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WHEN BUILDING GETS CHEAP, DECIDING GETS EXPENSIVE

THE FUTURE OF BUILDING

*How AI, product and people are redefining
what it takes to build great companies.*

SABRINA CASTIGLIONE
SPEAKER

DAVE WASCHA
SPEAKER

DAVE KILLEEN
SPEAKER

DEBBIE MCMAHON
HOST

01

Deciding is now the hard part.

For years, most of the time and money went on building the thing, so companies organised themselves around protecting engineering time. That cost is falling fast. What it leaves is the part that was always hardest: deciding what's worth doing, and in what order.

02

Everyone has been promoted, ready or not.

A graduate directing AI agents in their first week is doing a manager's job without a manager's years of pattern matching. Judgement used to come with time. Now it has to be taught on day one.

03

Your new job is the loop, not the task.

The valuable work is moving up a ladder: do the task, describe how it's done, define what good looks like, decide what the whole thing is for. Dave Wascha reckons almost everyone is still on the bottom rung.

04

Faster teams make alignment harder.

When every function can build its own agents, every function can optimise for itself at machine speed. Sales, customer success and product agents are already reaching different conclusions from the same data.

05

The moat is moving from the product to the people.

If one developer can rebuild a well-funded feature in a week, being first buys you weeks, not quarters. What's hard to copy is a group of excellent people who decide well together, for years.

06

Decide what would change your mind before you spend.

AI makes starting things easy and judging them hard. All three speakers came back to the same habit: write down what success looks like, when you'll check, and what would make you stop.

THE SHORT VERSION

AI hasn't made building companies easier. It's moved where the hard work sits. The effort that went into making things now has to go into deciding things: what matters most, what good looks like, which ideas deserve to survive. That was always a leader's job. Now it's everyone's, it happens much faster, and the companies that do well will be the ones that *build judgement on purpose*.

What does it actually take to build great companies now?

In February 2024 we ran an evening at Monzo called *Scaling at Pace*. The debate that night was fairly blunt: what are we going to do with all these product people? Someone in the room said the CTO was the only seat on the exec with no ability to deliver anything at all.

Two and a half years later, nobody has answered that question. There are just more of them.

Over the last quarter we've been running one-to-one point of view interviews with technology and product leaders. There's no consensus that everything is changing. There's barely agreement on what is changing, or how fast, or what to do about it.



People doing the same job today disagree about whether that job will exist in three years.

FROM NUMI'S POINT OF VIEW INTERVIEWS

NUMICON DIDN'T SETTLE ANY OF THAT. WHAT IT DID WAS MAKE THE QUESTIONS HARDER TO AVOID:

Q.01	If building is nearly free, what's a product team for?	Our prioritisation frameworks all assume engineering is the expensive bit.
Q.02	If a junior can direct agents on day one, where does their judgement come from?	The career ladder used to teach it. That ladder has lost a few rungs.
Q.03	If every team builds its own agents, who keeps the company pointed in one direction?	Sales, customer success and product agents are already reaching different conclusions from the same data.
Q.04	If a feature can be copied in days, what's actually defensible?	Being first used to buy you quarters. Now it buys you weeks.
Q.05	If you've just spent £50,000 on tokens, how do you know if that was any good?	CFOs are getting AI bills in the tens of thousands with no way to judge them.

None of these are really questions about tools. They're about how companies decide, coordinate and grow their people. That's where the rest of this goes.



Sabrina Castiglione

COO & CFO, OMNEA

Everyone is a manager now. Almost nobody was trained for it.

A finance and operations leader in a room of technologists, Sabrina wasn't there to talk about AI itself. She was there to talk about what AI is doing to companies. Employee four at Tessian; joined Omnea at around 20 people, now around 200.

The Great Reshuffle

Juniors get the *how*. As they progress they're trusted with the *what*, then the *why*, then white space. In the last 18 to 24 months that model has been hollowed out from the bottom. It isn't a headcount story: "This isn't the CFO chat where I say go and fire everyone."

Juniors are sitting on the bottleneck

Take execution away and the hard problem is in plain view, landing on people who became managers "almost overnight". The talk she used to give founders on building a culture is now the talk her ops associate gets on day three.

