

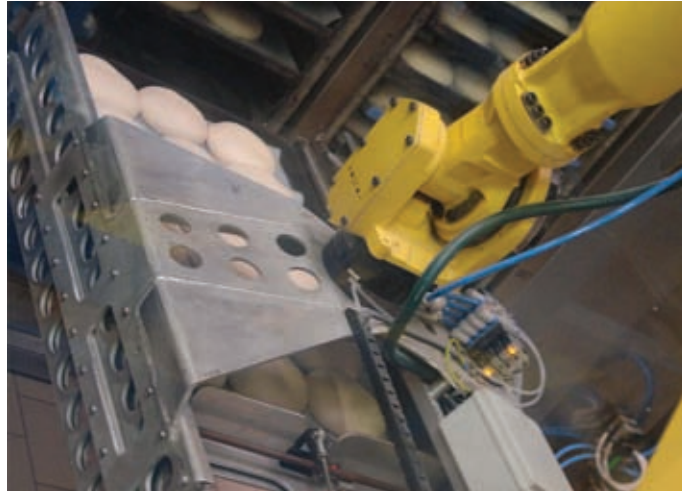
Automation benchmarking secures Government cash

The first study of automation within UK SME manufacturers has gained funding from the Government to help prepare companies wanting to introduce automation into their businesses. The study identified the main barriers to take-up by SMEs as their lack of knowledge and skills as well as their attitude to risk.

This four-country benchmarking study was commissioned by members of the Engineering and Machinery Alliance (EAMA), with support from the Department for Business, Innovation and Skills (BIS) and British Automation and Robot Association (BARA) members. It shows that UK manufacturers have invested significantly less in modern manufacturing technologies than their counterparts in mainland Europe.

As a result, many UK manufacturers aren't as competitive as they could be.

According to the report (*Application of Automation in UK Manufacturing 27th September 2010*), UK manufacturing has fallen a long way behind our European competitors. Taking robot use as an example, Germany has an installed base of 144,800 industrial robots and Spain 28,600, whereas the UK records just 15,100.



UK manufacturers have invested significantly less in modern manufacturing technologies than their European neighbours

"By comparing UK companies with similar businesses in Germany, Spain and Sweden this study highlights our weakness in automation," says chairman of EAMA Martin Walder. "If UK manufacturing is to remain competitive we have to act now."

And this study has prompted the Coalition Government to stump up some cash to help address the barriers that UK manufacturers face. In December, Business Minister Mark Prisk said: "I am delighted to announce today that we will be contributing £600,000 for a two year automation and robotics programme to be developed and run by EAMA and BARA.

"This programme will better

prepare companies to introduce new automated/robotic systems and help them increase productivity, reduce waste and increase precision in their manufacturing process."

In addition to supporting the automation and robotics programme, BARA with assistance of members including ABB Robotics and Kuka Automation + Robotics, and other trade bodies such as the Processing and Packaging Machinery Association, the Food and Drink Federation and other EAMA members, is implementing a regional events programme to help SMEs understand the benefits of automation.

020 7298 6450

www.eama.info/automation-and-growth.htm

BARA welcomes more support

Mike Wilson, president of British Automation and Robot Association (BARA) welcomes the Government's commitment to increasing automation.

"Although the UK is a long way behind in the use of automation when compared to some other countries, manufacturing in the UK has many strengths including reasonable productivity levels achieved by the widespread assimilation of lean concepts," says Wilson. "If the use of automation can be increased, UK manufacturing has the potential to be a significant force in global markets – however, there is a definite need for an overall strategy to be co-ordinated and driven at a national level, and BARA intends to take the lead on such an initiative," he says.

In addition to supporting the BIS programme, BARA will organise a series of regional events in early 2011 which will help SMEs understand the benefits of automation and provide advice on how to take the first steps in their adoption of automation.

"The regional events will provide manufacturers with an excellent source of information and know-how so that they can overcome the obstacles suppressing their uptake of automation and consequently increase their competitive edge," he says.

