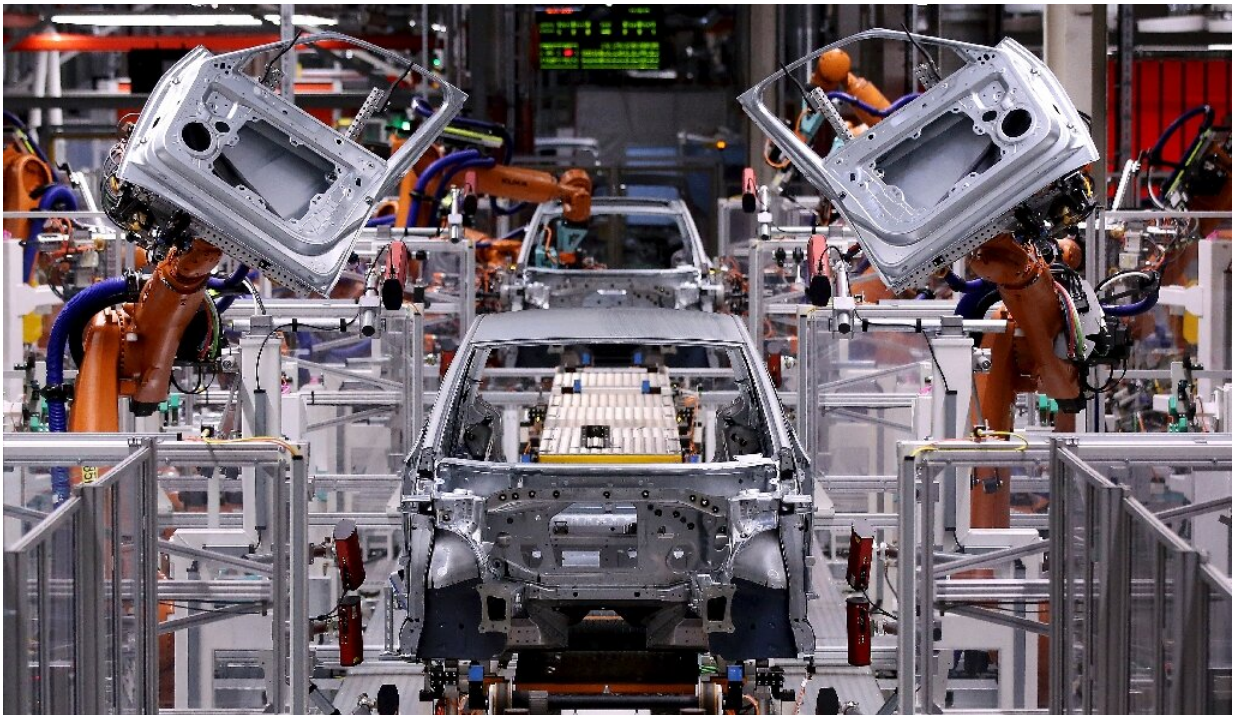


German carmakers race to retrain workforce for electric age

December 12 2021, by Sophie Makris



Robots mount doors on an ID.3 Volkswagen electric car. Germany's pivot to electric vehicles means carmakers are racing to retrain their workforces.

After her apprenticeship at Volkswagen, Michelle Gabriel was a master at welding, cutting, bending and stretching metal, but just a few years later it's not chassis but software frameworks she's piecing together after a speedy change of career.

The 24-year-old's professional journey reflects the transformation the [auto sector](#) is undergoing, moving away from its traditional focus on building combustion engines to developing software.

Germany's new government led by Olaf Scholz, which took office on Wednesday, wants to speed up this pivot with the aim of having 15 million [electric vehicles](#) on its roads by 2030 from just over 500,000 today.

But the upheaval being caused by the electric revolution is putting in doubt the livelihoods of thousands of employees in jobs where their skills may no longer be needed.

Managers are now confronted with the challenge of preparing their workforce to build the car of tomorrow.

Cognitive faculties

Despite thinking the welding work during her apprenticeship was "super", Michelle Gabriel could not imagine entering a profession that "could disappear in five years", she told AFP.

But "construction mechanic was a job already in the process of disappearing when I finished my training," said Gabriel, who like all apprentices began work on the factory line.



Electric cars require fewer employees to assemble units on the factory line and more IT technicians and electrochemists to develop the batteries that power them.

When the auto giant presented her with the opportunity to join its "Faculty 73" programme, intended to train [software developers](#), Gabriel signed up.

Open to Volkswagen employees as well as outside applicants—who must sit a series of tests but do not need a degree—the new kind of apprenticeship is the storied carmaker's response to the need for new skills.

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line and more IT technicians and electrochemists to develop the batteries that power them.

With around 100 students a year, the Faculty 73 programme launched in 2019 at Volkswagen's flagship plant in Wolfsburg in the north of Germany. Yet the initiative still will not cover the manufacturer's needs for new skilled workers.

Digital drive

That has prompted Volkswagen, like many other German carmakers and their suppliers, to launch an unprecedented internal drive to update existing roles.

Depending on the employee, the digital course could last between a few weeks and a year, time enough to acquire the knowledge needed.

"There are masses of people that we have to get qualified and we will not achieve it using just traditional methods," said Ralph Linde, director of the Volkswagen Group Academy.



A fully automated production line at Volkswagen's Wolfsburg headquarters. The German car giant has launched a programme to retrain workers as software developers.

Instead of teaching in classrooms, Volkswagen is using [online resources](#) that can be rolled out on the scale necessary, without which Volkswagen "would not be able to manage this big task", Linde told AFP.

The group plans to offer employees a personalised online platform to identify potential career development opportunities.

One issue, Linde conceded, is that "rapid technological developments" mean it is sometimes difficult to anticipate what skills the group's workers will need even in the next year or two.

Electric vehicles and the increasing role of software in the [auto industry](#) represent a "fundamental paradigm change" for workers, even if it "does not mean fewer jobs overall but different ones", said Johannes Katzan, a representative for the IG Metall union in the states of Lower Saxony and Saxony-Anhalt.

In all, including its vast web of suppliers, the car industry in Germany employs 830,000 individuals directly and 1.3 million indirectly.

Experts' estimates for how many of these jobs may be threatened by the digital switchover vary from 180,000 to as many as 288,000.

Yet a report by the Fraunhofer Institute, commissioned by VW last year, found that massive layoffs could be avoided—on condition that it accelerated its training programmes.

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