

WHAT THE ROOM SAID

Q2 2026

A recurring intelligence brief on engineering leadership

Each quarter, BairesDev poses a single question to a room of 40+ senior US technology leaders: sitting CTOs, Chief AI Officers, Chief Quantum Officers, and founders making these calls inside their own companies right now. In this edition, 26 of them answered candidly under Chatham House Rule. What follows is what decision makers are saying to each other.

THE QUESTION WE PUT TO THE ROOM

The industry has cut tens of thousands of junior engineering roles in the past 18 months. In five years, where do your senior engineers come from? Who inherits the institutional knowledge being written off today?

"The decrease in junior engineering roles across the industry is well documented, and pervasive across technical teams. These have largely been due to the increased value realization and ROI unlock from increased capacity creation through the use of AI tools. In future, the expectation is that mid-level engineering roles could be disrupted as well, as AI tools grow in sophistication. This is, of course, contingent on the pace of evolution of AI continuing with the same growth trajectory as today."

— Arun Nandi, Chief Data & AI Officer

"Senior engineers will come from the few organizations that kept investing when it wasn't fashionable. Everyone else will be hiring 'seniors' and wondering why judgment, ownership, and institutional memory are so hard to find."

— Rajesh Rudraradhya, CTO

"Our most recent data shows a rise in junior engineering hiring. Hiring them in five years will cost twice as much. A lower cost per hire is to bring them in as a junior and make sure they're a culture fit."

— Amanda Richardson, CEO

"What's changing isn't just the volume of junior roles, but the shape of early-career development. The traditional gradual on-ramp is giving way to a much steeper curve. Junior engineers are increasingly dropped into higher-leverage problems earlier, supported by AI tooling, better abstractions, and tighter feedback loops. Those who adapt will progress faster; those who don't will struggle to find footing."

— Christine Richardson, CTO

THE ROOM CONCLUDES

Every respondent agrees the traditional route to senior engineer is changing. The room splits three ways on what comes next:

CAMP 1

The Apprenticeship Advantage

Senior engineers are made, not bought. Apprenticeship, code review, incident response, and exposure to production are how judgment gets built. Cut the bottom of the funnel and the senior pipeline thins quietly until it breaks. No juniors today means no mid-levels in three to five years. Some companies are hiring now to avoid paying twice for the same talent later.

CAMP 2

Path Redesign

Juniors stay, but the work changes from stack fluency to domain fluency. The old junior role of boilerplate, ticket triage, and framework lookup is being absorbed by AI. The answer isn't fewer juniors. It's a redesigned entry path where onboarding shifts from the codebase to the customer and the business itself. Domain knowledge compounds while stacks turn over.

CAMP 3

Seniority, Redefined

As execution moves to AI, value moves upstream. Tomorrow's senior engineer is an agentic orchestrator who manages fleets of AI agents rather than rising through manual coding. Institutional knowledge gets encoded into systems of record and domain-specific models. Seniority becomes the ability to audit and direct a digital workforce, not a function of years served.

THE SHARPEST TENSION

Leaders disagree on whether the pipeline is even broken. One view: AI productivity is masking a slow erosion of capacity, and the metrics look fine right now, which is exactly why nobody is acting. The other: the cuts narrative is imprecise. What's actually happening is headcount freezes, not active junior elimination, and several companies are still hiring. A related open question is where the disruption stops. Several leaders warn the front line keeps moving up the org chart, with mid-level roles next as AI tools mature.

THE FORWARD VIEW

Junior hiring is not uniformly down. IBM tripled US entry-level hiring in 2026 even while cutting senior workers ([Bloomberg](#), 2026), and a [Korn Ferry](#) survey of 1,000+ HR leaders found 43% of organizations plan to replace early-career roles with AI. The signal is split, not one-directional.

The strongest emerging warning is that AI productivity is masking capacity loss. Output metrics look fine precisely because AI is absorbing the work that used to develop the next generation. The pipeline doesn't break visibly.

It breaks quietly, when senior engineers leave and nobody behind them knows why the system was built that way.

The competitive moat is shifting from talent stock to talent system. The room agrees ad-hoc development is over. The companies that pull ahead from here will be the ones that codify decisions and design intentional ramps on purpose, whether through apprenticeship, redesigned junior paths, or AI orchestration.