People First, Technology Second: Key Lessons from the BRIDGES 5.0 Industry Masterclass

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This article is based on the BRIDGES 5.0 Masterclass webinar held on 12 June 2026. Speakers: Giorgos Metaxiotis (Atheon Engineering), Evagoras Zervas (Trygons SA), Martina Wolfgruber (Infineon), John Roulstone (Kirchhoff Automotive Ireland).

What does it take to lead a successful Industry 5.0 transformation? That question sat at the heart of the latest BRIDGES 5.0 Masterclass webinar, which brought together managers and practitioners from across European manufacturing to share real-world experiences of navigating the shift towards human-centric, sustainable, and resilient industry. Four speakers — from an innovation technology firm, a composite manufacturing SME, a global semiconductor company, and an automotive stamping plant — offered strikingly consistent answers. Across very different organisational contexts, the same lesson emerged again and again: the biggest challenge of Industry 5.0 is not the technology. It is the people.

Industry 5.0 Is Not Just an Upgrade of Industry 4.0

Before diving into individual stories, moderator Karolien Lenaerts (VIVA Kevin) set the conceptual scene. Industry 5.0, as understood within the BRIDGES project, is a deliberate complement to the automation-and-efficiency logic of Industry 4.0. Its three pillars — **human centricity, sustainability, and resilience** — represent a broadened definition of industrial success, one that asks companies to measure value not only in productivity and profit, but in how well people and technology work together.

This framing was echoed throughout the day by every speaker. It is a vision of technology designed around people, rather than people forced to adapt to technology.

Knowing Where You Stand: The Prospects 5.0 Assessment Platform

Giorgos Metaxiotis (Atheon Engineering) opened the presentations by introducing a practical tool developed within the Prospects 5.0 project: a digital self-assessment platform that helps organisations understand how far along the Industry 5.0 path they already are — and what practical steps they need to take next.

The platform guides companies through a structured questionnaire covering all three Industry 5.0 pillars, as well as digital readiness and organisational culture. It produces two key scores: an **alignment score** (are you thinking in an Industry 5.0 way?) and an **implementation score** (how much are you actually doing today?). Results are benchmarked against industry averages and peer companies, giving organisations a clear sense of where they stand relative to others.

An AI chatbot assistant is now being developed to complement the platform. As the chatbot learns from more assessment inputs, it will generate increasingly personalised recommendations, functioning as a roadmap that guides companies from their current position towards stronger Industry 5.0 performance. The platform is already live and open to companies wishing to assess themselves.

Start with Real Problems, Not Technology Strategies

Evagoras Zervas (Trygons SA) offered one of the most grounded accounts of the day, describing how a 20-person Greek composites manufacturer used Industry 5.0 principles to tackle genuine production pressures — without ever setting out to “do Industry 5.0.”

Trygons’ transformation, he emphasised, was **driven by production needs, not technology strategy**. Entry into automotive manufacturing brought demands for repeatability, traceability, and measurability that the company’s maritime roots had never required. Quality failures, operator strain from hazardous environments (such as gel coating with toxic fumes), and production bottlenecks that exposed the limits of what operators could handle on their own — these were the starting points.

The company’s response was methodical: identify a concrete problem, find or

develop a targeted digital response, measure the effect, and gather operator feedback. Technologies deployed included digital twins for process monitoring, AI-based quality tools, machine vision, predictive maintenance, and augmented reality for operator guidance and onboarding.

The central lesson Zervas shared is one that resonates across all four presentations: **do not start with technology — start with problems**. Listen to operators, technicians, and production managers to identify what is actually going wrong, then select the right digital tool to address it. Connecting individual pilots into a coherent transformation roadmap — rather than implementing isolated technologies — is what makes the difference between genuine change and expensive experiments that go nowhere.

For SMEs particularly, Zervas noted that participation in the Prospects 5.0 network had been invaluable: access to researchers, benchmarking against peers, and the reassurance that gradual, use-case-driven transformation is achievable without a large R&D budget.

Technology Succeeds Only When People Accept It

Martina Wolfgruber (Infineon) delivered perhaps the session's most direct challenge to conventional thinking about digital transformation. As someone responsible for skills and workforce strategy across the semiconductor giant's EMEA operations, she has watched ambitious technology investments founder — not because the technology failed, but because the people using it never truly embraced it.

Her core message was unambiguous: **one of the biggest misconceptions in digital transformation is the belief that new technology creates change automatically. It does not. The people using it create the change.**

At Infineon, this realisation led to a fundamental reframing. Workforce acceptance is no longer treated as a "soft factor." It has become a business factor. Workers who do not understand or trust a new system will ignore it. Resistance is not an obstacle to be overcome by better communication after the fact; it is a design problem to be solved by involving people from the very beginning.

Wolfgruber identified four key principles her team now operates by:

1. Involve people early and listen genuinely. When employees understand why change is happening and have a hand in shaping it, adoption is significantly faster and more successful.

