

EVENT LEARNINGS

Learnings from 2024's Forum discussions and plans for 2025

The first event organised by the UK Automation Forum in 2025 took place online in February and reviewed the host of topics covered in its inaugural year while asking if the environment for automation adoption in the UK has changed, and what will we see this year?

Learnings from the event included:

1. The UK Automation Forum is the brainchild of trade body Automate UK and aims to generate the collective views of multi-disciplinary experts to generate a meaningful voice of industry that can help drive more collaboration, educate industry on the benefits of automation and help break down the barriers to adoption
2. It's been a successful start for the UK Automation Forum with buy in from many business sectors including automation suppliers; trade associations; policy makers; educators; end users; retailers and young people
3. Audiences, whether at exhibitions, conferences or online, at the seven events have learnt about a plethora of issues including myth busting; demands of politicians, skills, finance and culture change to attracting young people to manufacturing and challenging the food industry to buy more robots
4. It's been a challenging year for robot sales but there has been some success in non-traditional automation user categories such as retail and food & beverage producers. This seems set to continue as increasing labour costs and labour shortages remain
5. This year will see Forum events build on last year's as topics are developed into new areas, all of which are designed to break down barriers to automation adoption. A new finance event and a future food technology event are just two in the pipeline

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Panelists Peter Williamson, executive chair of Automate UK, and Mike Wilson, chair of the UK Automation Forum and chief automation officer at the Manufacturing Technology Centre (MTC) began the discussion by outlining why the Forum was set up and its aims.

The UK Automation Forum is really the brainchild of Automate UK the new trade body that incorporates the PPMA, BARA and UKIVA that were rebranded as Automate UK in 2024. This rebrand presented the opportunity to create a vehicle that was very much automation focused and therefore it has brought together experts, end users, policy makers, suppliers and educators to talk about the challenges and relevant topics relating to the adoption of automation technology in the UK.

It is completely independent and highlights the collective views of the experts involved to generate a meaningful voice of industry that can help drive more collaboration, educate industry on the benefits of automation and help break down the barriers to adoption. Another aim of the Forum is to debunk the misinformation and myths that exist about how challenging it can be to adopt automation.

In reality, automation options are more accessible and more straightforward than many people might think, and this is a message that the group has already had some success on. For instance, in its launch event last March, a family-owned, SME manufacturing wheelbarrows told its robot adoption story that today, sees about 20 workers assembling wheelbarrows on its shop floor while 20 robots are welding, unloading tube bending and press handling, indeed all the more arduous and mundane tasks.

It is a great example of how a traditional SME can buy in to automation and do it very successfully while not making any of its people redundant. Instead, they have upskilled their workforce who now operate and program robots rather than perform the manual tasks themselves.

Proving that robots don't take jobs; they boost production and make businesses more competitive. They enable firms to employ more people and often, in better paid, more skilled roles because the robots are doing the mundane and the repetitive, the arduous kind of tasks. The kind of things that really, we shouldn't be getting people to do in 2025.

And the evidence backs this up. If you look at some of the largest adopters of automation and robotics in the UK, they're the big automotive plants and their suppliers and they are growing and adding staff and developing more opportunities. Jaguar Land Rover was on its knees and now if you look at it, it's probably the biggest adopter of robots in the UK. And a huge

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employer. So, it creates jobs, it creates wealth as opposed to doing the opposite, as many people fear.

Part of the reason as a country we didn't adopt a lot of automation was because we were too keen to rely on cheap labor in the manufacturing process. Of course, that's not so accessible now and so people are struggling to recruit and fill those roles which means automation now becomes much more attractive.

How successful was the first year of the Forum?

Firstly, there were seven different events during the course of the year which were hosted at various different exhibitions, conferences or online covering a range of topics. From myth busting, ideas for policy makers, skills, finance and culture change to attracting young people to manufacturing and challenging the food industry to buy more robots. However, one of the key successes has been the close collaboration with other trade associations and organisations as well as the buy-in that we've had from educators, end users and even High Street retailers.

Professionals from all sectors have been keen to get involved, sit around the table and have the conversations that need to be had to make a difference to UK PLC. This engagement has been key. The Forum has also been successful in getting this message out to as many people as possible and we have been encouraged by the number of people attending our events, logging on to watch the events, and also watching them further down the line once they've been recorded and uploaded onto our website. Visitors to the website have certainly increased during the course of 2024, and with the events we've got planned for 2025, we expect to see that continue.

And the Forum is keen to hear from any companies reading this that have a story to tell in this area. Listening to a business that has been through an automation journey is the best type of information the Forum can share. It endorses that this technology is very appropriate to all companies of whatever size throughout all of UK manufacturing. The Forum also welcomes anybody that's willing to come forward and say what has put them off adopting automation? What were their challenges? What were their barriers? Was it finance? Was it skills? Please do contact us through Automate UK as the more people tell us about this kind of feedback, the better.

How was business in 2024 and what could lie ahead...

It's true to say that 2024 was a challenging year, with political instability and a lack of

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confidence in the market which has been reflected in BARA (British Automation and Robot Association) member surveys. These surveys cover sales figures that are fed into IFR, the International Federation of Robotics, to build a picture of the market.

There was a decline in sales last year, partly caused by less demand in the automotive industry, but certain sectors that would historically rely on cheaper labour like retail along with food and beverage production have seen quite a significant increase in the usage of robots. In 2023, these sectors only accounted for 8% of all robots sold by the members we surveyed whereas in 2024, the percentage has grown to 20%. In these sectors, there's been a significant growth in deployment. And from our understanding, it's been mainly two factors that have driven this – the availability, and the cost of labour.

