

EVENT LEARNINGS

Automation Forum- Automation UK Event Learnings

The fourth UK Automation Forum event of the year, held during Automation UK 2025, brought together industry leaders, integrators, and manufacturers to explore the practical realities of automation – from funding and implementation to workforce transformation and long-term strategy. The session offered a grounded, insightful view into what it really takes for SMEs to adopt automation successfully.

Learnings from the event included:

1. The Walsall Wheelbarrow Company demonstrated that automation doesn't have to mean job losses. By retraining staff into higher-skilled, better-paid roles, they achieved 70% automation while boosting morale and productivity.
2. For SMEs, choosing a suitable integrator is vital. Recommendations from robot suppliers, site visits to see systems in action, and clear, jargon-free communication all help ensure a successful partnership.
3. A well-prepared User Requirement Specification (URS) and a deep understanding of internal processes are crucial. Visual demonstrations and phased implementation help reduce disruption and build confidence.
4. Clear communication, workforce involvement, and having an internal automation champion support a smoother transition. Automation also enhances safety, environmental performance, and helps attract younger, tech-savvy talent.

Opening Remarks and Panelist Introductions

Chairing the forum, Tom Flude welcomed attendees to a frank and informative panel discussion focused on real-world automation experiences.

- Jonathan Thacker, Managing Director of Walsall Wheelbarrow Company, began by outlining his company's automation journey and its remarkable transformation.

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- Rosie Davies of Reeco Ltd, an automation specialist with deep knowledge of cobot palletisers and case packers, shared her insights from working hands-on with SMEs.
- Steven Grace of Cummins Engines Ltd provided a broader perspective from a multinational organisation that delivers a wide range of power solutions

Automation in Practice: The Walsall Wheelbarrow Story

Jonathan Thacker's contribution was a highlight of the forum. Faced with the decline of legacy equipment, his company reached a crossroads: continue with unreliable machinery, mothball part of the business, or embrace automation.

They chose to invest – and the results were transformative. Walsall Wheelbarrow is now 70% automated, having overcome early challenges including securing funding and alleviating workforce concerns.

- People-Centred Transition: Crucially, no redundancies occurred. Instead, staff were retrained and redeployed into higher-skilled, better-paid roles.
- Customer Engagement: Jonathan highlighted the power of factory tours as a sales tool. When potential customers saw automation in action, it often turned initial curiosity into commitment.

Building the Right Partnerships

Rosie Davies stressed the importance of selecting the right system integrator, especially for SMEs without extensive internal engineering teams.

- **Start With Robot Suppliers:** Many companies begin by contacting robot manufacturers, who often recommend reliable integrators with relevant experience.
- Visit Reference Sites: Seeing previous installations and speaking directly to customers helps demystify the process and sets realistic expectations.
- Simplicity is Key: SMEs should look for integrators who can explain automation clearly

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and implement systems in manageable, low-risk stages. groups.

Financial Realities and ROI

Funding is often one of the most significant barriers for smaller firms. The panel explored different routes to making automation financially viable:

- Leasing Models: Leasing allows SMEs to treat automation as an operational cost, spreading out investment and preserving cash flow.
- Bank Support: Financial institutions are increasingly recognising the value of automation as an intangible asset that can increase productivity and competitiveness.
- Timeframes: Although a 2-year return on investment (ROI) is often quoted, longer timelines may be necessary for SMEs working with tighter margins or gradual implementation plans.

Implementation: Common Pitfalls and Solutions

Several panelists spoke about implementation challenges and how to avoid them:

- Know Your Process: A deep understanding of your current operations is essential before attempting to automate any aspect.
- Create a Solid URS (User Requirement Specification): This document helps align expectations and ensures the integrator fully understands your goals.
- Visual Prototypes and Demos: These can validate concepts before full deployment, reducing the likelihood of expensive missteps.
- Delays Over Failures: Often, automation projects don't fail – they get delayed. Allowing space for iteration and learning is key to long-term success.

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Cultural Change and Workforce Engagement

Introducing automation isn't just about machines – it's also about people. The forum emphasised the need to bring your workforce on the journey:

- **Transparent Communication:** Talking openly about the reasons for automation and its benefits helps avoid resistance and builds trust.
- **Internal Champions:** Having someone within the organisation lead the charge – a so-called “automation champion” – can help maintain momentum.
- **Attracting New Talent:** Automation can help bring in younger workers who are more comfortable with digital systems and expect modern working environments.
- **Ease of Use:** Modern systems often have intuitive, user-friendly interfaces, reducing the need for programming knowledge and empowering more staff to operate equipment.

Beyond Financial Returns: Strategic Benefits

The panel noted that automation offers more than just cost savings. It's increasingly seen as a strategic enabler:

- **Improved Safety:** Automating dangerous or repetitive tasks significantly reduces the risk of accidents.
- **Environmental Impact:** Automated systems often improve energy efficiency, contributing to net zero targets and appealing to sustainability-conscious customers.
- **Labour Shortage Solution:** With an ageing workforce and growing skills gap, automation can keep operations running and support long-term resilience.

Key Takeaways: Practical Next Steps for SMEs

The session concluded with a series of actionable recommendations for companies

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exploring automation:

1. Clearly Define the Problem: Understand what issue you're solving before looking at technology solutions.
2. Develop a Thorough URS: This helps communicate your needs to potential integrators and keeps projects on track.
3. Get Leadership Buy-In: Automation projects need support from management to succeed.
4. Explore Funding Early: Speak with banks or leasing companies about finance options tailored to SMEs.
5. Engage With the Industry: Attend trade shows and connect with trade bodies to discover trusted suppliers and integrators.
6. See It in Action: Accept Jonathan Thacker's invitation to visit Walsall Wheelbarrow Company and witness their automation journey first-hand.

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