

Factory smart box

For operations directors and managers concerned about factory challenges, ERP does not provide the only answer, according to Jeremy Harford

Are you a production manager worrying about how to get a better handle on OEE, in terms of resource and/or labour utilisation? Do you need to improve recording of process compliance or materials traceability? For that matter, are you concerned about upping the ante on production status and WIP tracking, or quality, scrap, rework and yield reporting – either to help drive continuous improvement or simply to streamline data collection for regulatory purposes?

If so, you're probably scratching your head, pondering the considerable cost, complication and management interrogation that invariably precedes any suggestion of extending any ERP system... Even more so, if you're contemplating a separate MES (manufacturing execution system) implementation.

But Jeremy Harford, director at manufacturing specialist Mestec, insists there is a better, simpler, quicker and far less costly way. He observes that such common factory requirements are among the functions that ERP promised but, more often than not, failed to deliver. However, he argues that, precisely because of the costs and numbers of stakeholders involved in ERP, that's not the way to go. Equally, given the fact of MES functionality having long since been subsumed into ERP, neither is MES.

For him, what's required is a separate, out of the box solution that can be quickly configured, rapidly deployed and easily integrated to any ERP system, if required – which is exactly what his company offers (www.mestec.net). Just as important, though, he suggests that factory managers need to prioritise their wish lists, install one component and swiftly prove the value before moving on down the list.

"You can think of our product as a suite of standard components, each designed to solve common critical factory issues," explains Harford. "So operations people can pick off one challenge at a time, using one of the components, get rapid value and only move on if they need more. Everything can be integrated, so that information is entered once only. And we can easily hook into any ERP system, providing, for example, labour and materials consumed information, so that the system can show product or project costings to finance, based on real-time data."

What's more, he says that Mestec's factory components can fix shopfloor problems in as little as two days and for figures around £4,000. That's a far cry from the tens of thousands of pounds commonly associated with OEE or time and attendance systems, or indeed multi-media, paperless workbenches – all of which are also in the Mestec shopping

basket. Additionally, if it helps, components can be 'hosted' offsite, via the cloud and Mestec's database service.

"For example, if an operations director wants to implement OEE reporting, we can simply install our factory touch screens where they're needed and hook them up to the existing network – or install a wireless or mobile network, if that's a better solution – to link to the central unit," explains Harford. "Then we would configure the screens in manufacturing's language for the specific job, link up to barcode or RFID scanners, if required, sort out the workflow and do the training. Operatives then automatically enter the data, and managers get their reports and dashboards on any PC or portable device, exactly as they want them – showing real-time and historical manufacturing KPIs, trends, etc."

It's much the same for quality tracking, where management needs to understand yields at particular points in the production process. With the Mestec touch screens in place, operators simply select reasons for failure, with fault codes against product variants, works orders, etc. The component then tracks the passes and fails, and reasons against product type, operative, and so on, providing consolidated information on the dashboard to assist management decision making around continuous improvement, remedial action and more.

"Attempting to do that in ERP is too expensive, not least because all factories work in a different ways, so then you're into consultants. That's one of the reasons it's so rarely done during the initial ERP implementation. And that's why there are so many paper- and spreadsheet-based workarounds that break the information flows, cause errors, consume resource [in terms of data collection and management] and result in poor decision making." ■



Mestec's Jeremy Harford: prioritise wish lists and address one challenge at a time

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top ten components

- OEE (resource utilisation)
- OLE (labour utilisation and labour hours)
- Time and attendance, and timesheets
- Production status and WIP tracking
- Quality tracking, and scrap, rework and yield recording
- Stock tracking and management
- Multi-media and paperless workbench
- Flowline, network or asset-centric workflow
- Process compliance and regulatory traceability
- Food industry initiatives