„We Just Can't Find Good People Anymore": The Anatomy of a Self-Fulfilling Prophecy - A Case Study

By Christian Rook

The Staff Shortage That Paralyzes

"We simply can't find good people anymore."

This sentence has become a business mantra. It echoes through boardrooms, manufacturing halls, and executive off-sites across industries and geographies. It is used to justify delays, missed targets, stagnant innovation, and postponed investments. The belief in a general staff shortage has taken root so deeply that it now shapes not only how companies think – but how they act, or rather, how they **don't** act.

But what if this belief is not entirely true?

What if the shortage isn't (only) out there in the market, but within – in the organization's perception, planning culture, decision logic, and leadership structures? What if the staff shortage has become a **narrative convenience**, masking structural problems and reinforcing a cycle of inertia?

This case study tells the story of a tech company site that suffered from what looked like a chronic inability to attract and retain talent. The plant was facing ambitious growth targets, but recruitment was stagnant, and frustration ran high. Everyone agreed: *The problem is external. No one wants to work here.*

Until someone asked: *What if that's not the real problem at all?*

1. The Belief That Freezes Action

The most dangerous thing about the belief in a staff shortage isn't whether it's true or

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false. It's what the belief does to behavior.

Once an organization is convinced that **talent is unavailable**, it begins to:

- **Lower its expectations.**
- **Postpone critical projects.**
- **Stop investing in training and onboarding.**
- **Reject imperfect candidates with even less tolerance.**
- **Disengage HR from strategic planning.**

This creates a **self-reinforcing cycle**: The harder it feels to hire, the less an organization invests in solving the problem – and the harder it becomes to hire.

In the case we analyzed, the core belief was that the company urgently needed **74 engineers** to meet long-term growth expectations – but could not find them due to its *remote location*, *aging workforce*, and *tight labor market*.

This belief shaped everything:

• Budgets were frozen.

• Recruiting slowed.

• Hope eroded.

But once we began to examine the numbers and structures behind that belief, the picture changed dramatically. The shortage wasn't just in talent. It was in **facts**, **focus**, and **follow-through**.

What follows is the step-by-step dissection of how this myth took hold – and how it can be dismantled.

2. The Case – When a Tech Site Froze in Place

This is the story of a manufacturing and development site in a **medium-sized city**, part of an international technology company we'll call **TechCorp**. The site was known for its high-quality engineering, strong customer relationships, and a long history of innovation. But when the company launched a global transformation program and defined ambitious growth targets, the site suddenly found itself paralyzed by a single, dominant belief:

"We don't have enough people. And we can't get them."

The numbers seemed alarming: internal planning documents projected a need for **74 additional engineers** over the coming years. Local managers spoke of an **aging workforce**, **remote location**, and **unattractive image**. A widespread sense of demographic doom settled in.

But the site's paralysis wasn't caused by the external labor market. It was caused by what the organization **believed** about the labor market.

A Closer Look Revealed Five Critical Contradictions:

1. The Retirement Myth

Aging was cited as a key threat. Yet - after a careful deep investigation of the REAL numbers - HR data showed only **two retirements** projected over the next three years. The majority of employees were in their 40s and 50s, not young, but not vanishing either. The "demographic cliff" didn't exist. It had been imagined. Reason: the filter: „everybody above the age of 50" - was far too broad to give a good picture of the actual retirement cases.

2. The 74 Engineers Fallacy

The headline number – 74 engineers – came from a **long-term strategic capacity model**, not from current projects or product roadmaps. There was no breakdown by role, skill, or timing. It was a **planning artifact**, not an operational hiring need. But it was treated like gospel.

3. The Remote Location Assumption

The site was described as "in the middle of nowhere," making recruitment "impossible." In reality, it was **a one-hour train-ride from the capital**, surrounded by nature, affordable housing, and good schools. These facts were never leveraged in recruiting materials. The site had **advantages, not disadvantages**, but no one told that story.