2. Technology should adapt to people — not the other way around. This means designing solutions around actual workflows and concerns, not expecting workers to accommodate whatever the technology requires.

3. The biggest challenge ahead is not technology — it is talent, skills, and acceptance. Technical innovation without corresponding workforce investment does not accelerate transformation; it creates friction that can destroy it.

4. No organisation can solve this alone. Success requires ecosystem-level collaboration: industry, education providers, researchers, and policymakers working together. The collaborative European projects Infineon participates in — including BRIDGES — are not peripheral to the company's transformation strategy. They are central to it.

On the practical question of how to start, Wolfgruber was refreshingly direct: it does not require a large programme. A simple survey, an informal conversation, an internal idea-sharing call — small things that cost almost nothing but build the trust that makes everything else possible. Early adopters sharing their experience with sceptical colleagues ("peer learning") moves faster than formal training. Small wins build more momentum than grand programmes.

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16 Years of Human-Centric Manufacturing: A Roadmap in Practice

John Roulstone (Kirchhoff Automotive, Ireland) brought the longest view to the discussion — a 16-year journey of deliberate, incremental transformation at a small automotive stamping plant in Letterkenny, Ireland, employing around 40 people.

His story is particularly instructive because it shows human centricity not as a value statement but as a **survival strategy**. Competing for new business against the company's own Eastern European sister plants, the Irish facility could not win on labour cost. Its route to competitiveness had to run through quality, efficiency, and the deep engagement of a stable, experienced workforce.

The journey began in 2008, when management and the trade union jointly established a steering committee (KISC) with equal representation from both sides. That committee — and the trust it embodied — became the foundation for everything that followed.

Key milestones included:

- **2010**: Introduction of a data collection system met with resistance — not to the technology itself, but to a lack of IT skills. The committee identified the real problem; the company responded with a basic IT course. Resistance evaporated.
- **2012–2016**: New business, just-in-time production, and the introduction of high-volume manufacturing processes drove the need for new mindsets around machine availability, not just parts per hour.
- **2017**: Inspired by Scandinavian autonomous team models, the maintenance and tool shop departments were restructured with flat hierarchies and no team leaders — a model that continues to this day.
- **2019**: Quality processes were fully digitalised, with operators made 100% responsible for their own quality checks, feeding results directly into a live database with automatic flagging of deviations.
- **2020**: Digital daily huddles replaced traditional floor briefings, giving all operators real-time, transparent access to shift performance data.
- **2024**: Autonomous production teams of five operators — with no team leader, reporting directly to the production manager — were introduced, supported by digital planning boards and the SAP warehouse management system.

Roulstone’s account of rolling out a lean production system with German consultants from Porsche Consultancy — “German consultants rolling out a Japanese production system in Ireland” — and the initial failure that resulted, is a vivid illustration of why cultural fit matters as much as technical design. The programme only took hold when the approach shifted: bringing people in, running workshops where everyone had a say, and building the system from the bottom up.

Looking ahead, the challenge is evolving again. Human capital in manufacturing is increasingly scarce. The company’s response is to reskill its operators as technicians — people capable of managing, programming, and debugging automated systems. The direction of travel is upward, not sideways.

The Emerging Consensus: What Managers Need to Know

Across the four presentations and the discussion that followed, a set of consistent messages emerged for managers navigating Industry 5.0 transformation:

Transformation is not technology-led — it is problem-led. Start by listening to operators about what is genuinely hard, dangerous, or inefficient. Let real production needs drive the choice of technology, not the reverse.

Operators must be involved from the start, not told about changes after the fact. Early involvement reduces resistance, generates better solutions, and creates the sense of ownership that makes new systems stick.

Acceptance is a business factor, not a soft one. Technology that workers do not trust will not be used. The cost of underestimating adoption is not just slow uptake — it can destroy the value of the investment entirely.

Small wins beat big programmes. In a fast-moving environment, a six-week IT course, a coffee conversation, or a simple idea-sharing session can unlock more transformation than an expensive rollout with external consultants.

Connect the dots — don’t just pilot technologies in isolation. Individual digital tools create limited value. The real transformation comes from integrating them into a coherent roadmap, with data flowing across the organisation.**No company does this alone.** Whether through trade union partnerships, European research consortia, or industry networks, the most successful transformations draw on external knowledge, benchmarking, and collaboration.

Looking Ahead

The BRIDGES 5.0 project will hold its final **conference** on 2 October 2026 in Brussels, at the Royal Library of Belgium, under the title **From vision to action: Unleashing Skills for Industry 5.0**. The conference will bring together the themes explored throughout the masterclass series and offer a platform for further exchange across industry, research, and policy. The consistent message from this masterclass: the future of Industry 5.0 belongs to organisations that treat their

people not as users of technology, but as the reason technology exists.

For recordings and presentations of our events please see recordings page

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