



Executive Interview

Forward-Deployed Engineers: The Formula 1 Drivers of the AI Era

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About Ashwin Bharath



Ashwin Bharath has been recognized as one of the leading employers of emerging technology talent in the U.S., where he built the training model that has prepared more than 10,000 software engineers for Fortune 500 companies and government agencies. He is also CEO of Galent, an AI-native digital engineering firm helping enterprises and global capability centers accelerate AI adoption.

With more than 25 years in digital transformation and workforce strategy, Ashwin is a recognized voice on generative AI and the future of work and hosts Galent's Fireside Roundtable Series for global executives. He began his career as a technologist, completed his first AI project in 2001 and after a successful exit from Revature, returned to entrepreneurship by acquiring Galent. He reacquired Revature in April 2026 to address the growing talent scarcity created by AI.

About Revature



Revature has spent more than 20 years enabling talented young adults to build successful technology careers as developers, analysts and engineers. The company has prepared more than 10,000 software engineers for Fortune 500 companies and government agencies and continues to lead in both talent development and workforce transition, helping organizations move existing employees into roles required by today's AI-driven industry.

About Galent



Galent is an AI-native digital engineering firm helping enterprises and global capability centers accelerate AI adoption. The company focuses on preparing organizations for the shift toward forward-deployed engineering models and helping enterprises build the talent and capability needed to operate effectively in an AI-enabled software development landscape.

About Rachel Cooke



Today's conversation is moderated by **Rachel Cooke**, Chief Operating Officer and Principal HCM Analyst at Brandon Hall Group™. She is responsible for business operations, including client and member advisory services, marketing design, annual awards programs, conferences and the company's project management functions. She also leads Advancing Women in the Workplace and Diversity, Equity and Inclusion initiatives, research and events. Rachel worked in the HCM research industry for 20+ years and held several key management and executive positions within the Talent and Learning Research and Performance Improvement industries.

Recognition



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Learning & Development



2 Gold



1 Silver

The New Engineer

Q Rachel

The term “forward-deployed engineer” is fairly new, at least to HR and learning audiences. How would you describe this role to a talent leader who hasn’t encountered it yet?

A Ashwin

What AI has done in many areas is flatten a lot of the roles required for software development and consolidated them into one. That is forward-deployed engineering in essence. Here’s what that means. There are probably only a hundred human beings in the world who can program better than a large language model. That’s it. But we have 30 million programmers worldwide. So, if AI can do the coding, how does the software actually get built and what are the engineers going to do?

Outcomes Over Code

Forward-deployed engineers own the entire business outcome, not just software implementation.

That’s where the forward-deployed engineer comes in. You have implementation, which is the coding phase. But to get software built, you need pre-implementation work: creating a business solution, finding the right features for the problem you’re trying to solve, architecting it and designing it. Then coding happens in implementation. Then there’s post-implementation work: How do you deploy that into production, how do you maintain it, how do you support it?

A forward-deployed engineer is capable of doing all three end to end. They focus on outcomes, not just

Business Before Code

coding. They work with the business to find what they want, solution it, architect it, get the implementation done, deploy it into production and maintain it. All those roles got flattened and consolidated into one outcome-based model.

Q Rachel

How is AI accelerating the shift away from the traditional feature-focused developer toward someone accountable for end-to-end outcomes?

A Ashwin

In a pre-AI world, developers are assigned coding tasks through a ticket with a user story. They see it and start development without thinking much about why that user story was created or what it's solving for the person who will use the software.

Think End-to-End

AI enables engineers to move from isolated coding tasks to complete business solutions.

A forward-deployed engineer first thinks about the outcome rather than jumping straight into coding. Why is this being asked? Is it the right solution? What will be the benefit? They think through the whole ecosystem before worrying about implementation. Because you're thinking through the whole equation at once, you can condense everything: getting the business feature, deciding on the outcome, implementing it and getting into production all happen in one giant step rather than multiple separate phases.