Wilson believes that in a relatively high cost economy such as the UK, the application of automation is an essential ingredient in the sustainability of manufacturing businesses, enabling them to compete more successfully in the global market. "Automation not only drives costs down, it improves quality, reduces waste and also optimises energy use," he says. robots@hotmail.com

Food and drink sector supports initiative

The Food and Drink Federation (FDF) is supporting the launch of this two-year programme to encourage more UK manufacturers to invest in new automation and robotics technologies to help drive down costs, improve quality, reduce waste and optimise energy used.

FDF director of communications Julian Hunt said: "We applaud the fact that the Government is funding this programme in collaboration with industry as part of its strategy to encourage growth in UK manufacturing.

"UK food and drink

manufacturers are already major users of robot applications – and the uptake of such technologies has been growing rapidly since 2006. But, like other sectors, we still need to close the gap with our rivals in the rest of Europe," he said.

www.fdf.org.uk

SHOW BRIEFS

With over 70 companies from the bioplastics sector showcasing their latest products at the **K-2010** in Germany last November, the show proved to be “the ideal platform for this industry to feature its tangible benefits of innovation and sustainability in this rapidly emerging branch of the plastics industry,” says Hasso von Pogrell, managing director of trade association European Bioplastics.

Sustainability was one of the key topics discussed at the show and the decades of research into finding alternatives to petrochemical-based plastics seems to be paying off. “One sees this with machine builders, converters, brand owners, retailers and converters,” says Pogrell.

According to Pogrell, European Bioplastics is actively working with stakeholders at EU level to jointly develop appropriate criteria and standards for measuring sustainability regarding bioplastics. “As knowledge partner throughout the whole value chain, we seek to provide fact based and reliable information about the bioplastics industry to all interested parties,” he says. www.european-bioplastics.org

With 1,295 exhibitors and an attendance of over 85,000 visitors over the four days, the international packaging exhibition **Emballage** held in Paris last November was said to “reflect the restored dynamism for the packaging-related industries”.

Show organisers say that the predicted growth and business confidence were back at the show and that 70% of visitors were decision makers who were often already involved in concrete investment projects. www.emballageweb.com

Food and drink makers continue investments

Food and drink manufacturers remain confident that they will maintain their investment in new plant and machinery, despite the economic uncertainties, according to a new survey carried out by the Food and Drink Federation (FDF).

Very few companies quizzed by FDF were optimistic about the general business environment, but the survey found that most respondents are either maintaining or increasing their investment in equipment and research. In fact, a sizeable minority – 38% – said they were actually planning to increase their capital expenditure.

And almost half of the FDF members who responded to the survey said they were also planning to launch new products.

The survey results – which will be good news for machinery suppliers to the sector – confirms Government data showing that



Food manufacturers remain confident of maintaining investment plans in 2011 including launching new products

business investment by food and drink manufacturers grew by 10% at the end of 2010 compared with 2009. Such confidence comes on the back of a strong performance by the UK’s biggest manufacturing sector, with 60% of respondents reporting increased sales in the third quarter of 2010 and more than half predicting that sales would keep growing into 2011.

“Continued uncertainty over the performance of the UK economy means that members remain cautious, but they have not cut their investment in physical and human resources or delayed taking products to market,” says FDF director of competitiveness Angela Coleshill. “Overall, it’s an encouraging outlook for the UK’s largest manufacturing sector.”

Shrink film offers economies

Sealed Air has unveiled a new range of shrink films including the CT-301 film claimed to be the only seven micron film on the market and, despite it being half the thickness of other films, is said to retain the strength, tear and burn resistance of heavier gauge films as well as offering enhanced seal strength and durability.

“We anticipated competing effectively against 11 and 13 micron films but CT-301 exceeded our expectations as we began to take it to market,” says Hélios Ruiz, marketing director for Shrink Packaging Europe. “We were able to drop in 7 micron film behind competitive 15 micron films running at high speeds and not even miss a beat.”

The Cryovac CT family of ultra thin structures represents an



Sealed Air has a new range of thin films including a seven micron version

advance in source reduction and reduced carbon footprint. This film reduces the number of cores, cartons, pallets, warehouse space and shipping costs while providing the same area of film, claims the company.

“Longer length rolls and operational efficiencies are something our customers

constantly ask for and we are pleased to be able to deliver a high performance film that enables many operational benefits such as fewer roll changeovers, less storage space and longer production runs,” says Ruiz.