4. The HR Disempowerment Trap

HR had become a **low-level administrative function**. It had no strategic voice, no role in long-term planning, and little influence over decision-makers. Recruiting was reactive. Job descriptions were vague. Feedback loops were broken. HR was held responsible for a failure it was never empowered to prevent.

5. The Perfection Filter

Recruiting efforts were narrow, inflexible, and unrealistic. Within the last month, out of **115 applicants**, only **3 were hired**. There was no structured onboarding, no mentoring, no second-chance process. The expectation:

find fully trained, perfectly matched engineers who would relocate voluntarily, without any support. Unsurprisingly, few met the bar.

The Result: A Self-Fulfilling Crisis

The consequences of these five factors combined into a classic **self-fulfilling prophecy**:

- Because the site *believed* it was unattractive, it didn't promote itself.

- Because it *believed* the workforce was aging, it didn't invest in younger talent.

- Because it *believed* the headcount need was urgent and fixed, it panicked.

- Because it *believed* in perfection, it rejected good-enough.

All of this led to **inertia**, **frustration**, and **blame** – not just toward HR, but across teams and up the chain. Meanwhile, strategic projects stalled, customer timelines slipped, and internal morale dropped.

The problem wasn't (only) the labor market. The problem was how the company saw itself.

3. The Dissection – How Misconceptions Take Hold

How could a company as sophisticated as TechCorp fall into such a deep strategic misperception? The answer lies not in incompetence, but in **cognitive habits**, **organizational structure**, and **unquestioned assumptions**.

Misconceptions don't shout.

They creep in. And once accepted, they shape perception, behavior, and culture.

This chapter examines the **five key fallacies** that paralyzed the site – and shows how each can silently undermine even the best intentions.

A. The Exaggeration Fallacy

What they believed: "Our workforce is too old. Most will retire soon."
What we found: Only 2 retirements forecast in 3 years. Median age: mid-40s.

This is a classic case of **availability bias**: a few well-known senior engineers were prominent in daily operations, so their age defined the perception. Leaders began to act as if a "silver tsunami" were imminent and used this to justify inaction in other areas (e.g., training, onboarding).

But the real problem was **not age,** it was **a lack of renewal mechanisms**:

- No early-career pipeline.

- No structured onboarding program.

- No career pathways for juniors.

The workforce wasn't old. It was static.

B. The Planning Fallacy

What they believed: "We urgently need 74 new engineers."
What we found: That number came from a **model**, not from actual hiring needs. Also, they were needed over a period of 10 years, with most recruiting taking place in the latter part of that timeframe. 7 engineers per year had been also hired in the past. HR said they could handle that.

The figure was generated as part of a global ramp-up simulation. But no one ever translated it into:

- Role profiles.

- Skill breakdowns.

- Time-phased hiring plans.

Worse, it became a **symbol of helplessness**: the number was too big to achieve, so no one started. The "74 engineers" became a mental roadblock, not a goal.

The site needed a **dynamic, project-linked hiring model** – not a static long-range target.

C. The Location Fallacy

What they believed: "Nobody wants to live here."
What we found: Location was objectively attractive, but unmarketed.

The city was safe, green, and well-connected, but the employer never promoted this. Candidates were left to guess. There were:

- No relocation incentives.
- No partnerships with local services.
- No narrative that framed the site as a *life choice*.

This fallacy reveals a deeper pattern: **the company didn't believe in its own offer** – so it never sold it. The war for talent was lost not on the battlefield, but in the mirror.

D. The Perfection Fallacy

What they believed: "Only perfect candidates should be hired."
What we found: 97% rejection rate. No investment in onboarding or upskilling.

This mindset created a bottleneck:

- Candidates had to match all criteria.
- Interviews focused on elimination, not potential.
- No room for career starters or internal movers.

The result: **No growth strategy**, just selection anxiety. Meanwhile, time passed, and the hiring crisis deepened.

Perfectionism became a proxy for fear.

