

Cloud-Based Manufacturing Platform Enables Food Manufacturers To Reach Their Full Potential

Plex, by Rockwell Automation, provides MES, quality management, and supply chain management, all from a modular, scalable SaaS platform

HAWTHORN, VICTORIA, AUSTRALIA,
November 22, 2022 /

EINPresswire.com/ -- Since its birth in the 1980s, MES has played a critical role in manufacturing operations across most industries. However, it is the development of cloud computing that is sparking a massive transformation across industries and businesses.

Manufacturing industries are increasingly moving their systems to the cloud. One of the companies enabling this transformation is Plex, a SaaS manufacturing platform that includes MES, quality and supply chain management capabilities.



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Rockwell Automation, the world's largest company dedicated to industrial automation and digital transformation, acquired Plex last year. "This allows us to optimise our customers' operations and bring smart manufacturing to life," said Anthony Wong, Regional Director – South Pacific, Rockwell Automation.

An example of a system helped by digital transformation is the production whiteboard which is a common sight on shopfloors. Being manual, these whiteboards are prone to human error and become outdated very quickly.

In contrast, Plex Production Monitoring allows users to set up and leverage dashboards and scoreboards to display real-time production measures including cycle times, capacity utilisation,

and overall equipment effectiveness. "This is when production monitoring stops being just a process and becomes the swiss army knife that gets you to your goals," said Wong.

Typically, different teams within manufacturing processes worked in silos, making information sharing slow and error prone. It is difficult for teams to access accurate and reliable data on things such as inventory levels and expiration dates which are especially crucial in the food and beverage industry.

Increasingly, consumers care about what they eat, how their food is produced, and the impact that food production and consumption have on the environment and society. Food safety too is a major concern.

Traceability of the ingredients is thus essential. Australia has stringent rules that continue to grow increasingly complex with food manufacturers being held to greater accountability. FSANZ specifies the "one step back and one step forward" rule for traceability and manufacturers must be aware of the source of all their ingredients and maintain detailed records.

According to the Consumer Brands Association (formerly the Grocery Manufacturers Association), the estimated average cost for a food recall is (AUD) \$16 million — and that is only the direct costs to the company, such as the retrieval and disposal of the tainted product.

Impact on the Australian food and beverage industry

There are lessons for the country's food manufacturing sector. [According to AFGC](#), Australia's food and grocery manufacturing sector is under pressure from declining profitability, partly due to stagnant capital investment and low innovation.

Food is the largest manufacturing sector in Australia and is a priority industry for the country, expected to grow to \$230 billion by 2030. The next biggest sector is primary metal manufacturing, which has an annual turnover less than half that of the food and grocery sector.



"With Australia's ongoing skilled labour shortages, automation can help, especially with knowledge transfer and retention," says Anthony Wong, Regional Director, South Pacific, Rockwell Automation (pictured).

Growth can be particularly challenging as this is a margin-constrained business severely impacted by economic conditions, weather and skills availability. Here's where technology like Plex can make a difference as it delivers value to manufacturers in high-volume, highly repetitive processes while helping them comply with regulatory requirements and meet consumer expectations in areas like product quality, safety, and sustainability.



Being cloud-based makes it easier to keep software like Plex updated with customer-driven features.

Food manufacturers are also facing a skills shortage. "The immediate cause of the shortages is an increase in demand for engineering skills at a time when international border closures have hindered skilled migrants arriving in Australia," says the report [Strengthening the Engineering Workforce in Australia](#).

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Anthony Wong, Regional Director – South Pacific, Rockwell Automation

Manufacturers face the prospect of key roles sitting vacant for long periods, putting additional pressure on the remaining workforce. "With Australia's ongoing skilled labour shortages, automation can help, especially with knowledge transfer and retention," said Wong.

Systems like Plex allow manufacturers to gain control of their plant floor and boost automation with a comprehensive view of their production lifecycle as well as connectivity to their ERP. It is possible to easily automate tasks, help prevent errors, and boost quality on the production line.

The AFGC called out the sector for its declining productivity growth caused by the lack of investment in the latest production technologies. "The industry is falling behind the efficient production frontier compounding the weakened competitive position," said the [report prepared by the Australian Institute of Food Science and Technology](#).

A scalable, modular solution

The good news is that solutions exist and can be quickly implemented. Plex, for instance, does not require major investment in hardware or IT infrastructure. "Plex is modular and scalable – it

grows with you,” said Wong.

“Using Plex for food and beverage manufacturers and processors is like moving from DVDs to a streaming service,” said Wong. It opens up these technologies to smaller players, who don’t have to invest in large up-front costs.

“You can select the components you need – such as a quality management system (QMS) or monitoring, and can evolve to a full MES later. It works for a business of any size, any amount, any scale. The software grows with you, including the pricing.” This is positive news for a sector that is largely dominated in Australia by SMEs.

Being cloud-based makes it easier to keep software like Plex updated with customer-driven features. “New functionality is constantly being added, and because it’s a modular system, it doesn’t take everything else offline to perform an update,” said Wong.

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