Q&A: Automation Trends For Food Manufacturers

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Interview with Matt Wicks, vice president of systems engineering, Intelligrated

Incorporating automated equipment into food manufacturing processes can offer a wealth of benefits. Matt Wicks of Intelligrated spoke with *Food Manufacturing* about how food processors can best harness automated technologies in their facilities.

Q: What are some of the latest trends in plant automation for food manufacturers?

A: Trends for food manufacturers include wider, more diverse packaging types, as well as the integration of local-marketing package labeling. Other trends include the increasing demand for supply chain improvements including the integration of order fulfillment solutions from warehousing into manufacturing.

Q: Are these automation trends easy to implement? Can new automation be installed into existing production lines, or do manufacturers often need to overhaul entire processes?

A: The more flexible the automation, the more easily it can adapt to packaging trends. Supply chain improvements can range in scale from minor to major, depending on what is involved. Robotics, flexible conveyance and sortation as well as integrated software solutions are key components of many manufacturers addressing the trends.

Q: How has robotic technology impacted the food manufacturing process?

A: Robotic technology has substantially impacted the food and beverage industry. Integrating robotics into manufacturing and supply chain processes provides flexibility that enables end users to drive down costs, improve quality and expand capacity.

Q: New software is also becoming available to food manufacturers. What types of software are most beneficial for food processors and why?

A: Software that provides “clear” visibility into the processes is extremely beneficial. Increasing connectivity and the availability of information is pervasive, so software capable of processing data and delivering it in a meaningful way is critical to improving overall equipment effectiveness (OEE). In addition, software that bridges the gaps between order demands, as well as directly impacts the machine control, also provides major benefits to end users.

Q: How can automating production processes benefit food companies?

A: Food and beverage companies can benefit from automation in numerous ways. Implementing automation can result in cost reduction, quality improvements, faster responses to changing environments and reduction in supply chain costs.

Q: What should plant managers consider before implementing new automation features into their production lines?

A: There are numerous considerations to make before implementing new automation features:

- Consider the overall supply chain in the assessment of automation. Initial costs for automation may be high, but when other processes such as packaging, palletizing, warehousing and order fulfillment are considered, automation can prove to be a major improvement for your organization.
- Select an automation partner with experience in the industry and the breadth of hardware and software solutions that can provide the best solution. Integrating an automation system can be complex and having a partner who can integrate your solution will be critical to the success.

Matt Wicks, vice president of systems engineering at Intelligrated, has more than 18 years of experience in the automated material handling industry. He is available to comment on integrated systems and mixed load order fulfillment.

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