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The future of modern manufacturing relies on more than next-generation technologies to optimize the factory floor. Engaging and empowering the next-generation workforce is the key to undergoing a successful digital transformation, and it starts with rethinking underlying business processes and human resources (HR) policies.

The workforce is a critical part of the digital transformation, not just a beneficiary of it. Manufacturers can digitize their plants with all the technology they want, but unless business leaders consider the expectations and needs of employees—both hourly and salaried—as part of a holistic digital transformation strategy, manufacturers may find their workforce uninspired and unprepared to drive innovation and deliver the business results they expect.

It's vital for manufacturers to understand the dual-importance of fostering a tech-friendly work environment and investing in their people resources. For example, a recent survey from The Workforce Institute at Kronos indicates there is an undeniable demand from the [workforce for technology](#) to improve daily tasks like scheduling and shift swapping. Nearly half (47 percent) of employees have had a time-off request rejected by their employer within the last year, with manufacturers most commonly rejecting vacation requests. At the same time, a staggering 90 percent of employees worldwide think their organization can improve scheduling—which would inherently impact the work-life balance of the impacted workforce.

By including HR in upfront discussions about their organization's digital transformation, manufacturers will have a greater sense of what the future of work entails, and what it takes to provide a modern and engaging employee experience as the foundation for a successful digital transformation.

Understanding Employees' Workplace Expectations

Workplace technology was once far more innovative and superior to anything that was available for consumer use, but the opposite is true today: Close to half of manufacturing employees (49 percent) agree it is easier to search for new movies on Netflix than to check the details of their employee benefits, according to [another recent survey](#) by The Workforce Institute. Nearly half of employees (48 percent) wish their workplace technology performed just like their personal technology, and 35 percent (and 39 percent of Gen Z employees) feel their job is harder than it should be because of outdated processes and legacy technology.

Frustrated with how long it takes managers to approve time-off and schedule requests, more than a quarter of employees (28 percent) wish their organization would embrace self-scheduling, allowing them to build their own schedules or select preferred shifts that make it easier to manage personal responsibilities outside of work. By and large, employees want solutions that make it easier to work their way: swapping shifts, seeking coverage from colleagues, and opting into open shifts for more hours—especially via a mobile phone or tablet.

In the age of digitization, manufacturers that provide employees with responsive solutions that match the ease of use and real-time nature of the applications they use in their personal lives can build an engaging employee experience and support their efforts to recruit and retain talent—which remains a [top priority across the industry](#). On the flip side, if manufacturers fail to prioritize the needs of their workforce while undergoing a digital transformation, meeting the expectations of employees will become increasingly difficult.

Including HR in the Transformation Conversation

For the most part, employees want to do well by their employer, and vice versa. However, without ample communication with stakeholders across the organization, it can be easy for organizations to undermine their own employee experience with antiquated attitudes about workforce management and HR processes.

When undertaking digital transformation, manufacturers should consider the technological and people-centric upgrades that will enable the workforce to operate at full capacity. This might include real-time labor analytics to help managers make informed operational decisions; intelligent self-scheduling and shift-swapping technology; and real-time performance data that can help managers have constructive conversations and provide transparency to employees about what is required of them to advance in the organization.

Involving HR throughout the digital transformation will help to ensure that manufacturers' most valuable resource—their people—remains a top priority throughout the process. After all, digital changes that emphasize a positive employee workplace experience are one of the most important differentiators for recruiting and retaining top talent.

Employee-centric solutions powered by artificial intelligence and machine learning are not only transforming the future of smart factories—they're making great strides in engaging employees as a core component of business success from the outset. By investing in the workforce today, organizations can begin to fundamentally improve engagement and drive productivity, both of which are essential parts of any manufacturer's digital transformation.

Bottom line: In the move to the digital era, don't underestimate the value of the workforce—it's what will separate the encumbered from the empowered.