BEFORE	NOW
WHITE SPACE	WHITE SPACE
WHY	WHY
WHAT	WHAT · JUNIORS ↑
HOW · JUNIORS	HOW · AI

Fig. 1 · Sabrina's seniority model, from her slide. Illustrative, not data.

"People want to be able to understand the decisions that are being made, not necessarily like them."

SABRINA CASTIGLIONE

HER ORDER OF CONTROLS

1 · CULTURE	FIRST
2 · GLOBAL OPTIMUM	THEN
3 · FORMAL PROCESS	LAST

DAVE WASCHA

FOUNDER AND ADVISOR

628 AD
Brahmagupta writes down zero

Your new job is the loop, not the task.

Zero took a thousand years to be accepted; Florence banned it in 1299. Dave calls today a once-in-a-civilisation shift, and he's aware how that sounds.

The product pipeline (research, ideation, prototype, spec, design, build) exists because engineering was expensive. Every step before it was risk reduction. So what happens when the expensive thing is close to free? Every prioritisation framework has a denominator. Send it to zero and they stop working.



	A · Framework	B · When cost goes to zero	C · =value/cost
1	ROI	Value over near-zero cost: every idea wins	#DIV/O!
2	RICE	Effort goes to zero: everything scores the same	#DIV/O!
3	Sprints	Capacity is near-unlimited: the ceremony becomes theatre	#DIV/O!

Fig. 2 · Dividing by zero. From Dave's slides.

THE FOUR LEVELS OF WORK

EXAMPLE: 200 SUPPORT TICKETS

Decide	THE GOAL · LOOP 3, PURPOSE	Fewer tickets, faster fixes, or retention? Notice when the metric has become the target.
Define	THE MEASURE · LOOP 2, PROCESS	Judge twenty tickets yourself; let the loop rewrite its own prompt when it misses one.
Describe	THE PROCEDURE · LOOP 1, PRODUCT	Write the prompt that reads them and writes the summary. Check the output.
Do	THE TASK · WHERE NEARLY EVERYONE STILL IS	Read 200 support tickets and write the summary.

"Be a dolphin."

Hawaii, 1965. Rewarded for new tricks each show, a dolphin called Malia worked out that the game was novelty itself, after two weeks of visible frustration. The only clean example Dave knows of something closing the third loop. For leaders: write a constitution, the list of things your loops may never change.

Dave Killeen

FIELD CPO, PENDO

Being first now buys you **weeks**, not quarters.

If Dave Wascha brought the theory, Dave Killeen brought the field notes: first Dex, his own open-sourced personal AI operating system, then a 500-person company trying to work the same way.



THE OLD JOB

Head chef

Designs a menu and judges what's on the plate.

THE NEW JOB

Truffle hunter

Decides what's worth cooking in the first place.

"200 brilliant ideas is not a roadmap."

WHEN IDEAS EXPLODE,
TASTE IS THE BOTTLENECK

Move 01 →

Out-hunt

Spot the signal before it's obvious and before your competitors do.

Move 02 →

Bend the system of work

Reshape the work around AI instead of bolting AI onto the old work.

Move 03

Prove impact

"Can we build it?" matters much less than "should it exist?"

FIG. 3 · ANATOMY OF A PENDO CONVICTION DOCUMENT



Nothing gets built without one. Then, to force the change: *Headless October*, a month in which nobody can log into Pendo's own interface. Find your forcing function.

THE HONEST BIT

For all the energy around Dex, he doesn't know whether people are using it. The kind messages are lovely, but kind messages aren't usage. Can we build it is easy. Is it worth building is the hard one.

"If you cannot convince your customers and your colleagues what to build and what not to, you are stuffed."



DEBBIE MCMAHON

HOST

HER QUESTION TO DAVE WASCHA

An agent built in customer success contradicts one built in sales, which contradicts one built in product. They're all looking at the same information. How do you stop that?

"We need to have and understand the headache before we appreciate the aspirin."

DAVE WASCHA, IN REPLY

There isn't a playbook yet. Plenty of people in the room recognised the problem, and it runs straight through theme 2.3: speed makes alignment harder.