00 33 2 37 18 93 12

www.sealedair-emea.com

Robust orders

UK mechanical engineering companies continue to consolidate their position on UK and export business according to the Engineering and Machinery Alliance (EAMA) Business Monitor.

The more robust numbers witnessed since the summer increased again in November with positive balances of over a third on inquiries for UK and export business. Overall, order levels were also up with healthy balances of plus 17% on UK and plus 14% on export activity.

The view on employment is also fairly bullish with a balance of plus 11% saying job numbers were up.

Although there is no clear-cut gain in investment activity, the

stand out number this month is the increase in the number of firms reporting investment in all areas of the business.

"Although the basic 50:50 split between firms investing in some form of activity and those thinking about it but currently holding back is still a worry, we now have a third of firms reporting investment in all areas," explains EAMA chairman Martin Walder. "Over the last four or five months, investment activity has been more consistent reflecting some confidence in the future.

"And although just over a fifth of firms say that month on month orders have declined, companies remain cautiously optimistic," he concludes.

Machine vision technology day

Multipix is running a machine vision technology day in March entitled Machine Vision: Another Dimension that will explore the latest technologies in vision and automated inspection.

Topics such as 3D software algorithms, intelligent laser profiling, inspecting with thermal imaging and rapid application development will be the focus of the day with presentations from machine vision manufacturers such as MVTEC, FLIR, Sick,

Panasonic and Basler.

With the use of real-word applications, Multipix says the subjects covered will educate attendees and expose them to new application solutions.

Taking place at the conference facilities at the Heritage Motor Museum in Warks, this free day will include lunch and a chance to walk around the museum itself.

01730 233332

www.multipix.com

Free webinars provide expert facts

Mettler Toledo is giving access to a library of relevant industry information and expertise across checkweighing, metal detection and x-ray inspection equipment within the food industry.

The 'on-demand' webinars give the opportunity to keep up to date with industry trends and standards as well as the ability to obtain specific information about proprietary products and

services. There are currently ten webinars available to watch free of charge and at the most convenient time.

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New Directive confusions need sorting by year end

With just under a year to go until EN 954-1 is completely replaced by EN 13849-1 Paul Laidler of machinery safety and compliant consultants Laidler Associates believes there is much more work to be done before machinery builders and users understand the differences, and also the implications of the changes.

Speaking in London in January, Laidler said that an awful lot of work will have to happen before the grace period runs out in December 2011, as confusion reigns at the moment. And this confusion is at both machinery companies and at their customers. One thing that he does believe, however, is that end users will drive this forward as they – under the PUWER regulations – are ultimately responsible for anything that's non-compliant, rather than the machine builder. But, machine builders who do not bother to check out the differences, and in particular the whole life cycle emphasis of the regulations, may find themselves unable to sell their kit legally come the new year.

"Validation is the completely



Laidler Associates is expanding its range of machinery safety courses

new element with every safety component having to have a mean time to (dangerous) failure (MTTFd) provided by the manufacturer," says Laidler. In practice, this MTTFd is the complicated bit to ascertain.

Laidler talked of an end user that had called the consultancy in to carry out a validation project for a recently installed machine that had not previously been validated, even though a 13849-1 assessment had been completed. Laidler found that

the correct performance level had not been achieved and the machinery builder had to remove the newly installed circuitry and start again, and all at additional cost.

This situation is just one of the reasons Laidler Associates is expanding its range of machinery safety courses to cover both electrical safety and the newer functional safety standards.

The first of these, called Electrical Machinery Safety

Awareness runs for one-day and delegates will be given an awareness of the relevant regulations and how standards can be used for compliance. Delegates will gain an understanding of electrical safety legislation, regulations, standards and terminology.

The second course runs for two days, is called Practical Electrical Machinery Safety and incorporates the first course as the content of day one and then delegates increase their knowledge base and apply this through practical assessment. The final course, called Electrical Machinery Safety, runs for five days and introduces attendees to the whole concept of safety related control circuits.

This course will cover the functional safety standards EN 13849-1 and EN 62061 and demonstrate practical real-life examples of how these standards are used and validated.

Further information on regulations and how to avoid banana skins is on page 30.

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