Talking about AI

Automation, integrated CNC machine links and modern business software have transformed the window, door and façade industry. Fabricators routinely achieve levels of workflow consistency and operational predictability that would have been unimaginable just 10 or 15 years ago writes Forterro product manager Carrie Tallet

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Solutions such as EvoNet and Logikal MES also allow businesses to monitor operational performance in unprecedented detail. It is now possible to see what is happening across an entire production environment at the touch of a button.

However, as with any manufacturing business, greater automation changes where attention needs to be focused. A production plan may still be running efficiently while costs begin to shift beneath the surface. Orders may continue to move through established workflows even as supplier issues or delivery risks start to build in the background. None of these developments necessarily signals an immediate problem, but they may indicate that assumptions which previously held true are no longer reliable.

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Visibility alone does not guarantee control. The information businesses need often already exists somewhere within the organisation, but it remains isolated across procurement, production, finance or customer service. The real challenge is recognising what matters before the impact becomes obvious.

Operational issues rarely develop because of a single event. More often, they emerge gradually across different parts of the business. A procurement problem may not affect production immediately, while a delay may only become apparent later through missed delivery dates. Viewed individually, these developments can appear routine. Their significance often only becomes clear when the effects begin to surface elsewhere in the organisation, by which point the available options may already be more limited.

This is a very different challenge from simply executing processes efficiently, and one where automation may effectively have reached its natural limit.

This is where the industry needs to start having a different conversation about AI.

Set aside the AI tools designed simply to speed up repetitive tasks. The real opportunity is understanding how AI can help businesses interpret what is happening across their operations while there is still time to respond.

Businesses are unlikely to benefit from another disconnected source of information. At Forterro, we are seeing customers looking to use AI within the workflows where work is already taking place. Their objective is to identify operational risks, emerging opportunities and developing issues before they become visible elsewhere in the business.

It is easy to assume that AI and automation are the same thing because the two are closely connected. They are not. The distinction matters because they serve different purposes.

Automation is focused on execution, enabling organisations to carry out processes consistently, accurately and at scale. AI, by contrast, helps businesses understand what is changing around those processes, highlighting patterns, risks and opportunities that may require attention.

The greatest value comes when the two work together. AI can identify an emerging issue, while automation ensures a timely and consistent response. Whether that involves workflow orchestration, warehouse robotics or production planning, combining AI with automation enables manufacturers to respond faster and with greater confidence.

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This ability to recognise change earlier is becoming increasingly valuable. Rising costs, supplier performance issues and shifts in demand rarely appear overnight. They build gradually before affecting margins, delivery performance or customer satisfaction.

The earlier these changes are identified, the more options businesses have available. That could mean spotting margin pressure before month-end reporting, recognising delivery risks before customers notice them, identifying changes in demand before inventory becomes a problem, or uncovering connections across procurement, production, finance and service that would otherwise remain hidden.

Limited prdictability

For much of the past decade, the focus has been on making manufacturing operations more efficient and predictable. That remains essential, particularly in today's challenging market.

At the same time, many manufacturers are recognising that predictability has its limits. Processes may continue to perform as expected while the conditions around them begin to change.

That is reshaping expectations of industrial software. The question is no longer simply how systems help businesses execute processes more efficiently, but how quickly they can recognise the changes that will affect those processes next. For fabricators across the window, door and façade sector, that is becoming an increasingly important conversation.

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