

How to grow your manufacturing operations with intelligence

By Kate Brown

Looking to create a growth strategy for your manufacturing business? Before you rev that engine, you need to understand what's going on under the hood. Are your operations optimized to support your plan? Do you even know if you're headed in the right direction? Or do you need to [get a tune-up and a roadmap](#) before you start your journey?

One of the fastest routes to success is to know thyself. That's where data comes into play. The manufacturing industry is awash in data, but many struggle to unlock the full value of the information flowing through their shops.

Let data be your guide

Data is one of the most underutilized assets in the manufacturing industry. Most manufacturers are awash in data — even shops that haven't fully embraced Industry 4.0 capabilities. Yet it's still a struggle for many manufacturers to access and [make the best use of this information](#).

Information flow is often hampered by disparate data sets and resource-intensive processes. Collating error codes from paper ledgers once a week or manually exporting financials from multiple platforms at month-end simply does not support timely or strategic decision-making.

This matters when it comes to consequential decisions like purchasing new equipment or making an acquisition. Without an accurate handle on demand forecasting, inventory, machine uptime, job costs, market share and other intelligence that is foundational to your business, how can you have confidence that your strategy is targeting the right opportunities for growth?

For example, let's say you want to grow your profitability by purchasing additional equipment to expand capacity. But are you using your existing machines to full capacity? Are process bottlenecks throttling throughput? Could you build on current capabilities? Would you be better served by investing in sensors and machine learning to improve uptime? Performing a deep dive on your data will help determine if additional equipment will generate the returns you anticipate. More importantly, you may uncover other, more cost-effective solutions that would otherwise be overlooked.

Or maybe your growth strategy isn't defined yet because [you don't know where to prioritize your efforts](#). Again, use the data to uncover areas of opportunity. If third-party data reveals that you have a significant market share, then perhaps your growth strategy should focus on innovation or expansion into an adjacent market.

Optimize your data framework with integrated perspectives

The crux to growing with intelligence is having access to data that is [timely, actionable and relevant](#). Real value comes from the ability to pull and assess data from across your organization in real time. Business intelligence tools and advanced analytics are fundamental to getting a solid understanding of your operations. But if the data is consistently lagging by weeks or months or your data sources are incomplete, you may be relying more on assumptions than you realize.

If this sounds familiar, you're not alone. With the pace at which new technologies are being developed and deployed, manufacturers are understandably reluctant to invest in expensive applications that may

be obsolete in a few years. Unfortunately, there isn't one system that can do it all. Building an integrated pipeline to keep information in motion requires an ecosystem of applications.

[A data roadmap](#) will help you build a nimble and scalable data framework by prioritizing what you need right now, while positioning you to add capabilities in the future. For that reason, it cannot be a strictly finance or operations or IT venture. It needs to incorporate a cross-company perspective.

Think of your roadmap as a means to build bridges between departments to capture more value. After all, many of the metrics that finance is concerned with — such as profitability — are rooted in operations. The most valuable insights are gained by automating the pipeline to pull, transform, cleanse and normalize data from across the enterprise.

Building a true data framework may require more resources on the front end. But at the end of the day, you will have a best-in-class solution that will grow with you so that you can track your progress, fine-tune your strategy and intelligently plan for the next iteration of your business.

Put your data to work for you

Today's economy requires manufacturers to be able to pivot at the drop of a hat. Businesses that know how to parlay their data into action will have the edge in making the most of the moment.

There is no one-size-fits-all strategy for building a data framework. But that doesn't mean you need to go it alone. Wipfli's manufacturing and technology specialists work alongside your team to identify where your data gaps are and help you build a roadmap that is right-sized to your organization and ambitions.

We have more than 90 years of experience helping manufacturers of all sizes tackle their operational challenges and define their next steps. [Learn how we can help build](#) a strategy to keep your data in motion.