E. The Power Fallacy

What they believed: "HR is responsible for the talent shortage."
What we found: HR had no strategic voice, no resources, and no mandate.

HR operated at a purely operational level:

- No involvement in headcount planning.
- No control over employer branding.
- No tools to challenge planning assumptions.

Despite this, HR was blamed when recruiting failed – a **structural scapegoat**, not a strategic partner.

The deeper issue? **Organizational design failed to assign ownership.** Strategy, execution, and recruitment were decoupled. No one owned the full pipeline.

Most hiring was outsourced to the HQ in the capital. The plants in the capital also had hiring needs. Candidates first got offers from the companies in the capital, were relocation was not necessary.

Summary: How Misconceptions Harden into Culture

Each of these fallacies started as a story, evolved into a belief, and then ossified into a **strategic blind spot**. Together, they created a culture of:

- Passive resignation.
- Externalized responsibility.
- Missed opportunities.

Only by naming and dismantling these fallacies could the site begin to move again.

4. The Roots Beneath the Fallacies – Why Misconceptions Persist

Misconceptions don't survive in organizations because they are persuasive. They survive because they are **convenient**. They relieve pressure. They provide explanations where strategy has failed, and they offer a shared narrative that reduces the discomfort of uncertainty.

At TechCorp's site, the belief in an unresolvable talent shortage became a collective truth. It wasn't just a problem – it became the *answer* to every difficult question.

Why are we missing our milestones?

Why are our teams overstretched?

Why are projects delayed?

Because we don't have enough engineers – and we can't find them.

But this belief didn't exist in a vacuum. It was nurtured, tolerated, and slowly embedded into the site's planning culture. T

o understand how this happened, we must examine not just the fallacies themselves, but the **conditions that allowed them to thrive**.

Cognitive Shortcuts and the Need for Simplicity

In complex environments, humans crave simplicity. The labor market is unpredictable. Workforce planning is uncertain. Talent development is slow. In contrast, a single explanation – "the market is dry", feels elegant. It **externalizes** the problem and reduces the need for uncomfortable conversations.

Leaders at the site weren't lazy or uninformed. They were **overwhelmed**. Faced with aggressive corporate targets and limited tools, they defaulted to a narrative that *felt* true, even if it wasn't supported by data. This is the dangerous power of **plausibility over truth**.

Broken Feedback Loops

One of the defining features of resilient organizations is their ability to **self-correct**. At TechCorp's site, the opposite had happened: feedback loops were broken. Plans were made without HR, hiring outcomes were not analyzed, and rejected candidates disappeared from view without review. There was no structured way to confront assumptions with reality.

When a planning model projected 74 engineers, no one asked:

Do we really need that many?

For which projects?

By when?

And once that number was accepted, it became unchallengeable. When only 3 out of 115 candidates were hired, no one investigated the screening logic or onboarding approach. Instead, the result was interpreted as proof that "good people just aren't out there."

This absence of reflection meant that beliefs hardened into **organizational truth** – not because they were tested and verified, but because they were never tested at all.

Lack of Narrative Ownership

Perhaps most revealing was the site's passivity in shaping its own story. Despite being located in a beautiful, accessible region, with competitive salaries and interesting technology, the employer brand was barely visible. There were no relocation packages, no local partnerships, and no communication that framed the site as a compelling place to build a career or life.

In the absence of narrative, people fill the vacuum with fear. Instead of seeing the location as an opportunity, internal stakeholders assumed it was a disadvantage. Instead of promoting the site's qualities, they apologized for them. A kind of **institutional learned helplessness** set in – and it was entirely self-made.

When Belief Becomes Barrier

In theory, misconceptions are easy to fix: confront them with facts. In practice, beliefs are emotionally and politically loaded. They protect people from admitting past mistakes. They distribute blame conveniently. They align with internal power structures. And most of all, they **shape the mental models** leaders use to make decisions every day.

At TechCorp's site, the belief in a demographic catastrophe was never tested, because it was never allowed to be questioned. What looked like a talent crisis turned out to be a **systemic crisis of perception**.

