8 Problems High-Mix Discrete Manufacturers Have That They Don't See As Problems

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It’s human nature. We get used to doing things a certain way, to the point we assume it’s the way they have to be done. (How long did you use a paper roadmap or stop to ask for directions before you realized you could just get a GPS?) Manufacturers are not immune. Here are eight common problems that could be making your factory operations less efficient and more costly than they need to be.

1. No one has good visibility to the status of orders in progress.

It's a long way between a shop order release to the floor and finished goods inventory. For managers and executives, this can be a black hole where real-time information is at best difficult to get. (If people are relying solely on paper travelers, that hole can get very black very fast.) The repercussions on your ability to keep promises to your customers are deadly, but some manufacturers just chalk it up to "the way things are."

2.
Product mix and volume fluctuations result in shifting bottlenecks that are difficult to predict.

Deep down inside, most manufacturers wish they had a crystal ball that would let them see where production is starting to go wrong so they could step in and fix it. In the meantime, stuff happens, floor workers improvise as well as they can, and it's just accepted as standard operating procedure.

3.
Frequent expediting due to surprises on the shop floor.

Surprises are nice for your birthday but can cost serious money when they happen on the floor. But, really, what can you do? Aside from piling up large shipping bills in a frantic race to make delivery dates.

4.
No electronic record of the production events of each order's performance.

Ask a plant manager how much paper he has to shuffle through to track down where something went wrong or what was responsible for having to remanufacture a faulty product or otherwise live up to a warranty. Then ask him how often he actually finds what he's looking for. Just another day at the office.

5. Changes in resource availability result in fire drills or delayed shipments.

You know that machine you assumed would be ready to handle a key process in a big order? Or the specialist operator you didn't know was going to be on vacation? Or the sheet metal you were sure you had enough of to meet the new orders put into the system? All par for the course and accepted as part of the hassles managers have to face on a regular basis. In reality — Houston, we have a problem.

6.
The schedule is always wrong, so people do what they think is right.

This has been going on for so long in so many companies, it's basically the only way anything gets done. ERP and MRP aren't much help here, because they make assumptions about resource availability that can reach mythic proportions. Floor personnel and many plant managers know that "schedule" is basically a euphemism, but assume that's the best they're going to get.

7. Everyone is constantly reacting individually.

When there is no common view of reality, what else can they do? You may remember the old fable about the blind men and the elephant. The one who feels a leg says the elephant is like a pillar. The one who feels the tail says the elephant is like a rope, and so on. Somehow, products get made and orders get filled, anyway, but is this really any way to run a factory?

8.
Automation can make all of this worse.

Automation speeds everything up. Every inefficiency and every problem – even if it's not seen as a problem – gets magnified. Have you ever watched the classic TV episode where Lucy is on the chocolate assembly line? It's not nearly as funny when it happens in your factory.

Right about now, you may be saying, "OK, smart guy, we're not perfect. So what am I supposed to do about it?"

The fact is, high-mix discrete manufacturing operations will never be perfect. Ever. There will always be unexpected events and uncontrollable developments.

But the eight problems we've mentioned here are, actually, solvable, at least to a fairly large degree.

The first step is recognizing that they're problems.

The second step is visiting this website.

If you read a few pages and think that maybe, just maybe, we might have something here, get in touch.

We look forward to it.