

Why a change in culture will benefit productivity in this country

Third roundtable event covers culture change learnings

The first event organised by the brand-new UK Automation Forum was streamed in March under the title: Automation – how will greater adoption benefit UK PLC?

The third panel discussion organised by the UK Automation Forum took place on stage during the Robotics and Automation: For a Sustainable Future 2024 event organised by the MTC in May.

The panel of experts included participants from Automate UK the MTC (Manufacturing Technology Centre), the High Value Manufacturing Catapult, Make UK and The Manufacturer magazine.

The subject came about as the make do and mend attitudes of the past can still be found at many UK manufacturers, whereas many global competitors are prouder of brand-new automation options. The panel therefore discussed how changing these attitudes can help with buy in to new technology.

Takeaways from the event were:

1. Governments of whatever hue have still not fully understood the potential that manufacturing brings to UK PLC, although it was felt that there were signs of change. Certainly, the 2024 General Election campaigns had embraced the need for more apprenticeship support, for instance.

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2. Manufacturing firms of whatever size must get over their reluctance to invest in the latest automation equipment, especially the finance personnel who need to be educated into the benefits that automation brings to an organisation.
3. SMEs have a natural culture based around innovation, but this doesn't always apply to new tech. There is external support out there to help with adoption, but the often negative attitude towards seeking out advice needs to be broken.
4. The workforce is central to technology adoption and are the key to making the best of automation. A more diverse workforce is also critical to the manufacturing sector's success going forward.
5. Education must adapt to the needs of current manufacturing businesses which can be addressed by educators themselves, as well as individual firms engaging with local schools and colleges in a regular basis.

In a report published over ten years ago, the All-Party Parliamentary Manufacturing Group believed that the UK did not have a clear understanding of what constitutes our national industrial culture and the interactions that shape it. It also felt that the Government showed little understanding of the sector and what was needed to take the sector forward...

And so did the panel believe that this had changed since this report came out in 2013? The answers were mixed...some felt they were not sure a lot had changed as there are still issues in how politicians viewed manufacturing. Nothing to do with one political party over another, just that the Government in general, had not supported the sector.

It was felt that the Autumn Statement pledging support for Advanced Manufacturing was a start, but this still ignored a huge raft of the manufacturing industry. On panellist wondered who the companies in the unadvanced manufacturing sector were! However, they also believed that manufacturing was in a better place now with public perception and government perception, but that we do come from a long way back.

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It was felt that the pandemic had highlighted manufacturing in a positive light, not just with developing and producing the vaccine so quickly but also the fact that the industry worked throughout every lockdown, adapting to keep the nation fed and watered. The sector employs 2.6 million people and, it was felt, is no longer a dirty word and politicians are recognising it.

We are still a global manufacturing nation...we are fourth in Europe, R&D investment is high, exports are high even though we've had to cope with Brexit. And most of the sector want to adopt more robotics and automation. One of the reasons for optimism, is that manufacturing is one of the best routes to sustainability growth that the country has.

The government sees that we can deliver this going forward.

Finally, in this 'Making Good' report, the politicians felt that the manufacturing sector itself should better understand its own industrial culture, and in turn accelerate the adoption of competitive business practices.

The panel felt that there is still some reluctance to invest in new equipment, not with the engineers, but often the finance side of businesses that don't want to invest, possibly because they don't understand all of the benefits. The panel felt this had to be addressed if the industry was going to be successful going forward.

The finance sector must be a target to get the positive message about automation to. It is quite evident that we need to make it easier to create an environment for investment, said the panel.

The discussion was then opened up into other areas...firstly, what are manufacturing's most important assets? And how important is the role of the workforce in driving and delivering change to improve investment in technology and productivity? The panel felt that the workforce was central to technology adoption and was more important than ever. They are the key to making the best use of new technology and the narrative is starting to shift to take this on.

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And with difficulties in recruiting across the board, companies need to train up, not just recruit. Panellists thought the skills agenda was really driving this...doing more with less...adoption of automation benefits from this. There is also the importance of digital literacy – and with the average age of 52 in manufacturing, this is important. Maybe industry could think about short courses of digital literacy, especially for time-strapped SMEs.

The power of people is key to the power of technology...empowering people...the sweet spot is getting the shopfloor to influence a company to adopt the best technology, making their jobs more rewarding.

