

ARE WE THERE YET?



needs of their own, and “but...COVID-19...” isn’t really the force majeure it used to be 12 months ago.

So, how did the strong survive and flourish? What lessons did so many small and medium sized manufacturers have to learn on the fly when the world changed so many months ago? Well, the first step for many was to learn to focus the collective energy on customer needs and do whatever was necessary to ship product and maintain cash flow. In most cases throughout 2020, this allowed companies to survive but usually under great

As we close out summer 2021, and the vacations, road trips, and family adventures come to a close before heading back to school, we may have all heard once or twice “Are We There Yet?”. It’s so common we often joke with our kids about it even if they’re well past the age of needing 3 DVDs to make it across the state anymore. Even the purpose of our summer trips changes over time when kids need more college visits than trips to Space Mountain. The journeys and destinations change, but there is always a human need to know we are getting closer to that next milestone.

My journey in manufacturing consulting over the past year has been no different with countless clients and partners all trying to navigate the current landscape of operating in the middle of a global pandemic and searching for a “new” normal. From Buffalo to Hudson Valley, the stories have been both eerily similar and, in some cases, remarkably unique. How organizations have learned to adapt and grow since March of 2020 has been the main indicator of pandemic survival and success.

While no one can really know the answer to “Are we there yet?” with respect to the “end” of the impacts of the pandemic, the truth is that it may not matter when it comes to successfully navigating your next set of manufacturing or service challenges. Most customers now, while empathetic with the supply chain impacts and other forces generated by this new normal, have unmovable

stress while trying to maintain pandemic safety and distancing for employees and dealing with erratic customer and supply chain inputs. In these conditions, support functions, certification programs, and improvement projects almost universally took a back seat for those most impacted by the pandemic. Many of the best “survivors” had these strong support functions in place ahead of time and then made specific choices to prioritize them even when it seemed impossible or too costly in the short term. Specifically, the processes Human Resources, Mechanical Maintenance, and Information Technology became key indicators for many organizations of how well they would fare during these ongoing challenges.

Perhaps the most impacted support function during these pandemic times has been Human Resources. The range of new material and topics, as rules changed seemed endless from NYS and other regulatory bodies, was immense. Implementation of new safety measures was a new full-time job and keeping employees and their families safe took on new meaning. We all needed new mechanisms for onboarding, facility ingress and egress, training, and on the job protections. CEOs and COOs everywhere suddenly relied on somewhat underappreciated groups to keep the doors open legally and safely, and keep those machines running! What a challenge! So many places rose to the test and even

improved their processes to recognize gaps in resources, required skills, and cross training to continually adjust to this ongoing pandemic requirement.

Mechanical Maintenance was also another important support function that gained a new perspective on value during the pandemic. With labor availability immediately impacted by the pandemic, there could be no time lost for a machine to be down while people were available. The priority for planning and creatively scheduling machine downtime to coordinate with labor became much more impactful under near emergency conditions and limited employee availability.

Many preventive maintenance programs at our small and medium size manufacturers suddenly had much more influence on production schedules and became a great area to invest in and expand.

Of these three support processes mentioned, Information Technology had the unique position of having the potential to have very high risks in terms of cost and functionality, but also the highest reward in terms of impact and productivity. Sub-performing IT systems were still costly during a pandemic and did not facilitate employees working from home or allow enough access to company data or shop floor requirements. The best systems on the other hand, transitioned seamlessly from office to remote work and allowed management and technical staff to troubleshoot production problems real time, coordinate countless meetings and action items, and communicate well with customers and vendors. Industry 4.0 was not another catch phrase for these success stories; it became their new way of life!

But that really doesn't tell the whole story. It was invaluable to have these support processes when the pandemic hit, but staggeringly difficult to implement after. Investing and prioritizing in these support functions was often only possible because of the presence of a larger management system and the proactive assessment of risk in the organization. Very few organizations

had "global pandemic" on their list of company risks. However, many knew how to respond to risk or rapid changes from the outside world and had processes in place to address resource needs, customer schedule changes and supply chain issues to mitigate the potential negative results. All currently certified companies

to ISO:9001 2015 or similar already had risk mitigation plans in place that even at a minimum, provided a jumping off point for tackling a new, significant unknown. Their management systems had already been prepared for risk, with a methodology to assess, rank, and take action on the most vital issues, pandemic or otherwise. Many could quickly

decide what they needed to keep as their core business and where they could offload unnecessary activities, or even subcontract tasks where they did not have a core competency.

But like many of you, I find myself asking "Are we there yet?" as in are we done with the pandemic? Can we breathe a little easier yet? Can I sleep tonight with my supply chain in shambles? Can we just be done with this pandemic grind? Well, maybe not, but the best organizations going forward are the ones that were on the right track before all of this started. As the saying goes, "The best time to plant a tree is 20 years ago, the second-best time is now". But no matter when they start, these organizations empower their people not only to do the right thing for the customer every day, but also to speak up objectively about risk and ask questions that move the company forward. What is our core competence? Did we move closer to that or further away during the pandemic? How can we utilize all of the pieces in the organization in the best way possible? Where do we objectively need help? These focused thoughts and questions will be great component to any successful organization, regardless of where the next big risk comes from.



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