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BY: The Manufacturer

Despite debating the merits of paperless for the past two decades, very few manufacturing firms have actually adopted an entirely paperless operation. Mark Hughes says it is time to stop talking about it – and start adopting.

Advances in technology, as well as changes in legislation and the rapidly evolving marketplace, are only set to amplify the need for paperless manufacturing in 2019.

Today, more regulatory and compliance authorities are demanding the automated generation of digital records, putting increasing pressure on manufacturers to go paperless.

While investing in the right software will be crucial in helping to stay agile and responsive to market change, these systems are driven by data. This data must be stored electronically so that it can be accessed by anyone across the organisation, at any time.

Increased accuracy, seamless electronic record-keeping, and easily shared data are just a few of the benefits to be gained from embracing technology and eradicating paper.

Businesses that fail to automate their operations will run the risk of being unable to navigate today's turbulent economic and political landscape, let alone capitalise on growth opportunities.



Eliminating inaccuracy

Compliance has and will continue to be of great importance for businesses. Breaching GDPR guidelines, for example, could cost firms an eye-watering 4% of annual turnover.

Accuracy and transparency is a necessity when it comes to compliance, which means that sticking with paper record-keeping is leading to multitudes of inaccuracies, which is costing the industry millions of pounds each year.

Food and beverage is an industry where accuracy is particularly crucial. The frequency of high-profile, large-scale food recalls has become too commonplace for comfort.

Businesses that are forced to recall large amounts of product over safety, hygiene, or labeling concerns can incur catastrophic damage, both in monetary and reputational terms.

This reinforces the need for optimal levels of traceability, quality, and regulatory compliance to minimize damaging product recalls, as well as risks to consumers.

Overcoming the obstacles

While the benefits of going paperless might seem obvious, manufacturers still have yet to completely remove paper from the factory floor, decades later than was initially predicted.

Despite various technological advances, manufacturers still appear to be unable to overcome the obstacles standing in their way to an entirely paperless environment.

Indeed, the transition from paper can prove daunting. There is a perception that digitization will require a complete system overhaul; but digitization doesn't have to be complicated, the move to paperless can often begin with a single process.

Concern that current workers lack the skills needed to adapt to this digital transition is another barrier to a paperless work environment. New technologies often require extensive training and many businesses worry that their existing workforce will not be equipped for these changes.



Despite this, manufacturers should be aware that the new workforce demographic is excited to embrace the latest digital innovations.

According to research, 41% of young people overall want the opportunity to work with the latest innovations, including voice-activated technologies that connect them with resources on-demand or that automate tasks.

Indeed, 33% of millennials say they want to be at the cutting edge of new developments and to interact with new technologies in ways that boost their productivity in the workplace.

The way we interact with machines, robots and the world around us continues to evolve, speeding up everyday actions and making these easier. Switching to a paperless environment, bolstered by software and tools, will help deliver a more seamless user experience for employees on the factory floor and in other areas of an organisation.

Say goodbye to paper

The need for paperless manufacturing simply cannot be ignored. Those that refuse to embrace it run the risk of falling behind in today's increasingly digital landscape.

Even long-established companies are overhauling their day-to-day operations – WD-40, a globally renowned manufacturer of household products, has completely automated its order processing, shipping and invoicing.

In doing so, the firm has streamlined its business processes into a single system. This has allowed the business to not only free up employee time, but also enabled improved inter-office communications between the company's multiple dispersed sites.

Southco, a manufacturer of engineered access hardware solutions, began its global digital transformation journey more than a decade ago, with the implementation of various automated processes across its factories, integrated and managed by an effective enterprise management solution (EMS).

By moving away from paper and connecting software with processes, the firm was able to transform its facilities into smart factories and as a result reduce product defects, downtime and waste.



Another firm embracing paperless manufacturing is BV Dairy, a dairy producer that went paperless with Epicor DocStar – an enterprise content management (ECM) solution.

DocStar began to yield benefits shortly after implementation, freeing up time in the accounts department and releasing staff to perform more complex tasks, thereby helping fuel corporate growth.

The system also removed employees' daily need to manually sort through over 100 delivery notes, saving 10 hours per week.

Under the new system, delivery notes are now scanned in, cross-referenced, marked as received, and stored in both DocStar and Epicor ERP (enterprise resource planning) to permit cross-referencing and searching from each.

The new system has increased the producer's accuracy, efficiency, traceability and flexibility, and helped streamline processes.

Get it right

While the benefits of going paperless are many and obvious, to take advantage of them manufacturing firms must ensure they have the right IT infrastructure in place.