

Empowerment 2.0: Engaging Employees With Smart Technology

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by Roy Thomas

According to Gallup's *2017 State of the American Workplace*, only 25 percent of U.S. manufacturing employees are engaged, meaning they are involved in, enthusiastic about and committed to their work and employer. An equal percentage are actively disengaged. These disengaged employees negatively impact their coworkers and cost employers anywhere from \$483 billion to \$605 billion each year in lost productivity.



For manufacturers that employ data-driven decision-making, the solution to disengagement lies in the numbers. The key is to translate data into a story that resonates with your employees — and chances are you already have the necessary tools to drive engagement.

Engagement is Essential to Productivity

The goal of employee engagement is improved business outcomes. Engaged employees care more about the products and services they deliver to customers and the overall performance of their organization; they are also more mindful of their surroundings and more aware of safety procedures to protect coworkers and customers.

Gallup research indicates that highly engaged business units experience a 40 percent reduction in [quality defects](#) and a 70 percent decrease in [employee safety incidents](#). Overall, the behaviors of highly engaged business units result in 21 percent [greater profitability](#) for their company.

The core of productivity will never change — leaders within the organization must provide the tools, training and resources, as well as encouragement and motivation, to perform at the optimum levels. The way we reach that core, however, has evolved. We're no longer stuck on the sidelines, forced to use observation as our only method of evaluating performance. The same business intelligence we use to adjust manufacturing processes can be applied to improve employee engagement.

Engagement is Attainable Through Data

The best way for an organization to maximize efficiency is to unlock the potential of its greatest asset — its people. For manufacturers that have transitioned to smart technology for regular operations, much of the heavy lifting is already complete —

you'll simply need to utilize the data you've already gathered to implement reviews, make real-time adjustments and measure immediate performance improvements.

Start by making your real-time metrics visible. For example, if you employ a manufacturing execution system, you can identify how quickly and accurately employees move through critical shop floor processes. Rather than restricting that data to management, share it with your staff. Giving employees line of sight across all process teams provides a standard they can measure their performance against, highlights quick wins and demonstrates how their performance contributes to the larger goal.

Better data gathering solutions also inspire more meaningful performance reviews. Rather than grading your employee based on observation alone, allow numbers to drive the conversation. Identify periods of time when their performance waned and give them a chance to explain — there may be underlying issues you can identify and work together to improve. Apply performance data to achievable goals and objectives, and empower staff to approach every day as a chance to improve.

Finally, use technology to encourage personal development and open feedback. Re-examine your technology on the shop floor — is it outdated, or, conversely, is it so advanced that your employees don't fully understand how to operate it? If you employ mobile technology such as tablets, build in a real-time messaging feature so that employees can send questions to management and receive an immediate response. Once your employees feel comfortable with smart devices, they're ready to employ technology when something goes awry — and sometimes, empowerment is about actually knowing when an employee should act.

Higher engagement won't happen overnight. Achieving greater productivity is a long-term process, requiring patience as you learn to better interpret data and your employees master new technology. Still, increases in productivity should be a daily goal warehouse-wide. An employee who upskills himself or herself one percent each day will see significant improvement in as little as a month.

Engagement is a Team Effort

No matter how you approach engagement, don't forget that improvement requires cooperation between management and staff. That doesn't mean you must blow up the hierarchy within your organization to achieve empowerment. However, you should use it in a way that places greater responsibility on those higher up to take care of their teams, as well as greater responsibility to ensure those below them have the tools they need to be successful decision makers.

When people are confident with their work and their employer, they are more willing to identify problems and suggest ways to improve quality and quantity of output. When you translate your data into actionable goals, you lay the foundation for greater engagement — and, ultimately, greater productivity — across your team.

Roy Thomas is the General Manager of Factory MES at [Aptean](#).