THE EFFICIENCY EDGE

MANUFACTURING: A FUTURE **WITHOUT WORKERS?**

The world has been celebrating International Workers Day, or Labour Day as it is known in some parts, since 1890. For 134 years, we have acknowledged the central role that people play in keeping the cogs of industry turning.

But, today, as we stand bewildered by the pace of the Fourth Industrial Revolution and the juggernaut of Artificial Intelligence, many workers find their job security increasingly threatened by new technologies.

This feeling is not a new one. When James Hargreaves invented the spinning jenny in 1764, he set off a revolution in the textile industry. Yes, fewer skilled workers were required, but his invention ultimately allowed textile workers to produce more yarn of a consistent quality with less effort, and also made textiles more affordable and widely available to the growing population.

People-centric tech

We cannot stop the march of progress, but some perspective is required when we think about the role that technology should play in industry today. Despite the dystopian ideal of fully automated dark factories, in reality, we will always need humans to bring their creative, problem-solving selves to the workplace.

We must invest in technology that embraces the spirit of Workers Month and empowers employees to do their jobs effectively and efficiently, to meet the unchanging goal of delivering a quality end-product at the lowest possible cost.

So, just how can tech support rather than supplant workers?

Here are 5 easy wins for the workplace:

1. Bridging the skills gap

In companies where skilled workers are ageing out of the system, finding and training the right replacements can be costly and time consuming. Guided work instructions provide one way to get them up to speed fast.

In a manufacturing environment, for example, step-by-step visual instructions on screen can help even semi-skilled operators gain the confidence to assemble a variety of quality products.

For junior technicians, simply placing an app on their mobile phone – pre-loaded with standard operating procedures and instructional videos – can help them navigate even complex maintenance tasks and calibrations without assistance.

2. Recognising workers' efforts

For managers, it can be difficult to keep track of their team's performance and for employees to demonstrate their individual efforts and successes as part of that team.

Having an app that schedules and manages the tasks for which a technician is accountable can help them manage their time more effectively and get more done in a day, while also providing a digital record of their valuable contributions in keeping the plant running when it comes to performance evaluation time.

3. Reducing stress associated with machine downtime

Eventually, when machines do go down, the pressure to get them up and running again is immense.

Instead of time wasted scrambling and hunting for machine buy-outs and maintenance manuals in dusty cupboards, storing all the critical asset and project documentation in a cloud-based portal is a much more efficient way to put essential info at employees' fingertips to source the necessary parts quickly and minimise downtime.

4. Keeping record of targets met

When it comes to production tracking, many companies still use a clipboard or whiteboard-based system. While it's useful at a glance, once the papers are filed or the board accidentally wiped, there's no way of knowing if the team is on track.

Digital production tracking allows team leaders to have eyes on their daily data in real time, and also makes data trend analysis a breeze when comparing that production data to previous periods.

5. Getting a jump on potential problems

Essentially, data is what drives any effective digital manufacturing system – the numbers will warn when there's a downward trend, allowing a team to act before there's a serious problem.

When an unplanned incident happens, time is of the essence and workers are often unsure who to alert and how, or what immediate actions to take.

A real-time alert system is essential for keeping a manufacturing facility running optimally by sending automated alerts to key people, allowing managers to take rapid action by assigning tasks to technicians and being able to monitor when issues have been successfully resolved.

Tech is now an essential tool

Ultimately, no manufacturing facility runs at 100% uptime. There will always be problems to solve and unplanned incidents to manage. And that is where humans can do what no machine can yet do. Today, technology is however indispensable in empowering workers to do their jobs better and overcome those challenges.

Additional Resources

Click here to see how digital solutions have had a real impact for some of these manufacturers.

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