Human in the Lead

This is an acceleration like no other. Critical tasks that normally take six months, a forward-deployed engineer with the right skill set can complete in one week from end to end, getting the business feature and deploying it into production. If AI is like an F1 car, you need an F1 driver to operate it. I also describe a forward-deployed engineer as a centaur: half-animal and half-human. The animal piece is the AI and the human piece is the human. That's what FDE stands for.

Q Rachel

Do you envision this role as staying largely human, largely AI, or some blend? What do you think that ratio looks like over the next two to five years?

A Ashwin

I don't think we'll reach a stage, at least in software, for the next few decades, where AI can do entire software development end to end. The human has to be there. Anything we do, not just software development, but any white-collar work, will divide into four categories. Category one: things fully automated by AI. Category two: created by AI but validated by a human, which is human in the loop. Category three, which is much more critical: created by a human and validated by AI, which is human in the lead.

Category four is the most critical: AI isn't there yet and it has to be done end to end by humans. Depending on the task, the percentages vary. For typical coding, roughly 80 percent can be done by AI and 20 percent by humans, or validated by humans. On the other hand,

Human in the Lead

AI accelerates execution, but human judgment continues to guide the highest-value decisions.

Shift Left

creating architecture and design has to be done by human beings, potentially 100 percent. The basic concept remains the same, but the quantum of how AI and humans combine is what will keep shifting.

Q Rachel

Can you elaborate on client proximity as a core competency for forward-deployed engineers?

A Ashwin

The term “forward” literally means forward-deployed. It means you’re deployed directly with the client, one-on-one aligned with them. In a typical software development lifecycle, you have a planning phase, then you define the application requirements and business functionalities, then you design the application, then you develop it. A developer traditionally comes in at stage four and there’s a high chance they might not even meet the client.

Closer to the Client

The strongest engineers work directly with business stakeholders from the start of every project.

If the developer is creating the application, why wait until stage four? Make them available with the client directly. Let the client tell the developer what they want and let the developer give feedback immediately: “Here’s my understanding. You told me 10 things, eight are great, but can you change two?”

That interaction, working hand in hand, is critical. Forward-deployed engineering is completely redefining the traditional software development lifecycle. It is lit-

**"... talk
technology."**

erally shifting left, from phase four to phase one. If you're not deploying engineers in front of clients, they cannot be a genuine forward-deployed engineer, no matter how strong their technical skills are.

Q Rachel

How is communication changing for this role? There's often been a gap between business and engineering, with project managers bridging both sides.

A Ashwin

This is a very good point. If we have 30 million developers in the world, not all of them can become FDEs. The challenges lie not in technical ability, but in two things.

One is mindset. Thinking like an FDE means business solutioning is the No. 1 priority rather than focusing purely on programming. That mindset shift is tough for people. The second biggest challenge is communication. In a pre-AI world, a developer just needed to know technology. In a post-AI world, that's only 50 percent of the job. The other 50 percent is knowing how to talk technology.

Communication is a core element of a forward-deployed engineer. I'm not saying it's impossible for everyone and not everyone is a great communicator,

Communication Wins

Technical expertise alone is no longer enough; communication is becoming an essential engineering skill.

AI Needs Partners

but don't take it for granted or try to hide from it. Take it head-on, enhance your communication skills and understand the best way to communicate with clients and business owners. If you don't do that, you'll remain a developer or software engineer. You'll never become a forward-deployed engineer.

Q Rachel

What about the other side of this? Business leaders and HR professionals who aren't traditionally technology-savvy now need to elevate their own understanding.

A Ashwin

Without a doubt, everyone should take an attempt to understand this. AI is not going to replace human beings, but human beings with AI are going to replace human beings without AI. It's simple. The way to measure this is: Do you have a high exposure score, meaning your job could be affected by AI, or a high friction score, meaning it likely won't be?

Partner with AI

Career growth comes from learning how to work alongside AI rather than competing against it.

