KEEPING THE CHANNELS OPEN

The recent cyberattack on the NHS was caused by a reliance on obsolete software, and manufacturers are running a similar risk, say 123 Insight

CONTRIBUTOR **123 INSIGHT**

Despite all the talk of Industry 4.0 in recent years, many manufacturers are still wary of making the change. That, says Martin Bailey, marketing manager at 123 Insight, means many companies are still running out-of-date, redundant software – something that can have catastrophic consequences.

"You only have to look at the Wannacry attack on the NHS last year," Bailey explains. "There were so many computers out there still running Windows XP, which made them extremely vulnerable to cyberattacks. Windows XP is over 15 years old, and Microsoft stopped supporting it in 2014. It's imperative that everyone keeps their software and hardware up-to-date."

Get a backbone!

One issue that compounds the complexities around keeping a company on up-to-date software is simply the number of different systems in use. Spreadsheets, databases created on unsupported products and bespoke software systems, often written by staff that have long since gone make for a whole world of pain and confusion when trying to standardise and update. However, an MRP system will replace many of these, bringing business areas such as sales, purchasing, stock, production and despatch together under one digital roof.

As Bailey notes: "A good MRP system will be the backbone of your company and will drastically reduce the number of systems in use, meaning fewer applications to update. And, as all customers benefit from 123 Insight's low monthly subscription model there's no software update fees involved as these are included. The updates themselves can easily be installed by users, but we also offer a remote update service for a small fee, so users can ensure they are always on the latest release."

Clear lines of communication

Replacing spreadsheets and databases may not be the entire story though. Often, companies will have other systems that communicated, or at least relied on these and would therefore need to exchange data with MRP. Wannacry affected many PCs because companies didn't update the OS and/or software for fear of breaking systems connected to them. 123 Insight's

Software Development Kit (SDK) can bridge the gap. "We have customers that have connected weigh scales, company intranets and bespoke testing equipment to 123insight [123 Insight's MRP/ERP system]. The SDK gives customers a bullet-proof way of interfacing with our software that they know won't change when the software gets updated," Bailey explains. "If there are any updates to any part of the software, the interaction between 123insight and any in-house systems will remain the same. The communication between the two remains open."

One company that has benefitted from the SDK's openness is County Antrim-based Canyon Europe. The firm manufactures injection-moulded plastic parts for spray bottles, in a variety of colours. "Every time they needed to change the colour of the plastic, they had to flush out the machine," says Bailey. "This was a very time-consuming process that was

> ## A good MRP system will be your backbone"
> **Martin Bailey, 123 Insight**

disrupting the entire factory."

Canyon Europe used 123insight to reconfigure their weekly production schedule and improve their efficiency. The SDK is used to gather live information from machinery and feed it into 123insight. Their own in-house Data Acquisition System (DAS) had to be fully integrated into the whole system, as well.

The firm's operations manager, Graeme Bennett, says that the fact that the SDK remains the same has been a major advantage.

"The biggest benefit to us is that the SDK is maintained by 123 Insight with every release, so it just continually works," he explains. "The introduction of SDK was important, as we wouldn't have the link to DAS without it. We're running the current version, and every time we've done an upgrade there's been a benefit to us."

The software-based approach has brought major benefits to Canyon Europe. As machines were no longer often producing short runs, waste dropped from around 4-5% to 0.1%. "The machines can only run while the components are available, and that's why 123insight has been so instrumental to us," continues Bennett. "It's making sure that the machine components are available line-side, in full and on time."

SMEs see the benefits of a consistent approach

Smaller manufacturers, in particular, can benefit from consistency of a common system throughout the company, says Bailey. "SMEs often just rely on one IT person across the whole organisation, who may not necessarily have the skills needed to identify potential problems when many different systems are in use," he explains. "Either that, or they outsource to a third party who will know of some of the common issues, but only do the jobs that are asked of them. If the question isn't asked of them by the site's IT team, it won't be answered." An MRP system eradicates this, as there is just one system to maintain.

"An MRP system also needs to provide easy mechanisms for searching data and analysing it," said Bailey. "At 123 Insight, we are looking to reduce the barrier of knowledge for manufacturers. The system has been designed so that a customer only enters data once, and that data follows through the whole system – you don't have to keep entering data at

different points, which reduces the possibility of error. We don't have customer and supplier records, we just have company records. You can have a company that is both a customer and a supplier under the same record. The information is just entered once, and it filters through every part of the software."

Consistency and streamlined processes also deliver quality, and Bailey explains that many customers have seen knock-on benefits during audits. "We've had customers tell us that audits that previously would have taken a day of frantically running around following paper-trails are now performed quietly on a laptop in under an hour," he says. "Having a single system that allows you to instantly drill down from a finished product to a serialised component or, inversely, to find out which products a batch of components ended up in is immensely powerful."

Budget shouldn't be a barrier to progress, either, Bailey continues. "As long as companies have a backbone system such as 123insight, when they decide they are ready to make the leap to the next step to something like Industry 4.0, the infrastructure will be in place," he says. "123insight's SQL server-based database is industry-standard, so data mining is very easy. Couple that with the SDK and communicating with today's and tomorrow's technology will not be a problem."

Finally, there are future-proofed benefits that may not be immediately obvious, continues Bailey. "Take the upcoming GDPR data protection regulations coming into force on 25 May this year," he says. "We have to be aware of how customers use our product to store their customers' data. You need a system that will help you to comply with the regulations."

When it comes to IT, consistency and simplicity are king. Keeping a clear and open channel throughout the entire business will bring benefits for companies of all sizes, but especially SMEs. As data becomes increasingly important for manufacturers, having an simple to use system that can easily exchange information with other applications will ensure your company is well positioned, both today and into the future.

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