations are weighed.

That requires judgement developed through experience, context and exposure to decisions.

This becomes particularly important as organisations seek to simplify structures or move decision-making closer to customers and markets.

Empowerment only works when the people receiving greater authority have the capability to use it.

Recruitment Perspective

CVs are good at describing experience.
They are less effective at demonstrating judgement.
For senior and specialist appointments, understanding **how somebody has made decisions** may therefore be as important as understanding which responsibilities they have held.

How Early is Early Enough?

Succession planning is often associated with identifying the next person for a senior position.

But the more difficult question may come before that.

What are you actually trying to replace?

- [x] Customer knowledge
- [x] Technical credibility
- [x] Supplier relationships
- [x] International market experience
- [x] Commercial judgement
- [x] Institutional memory
- [x] Leadership influence

Replacing the title does not automatically replace the combination.

And the organisation may not need an identical successor anyway.

The business environment five years from now may require different capabilities from the environment in which the incumbent developed.

That means effective succession planning needs to look both inward and outward

Internally:

- Who has the potential to develop?
- What experience do they still need?
- Where are the gaps?
- How long will development realistically take?

Externally:

- Where does comparable capability exist?
- How scarce is it?
- How geographically mobile is it?
- What would make somebody consider moving?
- And how long might the recruitment process take?

> "Knowing that talent exists does not mean it will be accessible when you need it.

For highly specialised positions, that makes **external market visibility useful well before a vacancy exists.**

Not because an organisation necessarily intends to recruit immediately. But because **the earlier it understands the market, the more options it has.**

Build, Transfer or Buy?

Not every capability gap should result in recruitment.

That is perhaps one of the most important distinctions in workforce planning. When organisations identify a future requirement, there are several possible responses.

01 Build it.

Develop capability internally through training, experience, mentoring and progression.

02 Transfer it.

Capture and share knowledge already held within the organisation before it disappears.

03 Redesign it.

Consider whether responsibilities should remain within the same role or be distributed differently as the organisation evolves.

04 Buy it.

Recruit externally where the required capability cannot realistically be developed within the necessary timeframe.

The correct answer will differ by organisation and by role.

- But understanding which problem exists matters.
- A skills problem is not necessarily a recruitment problem.
- A succession problem is not necessarily solved by an external hire.
- And a vacancy does not always mean replacing like-for-like.

Recruitment Perspective

The most effective workforce planning may therefore begin with capability rather than jobs.

What will the organisation need to be able to do – and how will it acquire that ability?

A Market Moving in Different Directions

One message from Issue 01 remains important: the chemical industry should not be treated as a single homogeneous market.

In July we described a picture of investment alongside restructuring, innovation alongside operational efficiency, and opportunity alongside economic uncertainty.

That remains an important backdrop to the capability discussion.

Across Europe, restructuring and competitive pressures remain significant. Elsewhere investment continues in selected technologies, markets and applications.

Supply-chain resilience, regulation, sustainability and geopolitical uncertainty continue to influence organisational decisions.

And specialist areas continue to place a premium on technical, regulatory and commercially relevant expertise.

The recruitment implication is therefore unlikely to be a simple story of either increasing or decreasing headcount.

Instead, capability is being redistributed

- Some expertise may become available as organisations restructure.
- Other capability becomes harder to access as specialist requirements increase.
- Some roles may disappear.
- Others may broaden.
- And new combinations of expertise may become more valuable than traditional job descriptions suggest.

Recruitment Perspective

Looking beyond immediate vacancies can help organisations understand how the talent market around them is changing. Where is capability becoming more available? Where is it becoming scarcer? Which roles are broadening, and which combinations of expertise are becoming harder to find?

That visibility can inform workforce, succession and development decisions before a recruitment need becomes urgent.

Looking Ahead

Perhaps the most important workforce question facing the chemical industry is not whether there will be enough people.

It is whether the industry is building the **right capability** for what comes next.

That capability does not appear overnight.

It develops through education, experience, exposure, mentoring, responsibility and opportunity.

It is also vulnerable.

- It can disappear through retirement
- It can disperse through restructuring
- It can weaken when development pipelines narrow
- It can become obsolete when roles evolve faster than the people within them.

For organisations, this creates a different way of thinking about workforce planning.

Not simply:

Which roles will we need to fill?

But:

- What capability will we need?
- What do we already have?
- What are we at risk of losing?
- What can we develop or transfer internally?
- What might we eventually need to find elsewhere?

The organisations asking those questions early will have more options.

Because by the time capability becomes a vacancy, some of those options may already have disappeared.

About Laborare Group

Laborare Group is a specialist recruitment partner to the global chemical industry, supporting manufacturers, distributors and specialty ingredient businesses across international markets.

We support organisations with specialist recruitment, executive search and talent intelligence, helping clients identify and secure the capability they need. To discuss how we can support your talent strategy, **please get in touch.**

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