



GUEST COMMENT Automation: the future of supply chains?

GUEST COMMENT 21 Jan 2022 10:30



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Caught between the chaos of coronavirus and fallout from Brexit, international supply chains are under serious strain. Add into the mix a **global labour shortage that shows no sign of abating**, and the cross-border flow of goods is set to get even trickier.

As economies reopen post-pandemic, employers across all sectors are struggling to fill vacancies. The residual consequences of Covid-19 are a big part of this – the public health emergency has fundamentally altered how and where people want to work. Britain’s departure from the European Union is also a factor, with UK companies unable to freely draw on the continent’s vast workforce like before.

Such is the interconnected nature of global commerce, upsets in one market can be felt thousands of miles away. And so, lacking the staff to pick, pack, load, and deliver their products, businesses around the world are facing a festive season that’s far from jolly.

Keeping up with demand

As brands navigate these colossal challenges, they are also working to meet customer demand that saw unprecedented growth as the pandemic took hold and continues to rise.

Last year, as lockdowns were called and public life retreated behind closed doors, shoppers took to the internet like never before. A peripheral interest for many people prior to the pandemic,

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ecommerce was suddenly a necessary part of everyday life.

Shoppers have grown accustomed to rock-bottom prices and next-day delivery. This raises the obvious question: can supply chains continue to meet customer expectations amid an era of unprecedented disruption?

The answer is yes – but it'll require some serious investment in innovative new technologies, and it could come with a cost shoppers and brands aren't willing to pay.

Robots to the rescue?

The merits of AI and machine learning are well documented: smart systems can speed up menial tasks, reduce the risk of human error, drive higher levels of productivity, and help businesses bolster their bottom lines.

There is, however, a human cost to the advance of automation, with fewer paying positions for real people. This is particularly pronounced in key supply chain sectors, such as warehousing.

Today, storage and distribution facilities are huge providers of jobs – but tomorrow, that may not be the case. So-called 'dark warehouses', great fulfilment centres staffed by semi-autonomous robots, are developing fast.

Whereas human workers require power-hungry lights to operate, machines can pick and pack products perfectly well in the dark, allowing this new breed of warehouse to run twenty-four hours a day, seven days a week.

Customers' call

Such a continuous operation would offer clear commercial benefits. But what of the warehouse's human workforce?

That, ultimately, is a question that companies must address with guidance from their customers. While shoppers want that last minute late-night order delivered the very next day, they are increasingly concerned about company values, including how an employer treats its staff.

If customers are truly worried about robots taking workers' jobs, they would have to commit to paying a little more or waiting a little longer for delivery from a brand committed to human employees. That is assuming shoppers are even aware of what level of automation is involved in fulfilling their order.

Customer demands are directing how companies adopt new supply chain technologies, with those that improve service and provide a better buying experience coming out on top.

To really tap into the needs and wants of their customers, businesses must leverage data in a meaningful way. This means utilising data mining tools that can help predict buying patterns, allowing brands to finesse supply chains so that the right products are in the right place at the right time. Attention to creating more efficiencies in supply chain through data and automation could lead to more jobs in engineering, design, management and repair.

Get this right, and businesses will have their customers on board as they explore new supply chain technologies and the potential of automation.

The image shows the cover of the 'United Kingdom Top500' report. At the top left is the 'RXUK TOP500' logo. To its right, it says 'In partnership with: Klarna. For Business'. The main title 'United Kingdom' is in large, bold, black letters, with 'Top500' in a white box below it. The cover features several overlapping images of the report itself. At the bottom, there is a red button that says 'READ THE REPORT'.

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