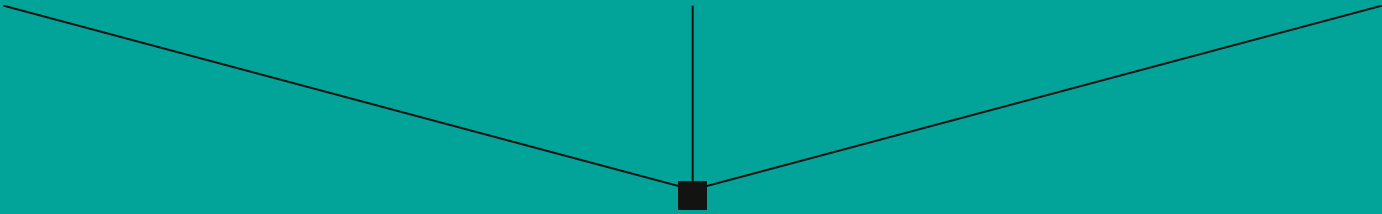
02

The ideas that connect

SABRINA CASTIGLIONE
A CFO WHO BUILDS CULTURE AND
OPERATIONS

DAVE WASCHA
AN ADVISOR WHO THINKS IN SYSTEMS
THEORY

DAVE KILLEEN
A PRODUCT LEADER EXPERIMENTING ON
HIMSELF AND A 500-PERSON COMPANY



They didn't coordinate their talks, and they came at things from very different directions. They still kept landing in roughly the same places.

2.1
The hard part was
always deciding

2.2
Judgement has to be
built on purpose

2.3
Speed makes
alignment harder

2.4
The moat is moving to
the people

2.5
Decide what would
change your mind

When execution gets cheap, a bad decision gets more expensive. *There's nothing slowing it down.*

THEME	SABRINA CASTIGLIONE	DAVE WASCHA	DAVE KILLEEN
2.1 The hard part was always deciding. Now there's nowhere to hide from it.	Deciding was always harder; execution just took up the hours.	Every prioritisation framework assumes engineering is expensive, and breaks when it isn't.	At Pendo, engineers sped up and deciding what to build became the constraint.
2.2 Judgement has to be built on purpose.	The founder talk is now day-three induction. Quarterly AI days; protected daily time.	Write down how you work, turn decisions into questions, build evals.	A "truths" document and conviction docs capture the reasoning, not just the output.
2.3 Speed makes alignment harder.	The travel booking story: one team's pain, the company's gain. Fix: "what's number one?"	A loop can't question its own goal. Fix: a constitution.	"That's a coordination problem." Fix: a shared AI chassis.
2.4 The moat is moving from the product to the people.	Outside frontier problems, what you've got is talent density.	If advantage comes from tempo, it lives in people and systems.	Open-source rebuilds in days. First buys weeks, not quarters.
2.5 Decide what would change your mind before you start.	Pre-register the bet: how big, how long, what you're looking for.	Evals: twenty cases where you already know the answer.	The conviction document: where we stop, what would change our mind.

WHERE THEY PULLED IN DIFFERENT DIRECTIONS

Pace and persuasion

Wascha has stopped arguing with sceptics; the market will settle it. Sabrina: be deliberate about the culture you want, and bring people with you.

The work, and the people

Wascha: doing the work is no longer viable for most. Sabrina: companies aren't getting smaller; the work is shifting. Pendo decides case by case.

Tempo

Run the loops faster, says Wascha. Don't spend every hour AI gives back, says Killeen. Someone still has to think about where the loop is pointed.

THEY CAN BOTH BE RIGHT

03

What this means for leaders

If the constraint has moved from building to deciding, leaders need to spend their time differently. Five things came out of the evening.

1

DRAWS ON: CASTIGLIONE · WASCHA

Write down what's number one, and what's second.

Put them in order; a list isn't enough. People accept decisions they dislike as long as they're consistent. When teams and their agents move fast and independently, a clear order is what stops them pulling apart. Wascha's version is the constitution.

2

DRAWS ON: CASTIGLIONE · KILLEEN

Pre-register your bets, including your AI spend.

Before you put money into a tool, a pilot or a new product, write down what you expect to see, by when, and what would make you stop. Then stick to it. It takes the emotion out of the review.

3

DRAWS ON: CASTIGLIONE · WASCHA

Teach judgement from day one, not year five.