Initially, it's been driven by the availability of labour as people are not prepared to do some of the dull, repetitive, dirty and dangerous jobs which in the food industry, has seen a significant increase in end of line palletising installations. By automating this process, companies can increase throughput and also move existing workers into areas where they are going to be better utilised.

And as we move into 2025, we are seeing an increase in inquiries to our members about potential automation projects which we surmise is caused by the concerns about the increasing costs of labour. Companies are clearly thinking about automation as a way of being able to grow rather than trying to recruit additional staff. It will be interesting to see how the numbers pan out in 2025 as to whether this initial interest actually manifests itself into an increase in demand. However, it is worth bearing in mind that increasing automation deployment will put pressure on our integration and automation supply chain if these things really do come to pass during the next 12 months.

Also, a Make UK Report last year found that there's something like 58,000 vacancies in manufacturing and there aren't 58,000 people sitting at home wanting to work in manufacturing. So, we would argue that the only way we're going to fill those vacancies is through an increase in automation adoption.

Today, we don't just have skills shortages, we have genuine labour shortages. So, we've got to do something different which it seems, the Government has started to recognise and so as a start, we are going to get an industrial strategy (which we haven't had for quite a while). We do know, through our conversations with Department of Business and Trade and the Department of Science and Innovation Technology, that there is increasing interest in robotics and automation because the Government desperately want to grow the economy, and they recognise that productivity is a key challenge in terms of achieving that.

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They see automation as one of the solutions to that challenge, which is a positive, but we need to engage politicians more (which was covered in one of our Forum events before the General Election). And we need to get them to focus on our sector of manufacturing as there's thousands and thousands of people who've consulted on this industrial strategy from a plethora of non-manufacturing organisations. All of which, will be vying for support and funding which makes it imperative that Automate UK, MTA, GAMBICA, the MTC and the like, continue to work closely with our members and with each other.

For instance, if every Automate UK member asked their local MP to be a special guest at our exhibitions (Automation UK, the PPMA Show or Vision UK), then they would actually see how amazing and vibrant UK manufacturing is. While also seeing what value their constituency businesses add to the economy and learning about some of the challenges they face. It is incumbent on us to pull together the evidence either in quantitative in terms of data or qualitative in terms of success stories, that the Government will base their decisions on.

Building on the success of 2024 with our future plans

There is certainly a plan to continue to run Forum events at exhibitions and conferences in 2025, as there were some excellent audience numbers throughout last year. An example of this was our panel at the PPMA Show in September that discussed robot adoption in the food industry that included senior experts from Gregg's and M&S. Some of the key findings from this discussion was to take baby steps, don't aim for lights out from the beginning and to pick a relatively easy task to automate first.

Following on from this, we are currently planning an event to take place at the Appetite for Engineering Conference in March where we'll be looking at potential future technology that will help the food industry going forward.

The event we ran on access to finance last year, which included participants from NatWest to discuss a report from Make UK, will also be built on in 2025. A survey of members from several trade associations is currently being undertaken on the issues related to finance to better inform this next event. This is being carried out as it seems that banks think that the businesses don't need the finance as they're providing all the finance they're being asked for, whereas businesses say they can't get access to finance.

To get over this disconnect, an event later this year will discuss the output from the survey to see if we can all understand what's happening, in more depth. Building on the kind of conversations we had last year that hopefully, should help in breaking down another barrier to adoption.

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Another event that is planned for March (Online at 2pm on 6 March) is also designed to combat the perceived barriers to automation adoption through explaining one of the tools that is designed to identify where a business is and how capable it is of taking on the new technologies or even existing technologies. This is called SIRI, or the Smart Industry Readiness Index, and we've got two leading minds together on the panel who will be explaining what the benefits of SIRI are; how it works; and how businesses can use these tools to identify challenges as well as these skill sets within a business. Therefore, if we utilise these skills correctly, there is a way for us to adopt the technology without it being daunting or having to go out and use huge additional resources.

Trends and projections for 2025

A trend expected to continue over from 2024 is that of industries that are not traditional adopters of automation being forced into, in the best possible way, adopting some form of automation because of the need for cost-control and to mitigate the shortage of labour to fill certain roles. These industries will continue to invest and look at how automation can be central to their growth and the development of their businesses.

The cost of labour and the availability of labour will certainly continue while the cost of automation is always coming down, so increased adoption should be a given. However, if UK manufacturing kind of woke up tomorrow and said robots are a great idea, we're going to buy 20,000 of them, then the UK supply chain could not deliver. This is potentially a concern, and we need to find ways of increasing the availability of the skilled people to implement these kind of solutions. We have lots of challenges in terms of the availability of general engineers as well as attracting young people, including more girls, into engineering and manufacturing. And the younger generation are tech savvy, so we need to give them an environment where they're going to interact with technology as the skills issue isn't really there for them.

And manufacturing needs to recognise this, especially if it wants younger generations to be attracted as the workforce of the future, it has got to adopt technology as one of the attractions. The final Forum event of last year included three apprentices on the panel to provide insights into their engineering journey and where they were hoping to go and what the opportunities were. A telling response to the question of what kind of job you want when you finish your apprenticeship, 'Well, I don't know yet, because the job I want to do has probably not yet been created.' This apprentice had certainly grasped the fact that technology is going to bring lots of opportunities over the coming years.

Perception change is also important in recruiting a more diverse range of people into

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manufacturing sites. A lot of work is needed to make the perception change within schools (and parents) to make engineering a highly skilled profession and one that's admired. There's a cultural challenge here and we have to change that narrative to communicate that engineering is a very skilled, rewarding career.

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