

Is technology the cure?



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Big Data, IoT, Mobility, the Cloud...is this the industrial Age of Aquarius, in which technology is the cure for all our industrial ailments? Taken together these technologies improve awareness. Combined the right way they gather, manage and communicate more information than has ever been available before, and more information, better awareness, will translate into better decision-making, right?

Maybe. Better awareness can lead to genuinely outsized opportunities for improvement, from better design and more rigorous installation, to improved operating procedures and more systematic condition-based maintenance. But technology can't lead. Information can't manage, and communicating is not the same as executing.

The assumption that better awareness translates into better outcomes is the leap of faith addressed by "Shake Off The Rust," a recent *Plant Services* article about restarting predictive maintenance (PdM) programs. It turns out that PdM programs are notorious for collapsing – for being, ironically, unreliable – even though PdM technologies have become ever more powerful and simple to use. The weak link, according to a handful of PdM managers and reliability consultants, is usually human and rarely just one human. Failed PdM programs are usually the result of overreliance on technology and under reliance on some combination of sponsorship, leadership and management. That is, the technology works, the information to improve decision-making is available, but the outcomes don't improve.

WHAT IS THE CURE IF NOT TECHNOLOGY?

The "Smart" in *Smart Industry* is still people. Not that technology can't vastly improve what we know, when we know it, or how fast we act on it. Technology amplifies our ability to do all three, in addition to improving the chances we take the right actions. But someone has to decide, to intervene, to evaluate the success of intervention, and perhaps to intervene again. A few technologies make the simple decisions for us, like shutting down machines when they breach certain operating parameters. But the simple decisions are often the easy ones. It's the tricky decisions that confound us.

Today's emerging industrial technologies vastly improve the chances of making the correct tricky decisions, too. The path to successfully deploying them, however, is crowded with people. Who will specify and design the application, who will approve and fund it, and who will be tasked with implementing and managing and evaluating and modifying it? People.

Technology cannot cure industrial ailments any more than a hammer can build houses or gene therapy can cure cancer. Like doctors to medicine or construction workers to building, industry needs leaders and managers and team builders to harness the new tools available to them. The technology will not deploy, implement or perform on its own, and putting it to use correctly will demand specialized knowledge – domain expertise. The Smart in *Smart Industry* means the knowledge, experience and understanding of both how new technologies work, and how they affect decision-making in the new information-rich age.