

Industry 5.0: The Future of Work Is a Choice

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BRIDGES 5.0 FINAL MASTERCLASS - 11th September 2026

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The final BRIDGES 5.0 Masterclass brought researchers, business practitioners and workplace innovators together to ask a deceptively simple question: how can Europe turn the promise of human-centric, sustainable and resilient industry into everyday practice?

A vision in search of practice

Industry 5.0 is often introduced through three ambitions: human centricity, sustainability and resilience. Yet the masterclass quickly exposed the distance between an appealing policy formula and the difficult choices faced by firms, workers and institutions. The discussion resisted the idea that Industry 5.0 is simply the next wave of automation. Instead, it treated technology as one ingredient in a much larger transformation of work, power, learning and social value.

One of the strongest challenges came from the argument that the firm is not the place where Industry 5.0 is completed. A company can contribute to a human-centric, sustainable and resilient society, but it cannot deliver that society alone. At company level, the three pillars may conflict: a decision that strengthens short-term resilience may damage job quality, while a sustainability investment may be postponed because its return is hard to express through conventional measures. At societal level, however, the pillars can be designed to reinforce one another. This shift in perspective changes the task for policymakers and researchers: not merely to describe desirable outcomes, but to identify arrangements that work for

businesses, workers and society together.

Technology does not choose the outcome

A recurring insight was that technology is neither neutral nor deterministic. New tools do not automatically create better jobs, greater equality or stronger organisations. Nor are damaging outcomes inevitable. Results depend on how technology is introduced, who participates in its design and whether the organisation has the capacity to learn from its use.

The masterclass gave this idea a practical name: the learning capacity of the organisation. This is more than training individuals to operate a machine. It means creating routines and relationships through which people can question, experiment, share knowledge and improve work together. Research discussed during the event suggested that when technology adoption is combined with strong organisational learning, the benefits can spread across productivity, wages, equality and resilience. Technology investment without that capacity risks reproducing old problems at greater speed.

Leadership without all the answers

The most vivid examples came from lived experience in manufacturing. Co-creation was described not as a workshop technique but as a different way of leading. Managers set a clear frame – quality, delivery, competitiveness and the future of the business – then invite employees to diagnose problems and develop solutions. The answer may take time to emerge, but when it does, the people closest to the work own both the insight and its implementation.

This implies a profound shift from management as control to leadership as coaching, facilitation and trust-building. Middle managers are often caught between long-term transformation and daily operational pressure. They cannot simply be blamed for preserving old habits; organisations must train, support and reward them for developing people, enabling participation and managing uncertainty. As administrative tasks are increasingly automated, the choice becomes sharper: use the time released to deepen human leadership, or use the technology merely to reduce layers of management and intensify control.

Learning must be built into work

The panel challenged the familiar idea that learning finishes when formal education ends. Lifelong learning must be embedded in jobs and work systems. Cross-training, job rotation and shared problem-solving help people understand the wider production process, strengthen resilience when colleagues are absent and reveal connections between departments that would otherwise remain hidden. They also create opportunities for employees to discover capabilities they may not have recognised in themselves.

Education has a complementary role: shaping the mindset of future engineers, managers and specialists before they enter positions of authority. Technical excellence remains essential, but it should be connected to social challenges, diversity, climate, ethics and the organisational conditions for innovation. The goal is not to hand graduates a fixed recipe for Industry 5.0, but to equip them to ask better questions and design context-specific answers.

The missing conversation about power

The discussion also refused to reduce change to good management practice. Decades of evidence show that high-quality jobs can support high performance, yet exemplary workplaces remain a minority. Knowledge alone has not shifted the dial. Questions of morality, bargaining power and the priority given to shareholder returns continue to shape whether technology enriches work or fragments it.

Social dialogue emerged as essential, particularly when artificial intelligence and digital systems alter roles, autonomy and surveillance. Agreements at European, national and company level can establish a right to consultation and technology assessment before implementation. But frameworks on paper are not enough. Their value depends on translation into the workplace, through works councils, unions, employers, researchers, consultants and public institutions capable of speaking both the language of policy and the language of production.

Hope, with conditions

The closing mood was neither technological optimism nor defeatism. Every wave of innovation creates better jobs for some and worse jobs for others. But the masterclass also offered credible grounds for hope: younger workers expect a stronger voice; leading firms are proving that participation and performance can reinforce each other; and AI could create time for distinctly human work – learning, judgement, conversation and care – if organisations choose to use it that way.

- **Treat Industry 5.0 as a strategic and societal project, not a branding exercise.**
- **Invest in organisational learning as deliberately as in technology.**
- **Redesign management roles around coaching, participation and trust.**
- **Build lifelong learning, cross-skilling and reflection into everyday work.**
- **Use social dialogue to shape technology before decisions become irreversible.**
- **Measure success through human, ecological and resilience outcomes as well as short-term output.**

There is no universal blueprint for Industry 5.0. Its meaning will be settled through thousands of choices about technology, job design, management and voice. The decisive question is not whether machines become more capable, but whether people gain greater capacity to learn, contribute and influence the future of their work. Nobody is the smartest alone; the smartest future is the one created together.

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