If juniors are directing work, they need the principles that used to come with seniority. Give new starters the thinking behind the company. Ask your best people to write down how they work, and use it to teach everyone else.

4

DRAWS ON: KILLEEN · CASTIGLIONE

Redesign how work gets done, rather than handing out licences.

Tokens without structure gave Pendo patchy excellence and a coordination tax. Build shared context, shared standards and a way for good practice to spread: a rotating AI lead in each team, best skills pulled into a company standard.

5

DRAWS ON: ALL THREE

Pick a forcing function, and protect time to think.

Headless October, quarterly AI days and a daily protected slot make new habits hard to avoid. Don't let the hours AI saves fill back up. That's where conviction comes from.



Look at your diary. If most of your week is spent doing, you're working at the level that's getting cheapest.

The people who can decide well are about to become the **scarcest people** in the market.

THEN	NOW	
Execution depth	Judgement	Choosing between lots of good ideas; saying what matters most.
Domain specialism	Systems thinking	Optimising for the company over the function.
Tool expertise	→ Metacognition	Describing how you work well enough that someone, or something, else can do it.
	Storytelling	Convincing customers and colleagues what to build, and what not to.
	Conviction, held loosely	A clear view of where things are going, and letting real usage change it.

Fig. 4 · What great is starting to look like. Qualitative, drawn from the talks. None of these are new; they're needed much earlier, and much more widely.

Roles are blurring, with no neat formula

The PM to engineer ratio is an organisational choice. The pull is towards broader builders. Hiring against last year's job description is getting riskier.

The junior pipeline is the quiet risk

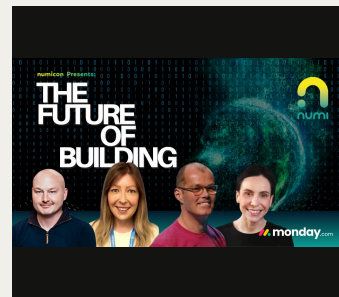
If AI does the work that used to train people, where do future leaders learn the craft? Plenty who can run the tools; not many who know what to point them at.

AI literacy is teachable. Attitude is harder.

Former agency recruiters on Sabrina's team were wiring APIs into the ATS after a few AI days. The tools will keep changing. The appetite to keep up lasts.

THE BETTER QUESTION

Can they do the work? Increasingly the better question is whether they can *decide what work is worth doing, and teach a system to do it.*



Every speaker described a world where nobody has the playbook yet. Dave Wascha put it well: we're going to have to fumble through this together.

We don't claim to have the answers. We get people who are actually building companies, products and teams into a room to compare notes honestly.

"Being able to talk candidly to other leaders in the room from stellar company brands is worth its weight in gold."

DAVE KILLEEN, AFTERWARDS

1,000+

PEOPLE AT NUMICON EVENTS

~5,000

LEADERS IN THE WIDER GROUP

~20

SEATS PER ROUNDTABLE

Free

AND INVITE ONLY. PLUS HORIZON, FOR WOMEN IN TECHNOLOGY



Stay in the room

Scan to join the numi community on WhatsApp and hear about the next numicon, Horizon and our roundtables.

Thank you to Sabrina Castiglione, Dave Wascha and Dave Killeen for being so open with their thinking, to Debbie McMahon for hosting, to monday.com for having us in their London office, and to everyone who gave up an evening to be there.



04 · THE FUTURE OF BUILDING

WHAT'S CHANGED, AND WHAT HASN'T

CHANGED

The most expensive part of building software is getting cheap. Loops that took quarters run in hours. Features that felt defensible get copied in days. Juniors are directing work that used to belong to managers.

Zero wasn't a bug. People just had to rebuild their frameworks around it. The companies that do well won't be the ones with the most tools or the most tokens. They'll be the ones that rebuild how they decide.

STILL THERE, JUST EASIER TO SEE

Deciding what's worth building. Being honest about what matters most. Getting people together who make good decisions as a group. None of it is new. It's more exposed, more urgent and spread across far more people.

■

The hard part of building a company was always deciding. AI has just made it impossible to ignore.

Planning your 2027 hires?



We appoint the executives and leaders who build technology companies, from the C-suite to the heads of AI, product, engineering and data. If you're thinking about who you'll need in 2027, talk to us.

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