Think about COVID. People who could successfully work remotely without hassle have a higher exposure to AI displacement. People who couldn't work remotely have a higher friction score. That doesn't mean everyone in a high-exposure category gets replaced. It means you should understand in what ways AI can

**“what will
help you
long-term”**

take over the simple, automated parts of your job and how you partner with AI rather than compete with it.

Everyone should think about what makes that partnership great, so AI helps you look good and grow in your career. That understanding and being able to communicate it to peers or to forward-deployed engineers, is quite critical.

Q Rachel

Some companies are paying seven figures per developer for this skill set. What’s your advice for organizations trying to build this capability without breaking the bank?

A Ashwin

This is a fundamental question every HR leader should be asking. I talked to an HR executive last week who told me they have the best “FDE hunters” on their team. But if you hunt a rare animal, you’re going to hunt it to extinction.

Hunting and gathering did not advance human civilization. Farming did. You can hunt for a short period out of necessity, but what will help you long-term is your ability to farm, taking a good stack of your existing resources. Not everybody will become forward-deployed. Don’t try to boil the ocean or convert everyone into FDEs.

**Grow Your
Talent**

Building AI capability internally is more sustainable than relying solely on external hiring.

Build, Don't Buy

Bucket your people into three categories. The first bucket is people who are almost there, almost forward-deployed engineers. Identify them, give them quick wins and quick tools to get them there. The second bucket is people who will take months, maybe one or two, but with the right support and time, they can become FDEs. Start a transition phase for them.

The third bucket, sadly, is people who can't become FDEs. It's OK to accept that, because trying to convert everyone will degrade the progress you're making with the first two buckets. Categorize and prioritize. If you think hunting, meaning recruiting your way through this, is your best strategy, it isn't. You'll drive the talent pool toward extinction.

Farming should be your focus. Some companies are charging \$1 million-\$2.5 million per developer per project. You can't hire your way through that at scale. You need a model that's accessible, affordable and affable.

Farm, Don't Hunt

Long-term workforce success depends on developing talent rather than competing for scarce specialists.

Q Rachel

What would you like to share about Revature's approach to developing and deploying this kind of talent?

A Ashwin

Revature has been doing this for the last 20 years, partnering with great organizations and HR leaders to hire the best-in-class talent as FDEs. On top of that, we've

Adapt or Fall Behind

been helping organizations transition their existing workforce from where they are to what today's industry requires.

Those are the two things we provide: best-in-class talent and a strong transition mechanism. What makes this exciting now is that the world is going to require this talent and this transition like never before. One of our biggest advantages is that we're a very adaptable company. We never assumed our existing mechanism would automatically work in the world of AI. We took our foundation and redefined certain things, including creating our own taxonomy and our own training pedagogy. We created a flipped classroom model.

Learn How to Learn

Organizations must continuously adapt learning models to keep pace with AI-driven change.

In AI, things change so fast that we don't teach theory anymore. We teach how to do the work using AI, because the moment we start teaching theory, in two months it becomes irrelevant. By flipping the classroom, we're teaching coding and self-learned theory on a need basis, creating learners who learn how to learn.

We're also coming in as a support, as an educator and consultant, for HR professionals. AI is a huge opportunity for all of us. Don't focus on the negatives. See the opportunity. My best advice for leaders is: Don't wait out the chaos phase. Start the transition phase now. You have about two years before this chaos phase gives way to a transition phase and then a growth phase.

If you start transitioning now, when your competitors are still struggling, you'll be positioned for massive advantage. Have a proper strategy to recruit forward-de-

ployed engineers or similar AI talent and have a proper model to transform your existing people into the world of AI.

Q Rachel

Any final thoughts?

A Ashwin

Lead the Transition

Organizations that embrace AI today will build lasting competitive advantage tomorrow.

I'd like to share something from Victor Hugo, which has always been my guiding force: Greater than the power of mighty armies is an idea whose time has come. This is the time of AI. We should believe in it, embrace it, not compete with it, not block it.

Make AI your partner and if you do that, you'll get the best return from that partnership. You can be among the first to grab the opportunity that AI is going to present to the world.



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