It is true that manufacturing is going through an unheralded transformation and, said the panel, if you don't bring your people with you, every single change programme will fail...

Culture is at the heart of these change programmes – you need to buy in...

The opportunity to reskill/redeploy people does require a mindset shift...and a change in the apprenticeship levy, to make it more relevant to a wider range of training, would be a great help in this area. An understanding that the culture in our education system also needs to change to direct students onto the correct career paths. Schools need to stop pushing people towards university without considering the benefits of apprenticeships and vocational training.

Another area of discussion focused on the predominance of SMEs in the landscape, and whether they are holding back progress? Panellists felt that SMEs had a natural culture based around innovation but that they don't always have the financial resource and expertise to implement new technology. They can change, adapt, and modify quickly, but new ways of supporting the SME community had to be found.

Often, SMEs were already on board with change, but because of their lack of resources, and time, they need assistance from industry to make the right investment decisions, and also to make it happen. Manufacturing includes over 99% SMEs who historically, don't seek out advice on automation, but rather prefer recommendations from other SMEs. That is fine, if you can find such suggestions.

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There is support out there...but how do we break this negative attitude towards seeking out advice?

The panel was then asked if we have the leadership to drive and support culture change in the UK? And it was felt that within businesses the culture is moving on through necessity, and the lack of skills and lack of available labour will make people go down the automation route. And does diversity and inclusion in the workplace result in greater innovation and a healthy bottom line? Yes, was the short and emphatic answer!

There are so many reports and research that says that greater diversity brings greater innovation, productivity and success, but we definitely need more women and girls in manufacturing as the figure just now is a paltry 24%. We are getting more girls and women into STEM education, but this is not feeding through to manufacturing. We need to look at the language...just using the word STEM can put people off...we need to revisit how we promote manufacturing and engineering.

Today's young people want flexibility of conditions and clear career paths are always required.

Getting the positive messages about manufacturing out there is key and the reason Make UK runs its National Manufacturing Day each year (26 September in 2024). The panel felt that the whole of industry should get behind these kind of initiatives to up the media coverage.

The day involves friends, families, local communities, government departments and job seekers joining up with local businesses – inspiring younger people and attracting people returning to the workforce.

The panel believed that businesses need to engage more with people within their local schools and communities to show there is a positive route out of education into manufacturing.

In terms of inspiring a new generation and influencing worker career choices, the panel felt that story telling around manufacturing is beneficial. For instance, telling the net zero story by being more efficient with resources is an excellent message to get across to young people today. And the current generation is brought up with new technology, phones, Xbox etc so if you've got old kit, they are not going to be impressed.

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We need to promote the fact that factories are not full of old equipment, or dark and dirty places to work anymore - they now include new and interesting kit, including robots. We definitely need to tell the story better to make it more exciting. And at exhibitions and career events, let's see apprentices manning the stands so it's not all about stuffy old men. And our educators need to understand that manufacturing is aspirational ... we need to get away from the "Don't mess around, or you'll end up working in a factory..." mentality.

Educating our educators would be a huge benefit...and also addressing the attitudes of parents towards manufacturing, too. It was felt that the media also has a huge part to play in not categorising manufacturing with dark satanic mills! However, this perception is beginning to change, but ever so slowly.

The panel believed that engaging with communities, educators the wider public can have a real ROI - if you organise open days at factories, future apprentices may be on that tour, for instance. There are lots of tools in the toolbox, but the lack of an industrial strategy is certainly not helpful. A more stable political environment to deliver longer term consistency can only help businesses with future investment plans.

It was felt by the panel and audience members that apprenticeships are currently having a moment, offering kids from lower income families a career path without the expense of university. Young people from urban areas, too. Making the apprenticeship levy more inclusive and with a wider remit would also boost uptake and skills.

Training the current workforce in manufacturing of many, middle aged men, would also be a benefit to new technology adoption, as would 'educating' finance directors in manufacturing firms. Delivering short courses and day release schemes would help to get over the time constraints of the SME in adopting automation. Indeed, the new Metropolitan mayors have been investing their budgets on adult education and training, which should also bring benefit to manufacturing.

Using all the many tools in the toolbox can surely only benefit manufacturing growth going forward...

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