

## ECM In The Plant's Front Lines

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Trimming the fat off of manufacturing processes is continuously a goal as organizations look to cut costs, reduce footsteps, and improve efficiency. Achieving lean is a continual process, as there is always room for improvement. Yet, market changes and tighter regulations make it an increasingly difficult and challenging focus. Manufacturing organizations spend a significant amount of time on organizing their factory and developing lean practices, but let slide what it is considered a necessary evil—the management of invoices, quotes, blueprints, and material management. After a rigorous effort and many lean applications, effort often stalls as leaders struggle to find new ways to improve processes. The nuts and bolts mentality of the manufacturing industry often causes managers to miss the technological applications that can effectively aid their lean movement in the front end operations. From reducing administrative overhead and simplifying common front end operations to finally connecting the entire organization into one cohesive unit, ECM provides a myriad of benefits to manufacturers.

Requiring management sign-offs on debits and credits is a common occurrence for any large manufacturing company. Traditionally, these requests are manually reviewed by administration, printed up and organized into the appropriate stacks, and then physically delivered to the corresponding managers to be approved or denied. Managers then spend considerable time researching an approval or denial decision often resulting in lost revenue and an increase in days sales outstanding (DSO). Often times, approvals must go through several tiers to be finalized, compounding the revenue and time lost in the process. With these executives regularly in meetings or traveling, the documents can quickly become backlogged, and can force a decision that can cost thousands in lost profits.

In comes ECM, designed to eliminate the administrative overhead and inherent problems with this system. With workflow, an automatic review can be set up in the system which uses specific business rules to electronically route critical documents to the appropriate personnel. The manager then receives a notification via email that a task needs their attention, and the workflow empowers them to make timely decisions and send it through to the next point in the system. The previous approach would typically take days or weeks but can now be completed in a matter of moments.

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Communicating with external vendors, suppliers and distributors is often the most inefficient and time consuming process in a manufacturing company, yet is arguably the most important to the business. Every facet of communication with outside channels can be handled electronically and set to the guidelines required by your specific business operations and processes. The system can be customized and set to request quotes, analyze the information, choose the cheapest provider, generate orders, and send notifications electronically. The ECM system can streamline and handle almost every aspect of this process. In addition, the visibility that the workflow provides offers a documented and traceable account of each step, allowing a company to continuously analyze and improve their front end operations. Managing nonconforming parts and collaborating with suppliers can now be streamlined and standardized to automate the workflow, better regulate the purchase of materials for just in time production, and ensure that every process is working in harmony within the organization.

An ECM system is not just beneficial for the front end either; it can have positive effects on your existing, back end solutions as well. For example, ERP is common for managing manufacturing processes. While offering greater visibility of production levels and distribution schedules, it is often disconnected from the critical front end processes and offers limited visibility into an enterprise wide workflow. A mature ECM system can integrate with existing programs, such as ERP, to add more value to an organization's current applications while connecting and streamlining the organization as a whole. A proper workflow management system can allow for collaboration and accountability across business units and departments. It can effectively link the front and back end to eliminate silos for improved collaboration and quicker communication.

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