The Expert's Opinion

Dr. Michael D. Oliff is the director of Manufacturing 2000, at the International Institute for Management Development in Lausanne, Switzerland. He is responsible for a collaborative worldwide project involving 19 leading manufacturing companies in 14 different industries. The five year activity involves a 10 billion Swiss franc budget targeted at the development of a new empirical information base to enable users to identify critical requirements for future manufacturing excellence.

Interview by Mehdi Khosrowpour

IRMJ: As a person coming from the product and management sides, what is your assessment of information technology?

Oliff: I believe there has been a historical migration in manufacturing strategy and technology - from cost driven to market and quality driven - to flexibility driven today. European companies like Reiter, Johnson Wax, Carnaud metal Box, Jacobs Suchard Tobler and others are redefining corporate (and functional) goals to compete on quick delivery and even broader product diversification in the marketplace. These same companies, along with a host of U.S. multinationals, are reorganizing in response to “Europe 1992” and the prospect of borderless trade among the 320 million consumers here. I see information technology playing a major role, not only in improving manufacturing performance at the plant level, but also as a strategic tool to link factory networks and entire business systems.

IRMJ: What do you consider to be the major organizational problems in managing IS technology as it is integrated into manufacturing and production?

Oliff: I think there are two dimensions of the problem. The first one is purely political. Traditionally, as IS and manufacturing has matured, distinct (and usually unrelated) entities have developed within organizations. Johnson Wax is an exception. Johnson Wax totally reorganized their European operations on a product group basis that combines design, engineering manufacturing design, and marketing with information support systems. When a new product launches, they now have multi-functional teams of people that speak four different business languages - information systems, engineering, marketing and manufacturing. I think that’s the model of the future for many companies. Nestle, a multi-billion dollar worldwide company headquartered in Switzerland, has just invested $20 million in their information systems deployment, specifically in the area of knowledge-based technology and production planning. With the rate of change and the rate of competition in the world, they see the need to retrain their work force at least once every ten years. How do you do that in a multi-national
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