

When skills shortages get real: Why AI and talent are now a dual imperative for lab suppliers



Jacqueline Balian, GAMBICA

The message coming out of the GAMBICA conference in March was hard to ignore: the AI revolution is no longer something to watch from the sidelines. It is already reshaping the competitive landscape for lab suppliers, and the gap between those embracing it and those hesitating is growing quickly.

The tools are advancing faster than the organisations trying to use them.

Delegates were presented with a mix of cautionary and inspiring examples showing just how fast AI is advancing and how tangible its productivity benefits have become. What stood out in the discussions afterwards was not scepticism, but urgency. Many companies are now actively looking at where AI can relieve pressure points in their operations - automating routine work, improving efficiency, and allowing skilled staff to focus on more valuable tasks. There is also a clear expectation that more practical guidance will be needed, something GAMBICA is preparing to support.

But recognising the opportunity is one thing; acting on it is another. Many organisations find themselves in a difficult position. Leadership teams often feel they are playing catch-up, lacking the technical grounding to confidently steer AI adoption. At the same time, newer recruits - while comfortable with digital tools - do not always bring the depth of industry knowledge or procedural discipline required in laboratory and engineering environments. The result is a subtle but important disconnect: the tools are

advancing faster than the organisations trying to use them.

This challenge becomes particularly visible when looking at field service, where pressures have been building for some time. Demand has risen sharply, with service requirements increasing by nearly 40% over the past five years. Much of this appears to be driven by a shift in customer behaviour. Many end users are scaling back their own technical capabilities and relying more heavily on suppliers for support, effectively transferring responsibility for maintenance, troubleshooting, and performance optimisation.

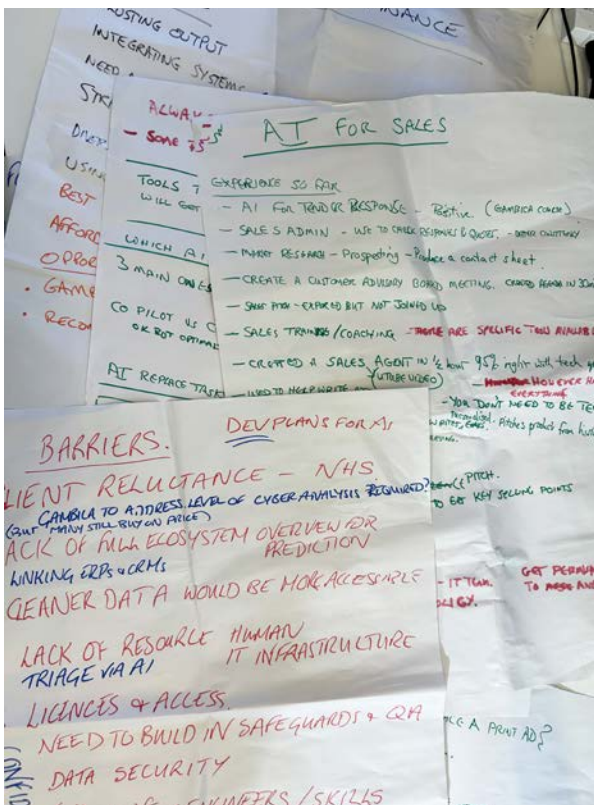
For lab suppliers, this changes the nature of competition. Service is no longer just an add-on; it is central to the value proposition. Customers are making purchasing decisions based not only on the quality of instruments and systems, but on the confidence that those systems will be supported effectively over time.

The difficulty, of course, is that the people needed to deliver that support are in short supply. A large majority of companies report ongoing challenges in recruiting field service engineers, and for a significant minority this is already affecting their ability to meet customer expectations. In some cases, it is even constraining growth, as businesses turn down opportunities they cannot confidently support.

The reasons behind this are not surprising, but they are becoming more acute. There are simply fewer candidates with the right mix of technical expertise and practical experience. Those who do exist are in a strong position to negotiate, pushing up salary expectations and often preferring roles that do not require relocation or extensive travel. Competition between employers is intense, and the UK appears to be particularly exposed, with higher support demands than many other regions.

Even when companies do manage to recruit, the challenge does not end there. Training and development are proving equally complex. Several organisations note that younger entrants are less inclined toward field-based roles, particularly those involving travel and time away from home. At the same time, fewer people are coming through traditional engineering pathways, and a substantial cohort of experienced engineers is approaching retirement. Without effective knowledge transfer, there is a real risk that critical expertise will simply fade away.

Some companies are finding success with apprenticeships and structured training programmes, but this is not universal. Smaller organisations, in particular, often



struggle to invest at the scale required to build a sustainable talent pipeline.

Taken together, these trends point to a deeper shift underway. Lab suppliers are not just dealing with a skills shortage; they are navigating a structural change in how capability is built and delivered. AI has the potential to ease some of this pressure by improving productivity and supporting less experienced staff, but it is not a substitute for expertise. In highly technical, regulated environments, human judgement and experience remain essential.

What is becoming clear is that AI and talent strategy can no longer be treated separately. The organisations that move forward successfully will be those that find ways to combine the two—using technology to amplify human capability while investing deliberately in the skills they cannot afford to lose.

For those that get this balance right, the current challenges may yet become a source of competitive advantage. For those that do not, the risk is less subtle: being left behind as the industry moves on.

Strong UK showing at analytica 2026

analytica 2026 in Munich (24–27 March), is one of the most popular exhibitions for GAMBICA members to show their innovations, and find new clients and distributors.

This year GAMBICA supported UK companies exhibiting by hosting a British Pavilion and early feedback from participants was strongly positive, with exhibitors reporting high footfall and a strong pipeline of viable international leads.

Companies highlighted the quality of visitors and the breadth of overseas contacts, as well as the opportunity to reconnect with peers across the wider analysis and laboratory community. Several reported productive conversations throughout the week, generating follow-up meetings and enquiries beyond their existing networks. One participant said the experience ‘exceeded expectations’, adding that it ‘could be very lucrative, with the potential to double our turnover’.

Feedback on the British Pavilion itself was particularly strong. Members made extensive use of the lounge and meeting areas for customer discussions, and welcomed the on-stand hospitality, with one exhibitor noting they ‘loved [the] drinks facility’ and another commenting that it ‘saved my life’.

A straw poll of other GAMBICA members exhibiting elsewhere in the show echoed these views, citing both the quantity and quality of visitors - an improvement on 2024 and an encouraging sign for post-pandemic international events.

GAMBICA’s on-site support was widely praised. Exhibitors said, that GAMBICA ‘takes a lot of stress away compared with doing it on your own; it definitely simplifies things’.



Practical help with set-up and snagging issues was singled out as especially valuable. Nearly all companies said they would return, describing the event as a strong investment and the pavilion as a ‘really big asset’ with a ‘friendly atmosphere’ that supports camaraderie.

Messe München also briefed exhibitors on upcoming analytica events, including analytica China (Shanghai, November) and the planned return of analytica USA in Boston, 2–4 November 2027. GAMBICA has options to take pavilions at all these events, so if you would like to participate, get in touch with Kirsty.roberts@gambica.org.uk



Read, Share and Comment on this Article, visit: www.labmate-online.com