

Q&A With S.S. Prasad Satyavolu, Tata Consultancy Services

Mobile technology and social media are becoming very relevant topics in the manufacturing sector. Companies have utilized these seemingly consumer-oriented tools for business applications, and they are allowing manufacturers to conduct business more effectively – thus giving them a competitive advantage. S.S. Prasad Satyavolu, Global Head of Innovation & Transformation, Manufacturing at Tata Consultancy Services, recently spoke about the roles mobile technology and social media can play in an industrial enterprise.

Q: The manufacturing industry has come out of 2010 in better shape than it came out of 2009. It is pretty safe to say some of the advancements in technology have had a lot to do with that. From your perspective, what are some of the leading tech trends out there that the industry will embrace to help sustain this recovery in 2011 and beyond?

A: If we look at the emerging technologies such as mobility and social media, they have played a greater role in bringing innovation into the (manufacturing) sector in the developed world. The use of social media and related analytics went into the shaping of a lot of marketing programs, particularly on the automotive side and with other high-tech products. Mobility is a big subject today. We are seeing its relevance right from the shop floor and up the business process layer. There is an intense drive to make use of transactional applications on smart phone devices and tablets.

Q: Do you feel a lot of companies are starting to wise up to some of the advantages that exist in using these mobile devices and related technologies in their business enterprise?

A: I would say there's a better understanding that exists. Can we do better than where we are today? Absolutely. The reason is that every employee today is carrying a smart phone, even if some of those are not issued by the corporation. Many organizations have a requirement for some amount of decision-making information, 24/7. Our world is getting increasingly complex and nobody is escaping from that fact. Organizations are increasingly beginning to realize that if some of the applications which are crucial from an information visibility perspective can be made available to the workforce on the smart phone, then life can be easier. There is an immediate advantage in terms of productivity gained, and ultimately results in savings because decisions are made faster, on the spot.

On the sales side, organizations are faster at adopting the use of the iPad tablet. It is pretty obvious that it is easy to carry; you can flip open an application and pretty much show something through the touch-screen interface. Some of the applications you can develop have great potential, and customers like it. Organizations we are

working with are beginning to enable several product configuration applications on the iPad. What that means is that I'm carrying a discussion and literally navigating the customer on an application on a tablet. I would go so far to say that it is helping the sales force grow better relationships because customers are better engaged.

On the shop floor and also on the supply chain side, we're seeing a much slower adoption. But organizations are definitely realizing the potential. Will it be like ERP, a big huge wave? I don't think so, because particularly manufacturing sector investments in the devices will be cautious. The first wave we are seeing is to take the existing transactional applications and some information visibility onto the mobile devices, then potentially the next step of making performance dashboards available and some on-demand information, which can enable faster and better decision-making.

Q: How has the introduction of some of these tech devices and applications affected the way companies conduct business? It certainly seems this new wave of technology has really forced companies to closely evaluate their operations and resulted in a lot of adjustment from everyone involved. Would you agree with that assessment?

A: Change is beginning to happen. But if I look at an end-to-end business process, has the organization completely changed the business process based on this particular trend? I would say it's not there yet. But definitely there are pieces of the process or activities within a process that have a mobility leverage. Have we seen large-scale transformation yet? No, not yet.

Q: Do you feel there will be more areas of a particular business organization where these devices and applications will become relevant?

A: Absolutely, I do think so. For one major consumer products goods manufacturer, we've developed a concept for them to actually monitor online performance of its different lines in a facility using the iPad on the shop floor.

What you are doing is eliminating latency that inherently exists without the tablet device. I feel the usage of smart phones and tablets will increase in organizations, and particularly this year we should see more projects in this area. Enterprises want to innovate and invest in new ideas, and mobility has really got the attention.

Q: What about social media? How does that fit into a manufacturing enterprise?

A: There is so much that is out there in social media, on virtually every subject. You simply can't track everything from Twitter to Facebook to blogs and other social networking applications. We at TCS have developed what we call a Listening Platform. This is a tool that crawls all over the blogs on the net, analyzes it, does the "conversation analysis" and knowledge processing, and gives you a very directional, quantified analysis of the subject. For instance, you could listen to what people are saying about your competitors. On the product development side and the product feedback side, leverage of social media and related data mining tools is a no-brainer. The need to measure and track online sentiment is getting prominent,

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and an essential part of the business processes in certain areas of manufacturing.

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