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# Weathering the storm

With an unpredictable 12 months ahead, manufacturers should be looking to invest in their futures, says Martin Bailey of 123 Insight

**N**ext year promises to be a turbulent one, both in manufacturing and the wider world. Brexit, and the financial uncertainty and political turmoil that comes with it, will cause unpredictable and unprecedented levels of disruption to industry. But, says Martin Bailey, marketing manager of ERP software provider 123 Insight, it could also offer an opportunity for savvy manufacturers to get ahead of the competition.

"Nobody yet knows the true impact of Brexit, as we haven't even pressed the button to leave yet," he explains. "Both sides of the campaign are still dishing out messages of optimism and dread in equal measure, but the smartest businesses are taking advantage of any uncertainty with a period of reflection."

Investing in IT infrastructure can go a long way to seizing this advantage. "Companies should now be taking time to look at their processes and infrastructure to see what they can do now, whilst economic conditions continue to be strong," says Bailey. "This will put themselves at an economical advantage and to make the most of any opportunities that Brexit, or any other period of uncertainty, can offer. That way, whichever way the wind blows, they will be well-placed to deal with it."

On the technology front, however, Bailey predicts a year of consolidation, not drastic innovation. While most manufacturers are now familiar, at least, with the potential that technology can bring, they now need to invest in and implement strategies that can help achieve that. "One such investment is connectivity," says Bailey. "By connecting equipment such as machine tools on the shop floor companies will be able to acquire much more accurate and instantaneous data about the status of any given job or component and pass it back to their ERP systems."

Companies like 123 Insight can help with this. Indeed, the firm's Software Development Kit (SDK) allows manufacturers to integrate manufacturing hardware and provide real time job data back to the ERP software. Bailey cites the example of Canyon Europe, a manufacturer of injected moulded products based in County Antrim, Northern Ireland. "The company integrated a data acquisition system from 123 Insight to capture the count

of parts manufactured, waste streams and any machine downtime." The SDK has helped Canyon Europe develop a First-In First-Out stock management system, as well as achieve a drop in waste from 4% to just 0.1%. "The machines can only run while the components are available, and that's why 123 Insight is so instrumental to us," explains Graeme Bennett, operations manager at Canyon Europe. "It is making sure that the machine components are available line side, in full and on time."

## Enterprise systems still have value

ERP systems provide a beacon of familiarity amongst new, 'shinier' technologies like Big Data and the Internet of Things, says Bailey. In fact, if anything, new technology has made the enterprise systems even more crucial, and the two can work together to streamline a company's operations. "ERP is the backbone of the organisation and it makes sense to have one secure repository for business data wherever possible, regardless of where that data physically resides," explains Bailey. "With today's virtualisation technologies, like the cloud, data can exist anywhere and still be accessed easily."

Heater manufacturer Ecoburner, based in Waterford in Ireland, took full advantage of this when they implemented 123 Insight's 123insight software but didn't want to be

lumbered with potentially complex IT infrastructure.

"We're a relatively small company," said Ciaran Doyle, Ecoburner's CFO. "We don't have in-house IT or server support people and decided from the outset that if we were going to take 123insight on as a monthly subscription why not take same approach for our servers and emails. We'd then have a set IT costs per month without any additional in-house costs. We decided to rent some server space from a company in Manchester, and our 123insight database and applications are hosted there, which we can then access remotely from anywhere."

## A secure future

It's important to perform due diligence on both new and existing technology to mitigate against security risks. Next year, Bailey says, manufacturers should be looking more seriously than ever to shore up their assets, particularly off the back of Chancellor Philip Hammond's new focus on cyber security (<http://tinyurl.com/gu3os4z>). "Security breaches are never far from the news headlines, and manufacturers are as much at risk as anyone else," Bailey explains. "The more fragmented your systems, the more potential there is for hackers to infiltrate it. By combining systems companies can lessen their exposure to such issues, also reducing the number of systems that have to

be learnt, supported and paid for in the process."

Returning to the wider market, there may also be an extra added bonus for manufacturers in the next 12 months. Bailey also sees the falling pound as an opportunity for manufacturers to get back to business. "There has been a trickle over recent years of manufacturing returning to the UK, but the weaker Sterling could increase this significantly," he says. "It's now cheaper than ever to manufacture in the UK and export overseas, while re-harnessing the quality that sets British manufacturing apart. We expect to see a substantial increase in UK manufacturing over the next few years as global businesses take full advantage, both of the lower pound and the UK's ability to build trade deals outside of the European Union."

Whatever the next 12 months have in store, it's important that your IT systems are in order. With their expertise, 123 Insight are well-placed to help you weather any incoming storms. They offer free Evaluation Workshops to show what ERP can deliver, backed up by no-obligation training. So, in today's uncertain times, investing in – and educating yourselves about – how IT can help steer your company around the rocks and into calmer waters is vital. ■

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