

# ERP with everything

*There's more than one way to achieve Industry 4.0-syle integration, says Guy Amoroso of 123 Insight.*

These days, Industry 4.0 and the Internet of Things are very much in vogue, observes Guy Amoroso, managing director of ERP provider 123 Insight, but he believes that many SMEs are left bewildered by these new buzzwords which essentially just mean the same thing - 'connectivity'. Often companies will want to connect devices and pieces of equipment within the four walls of their own enterprise—on the factory floor, or in warehouses, for instance, generating transactions, or capturing data for subsequent analysis. There is a belief, often mistakenly made by misinterpreting these current trends that they have to invest heavily to connect a given item to the internet. Actually, all that needs to happen is to build a relatively minor bridge to an infrastructure that already spans the business – your ERP system.

One aspect of the present focus on Industry 4.0 and the Internet of Things risks deterring some manufacturers, especially at the smaller end of the spectrum—a market with which 123 Insight, through its award-winning 123insight ERP product, is also very familiar.

"It's important to remember that the end objective is integration, and to achieve the exchange of data through a connection," he stresses. "Rather than complicating matters by connecting, say, CNC machine monitoring hardware or automatic component counting equipment directly to the internet, you simply need a way to collect that information locally and then transfer it to your core business software."

Moreover, he adds, traditional connection and integration technologies are likely to offer lower costs of integration than the Industry 4.0 approaches being promoted by many technology providers.

"Most equipment on the shopfloor that requires or generates data of any kind will have been supplied with an easy and well-documented method of transferring it in or out. Often the amount of data that needs to be transferred is minimal – effectively just a few columns of numbers that signify what process was completed and when. If a business doesn't need a high-tech approach to integration, why should it pay for it?," he emphasises. "It's overkill—and arguably expensive overkill, at that."

So how, then, do 123 Insight's own customers approach the issue of connecting their businesses—and ERP systems—to devices and pieces equipment? The starting point, explains Amoroso, is 123 Insight's Software Development Kit (SDK), a means of safely and securely passing data into 123insight without having to write directly to its database tables.

The kit consists of a suite of SQL stored procedures and supporting documentation—covering such things as the expected parameters, and error handling—for a developer to use when wanting to link an application or device to 123insight. Not only does the provision of ready-written code cut development time and reduce risk, he explains, but it also serves to 'future proof' any device integration by providing a common 'gateway' that does not change as successive versions of 123insight change.

"Quite simply, a manufacturer can be confident that any third-party links that it builds in order to push data into 123insight will not need to be significantly reworked when software upgrades are applied," he sums up. "Any piece of integration is a one-off development effort, using a straightforward and affordable development platform—and most emphatically not a maintenance nightmare that goes on consuming development budget long after the project has been completed."

So what integration projects do 123 Insight customers undertake with the company's SDK? The answer, says Amoroso, is that it's many of the kind of projects that

manufacturers might be tempted to undertake under the banner of Industry 4.0 and the Internet of Things.

In other words, he stresses, perfectly ordinary manufacturing businesses are already reaping many of the benefits—including significant numbers of 123 Insight's own customers.

Take Suffolk-based electronics contract manufacturer Cogent Technology, for instance, which uses 123 Insight's SDK as a means of linking Bill of Materials and parts master data to external systems. Interestingly, too, adds Amoroso, Cogent has also used the SDK to link 123insight to external test equipment, pulling test data into the 123insight SQL database.

Or Country Antrim-based Canyon Europe, who manufacture plastic injection moulded products. They were initially quoted £35,000 to integrate their Data Acquisition System by a local consultancy after a 30-minute tour of the facility and no real exposure to the integration required, but after talking with 123 Insight they were able to develop a flexible, stable data exchange between the systems that was future-proofed when either system is upgraded.

Or, alternatively, Powys-based Dynacast UK Ltd, a manufacturer of high-precision zinc die castings and assemblies. Selling parts by weight, and faced with constantly changing material costs, it is vital for Dynacast to have an accurate and automated means of correctly capturing the weight of each order shipped—orders that might be for tens of thousands of components, each weighing less than half a gramme.

The solution? Again, 123 Insight's SDK, which integrates the company's weigh stations into its 123insight ERP system. Operators at the despatch weigh stations scan the bar code of each customer order, and the relevant quantities for each line item are displayed. As components are placed into the shipping carton, an on screen counter calculates in real-time the number of parts in the box, versus the number required. Once the desired count has been reached, the item is marked as complete and 123insight is immediately updated.

And these are not isolated examples, stresses Amoroso.

Indeed, he adds, the very fact that the SDK makes integration so straightforward means that many 123 Insight customers turn out to make use of it.

"Using pre-written SQL calls cuts development time, reduces risk, and makes integration a simple and straightforward affair, using SQL skills that most IT people possess," he points out. "And the licensing is as straightforward as the product itself."

And here, of course, 123 Insight has largely written the playbook in how to demystify and de-risk the process of acquiring an ERP system. Many of the company's sales prospects arrive by way of word-of-mouth recommendations from existing customers, intrigued by 123 Insight's 'try before you buy' approach.

Forget high-pressure sales cycles and hefty upfront licensing costs: would-be customers sign up for one of 123 Insight's free evaluation workshops, held across the UK each month, and prove to themselves that 123insight will meet their needs by then attending the company's intensive 'hands on' six-day no-obligation training courses. If they then decide that 123insight isn't for them, they're free to walk away without paying a penny—otherwise they simply subscribe on a monthly basis for the licenses that they need.

"We like to think that it's a compelling sales process for a compelling sales proposition," sums up Amoroso. "First, 123insight is easily affordable, with no upfront cost and a low monthly subscription fee that includes maintenance. Second, there's no fixed-period 'tie in': it really is 'pay as you go', for as long or as little as you like. Third, 123insight is suitable for all types of manufacturing businesses and manufacturing business models—make-to-order, build-to-forecast, customise to-order, bespoke, you name it. Fourth, there's no customisation involved: everyone uses the same standard software, making implementation quicker. And fifth, because it's easy to implement and use, there's a rapid ROI."

What's not to like? ■

**"It really is pay as you go"**

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