The real shortage wasn't of engineers. It was of **clarity**, **courage**, and **constructive confrontation**.

5. Ways Out: Perception to Strategy

Every crisis of perception offers a hidden opportunity: once false beliefs are exposed, **real action becomes possible**. But the shift from perception to strategy is not automatic. It requires organizations to do something profoundly uncomfortable – to admit that the

problem was never "out there", but within. That the paralysis was not caused by market forces, but by their own mental models.

At TechCorp's site, that moment of honesty came late, but it did come. The decision to challenge the prevailing narrative about the "impossible" talent shortage was the beginning of a larger transformation. Not of the external labor market, but of internal alignment, ownership, and execution.

1. Replacing Myths with Data

The first step was to replace generalized assumptions with specific facts. This involved a systematic review of:

- Demographics and retirement forecasts
- Actual recruiting conversion rates
- Role-by-role breakdown of future needs
- Commuting and relocation patterns

The result was sobering and liberating. The feared retirement wave didn't exist. The "74 engineers" figure was neither urgent nor precise. The hiring system wasn't failing due to lack of talent – it was failing due to **lack of flexibility** and **strategic clarity**.

Facts don't solve problems on their own. But they **remove the fog**, allowing leaders to see what's really in front of them.

2. Redesigning the Hiring Pipeline

Next, the site rebuilt its hiring pipeline from the ground up. The focus shifted from **selecting perfect candidates** to **developing good ones**.

Changes included:

- Defining realistic profiles based on actual project needs
- Accepting partial skill matches and investing in structured onboarding
- Simplifying the interview process and involving operational managers early
- Introducing mentoring programs for new hires

The goal was not to "lower the bar," but to **broaden the gateway** – and to create a system that values potential over pedigree.

This shift also required managers to take shared ownership of hiring – no longer outsourcing talent decisions to a reactive HR function, but becoming active participants in building their teams.

3. Giving HR a Strategic Seat

HR was repositioned not as an administrator, but as an enabler of strategy. This required both **organizational support** and **leadership trust**.

HR professionals were:

- Included in headcount planning sessions
- Given direct access to operations leaders
- Empowered to question unrealistic assumptions
- Tasked with driving employer branding and external partnerships

Critically, HR also began to **challenge line managers** – not just by asking "what do you need?" but also "why do you need it?" and "what could be done differently?"

This marked a cultural shift: from blaming HR to **using HR** as a lever for change.

4. Owning the Employer Narrative

Perhaps the most underestimated change was narrative. The site stopped apologizing for its location – and started **marketing it**.

New employer branding materials emphasized:

- Work-life balance in a nature-rich region
- Proximity to Tokyo via high-speed train
- Affordable housing and good schools
- Access to outdoor sports, culture, and safety

More importantly, existing employees were encouraged to share their stories. What emerged was not a picture of isolation – but of pride, quality, and belonging. That message resonat-

ed with candidates. The myth of unattractiveness began to crumble.

5. Shifting the Culture from Resignation to Responsibility

The final – and hardest – step was psychological. Leaders had to confront how their own behavior had reinforced the paralysis.

This included:

- Letting go of the "victim" mindset
- Creating short-term milestones instead of abstract headcount goals
- Publicly acknowledging past misconceptions
- Celebrating early wins to build new confidence

In essence, the site began to re-learn what it meant to **act**. Not by waiting for perfect conditions, but by making **imperfect progress visible**.

From Deadlock to Movement

None of these steps was revolutionary. But together, they broke the inertia. They created a context in which change became thinkable – and then doable.

By turning beliefs into questions, and questions into decisions, the site reclaimed its ability to act. What had looked like a demographic crisis turned out to be an opportunity to reset the way the organization thought about people, planning, and progress.

In the end, the biggest bottleneck wasn't only in the labor market. It was mostly in the **company's imagination**.

Christian Rook
info@christianrook.com
www.christianrook.com