

NEWS

Social Networking Tools Penetrate Manufacturing

WITH THE PROSPECT OF NEAR-TERM BABY-BOOMER RETIREMENTS, manufacturers today face a need to transfer knowledge to a younger generation of workers. And as automation vendors and manufacturing software suppliers look to help meet that need, there are signs that today's social networking tools may be primed to play a role.

At Emerson Process Management (www.emersonprocess.com), the Austin, Texas-based automation supplier, for example, product engineers are looking toward collaborative systems such as plant "wikis" to help their customers ease the transition to a new set of workers. A wiki is a type of collaborative software program that typically allows Web pages to be created and collaboratively edited by a community of users.

PLANT WIKIS

Emerson plans to incorporate various plant wikis as part of its future control and simulation training systems, enabling operators, engineers and others to add information and knowledge that can be accessed by other users, says John Caldwell, Emerson's DeltaV product marketing manager for Advanced Control and Simulation Products. The plan is part of an overall initiative at Emerson focused on "Human Centered Design."

"We've got some mini-wikis going into our alarm system for our next release so that we can capture actions to take during alarm situations or during normal situations," Caldwell says. The concept will be expanded in future control system releases, he adds.

Another example comes from IFS North America Inc. (www.ifsworld.com/us), an Itasca, Ill.-based supplier of component-based enterprise resource planning (ERP) software built on service-oriented architecture (SOA) technology. The company on Dec. 14 said it is releasing results of a study showing that manufacturers want more integration between social networking tools and their ERP systems—and more social network-like, enterprise 2.0 functionality.

THEY WANT IT

The study, conducted for IFS by a third-party research organization, found that while 40 percent of survey respondents said that ERP and social networking integration was extremely or very important, the vast majority indicated that they wanted their ERP system to help them perform functions typically associated with social networks and other Web-based collaboration tools. A

full 62 percent of respondents said they wanted their ERP system to "capture and record the knowledge of senior experienced engineers and professionals so that it becomes part of your corporate knowledge base." Among manufacturers with more than \$1 billion in revenue, 72 percent said they wanted this capability.

"Enterprise 2.0 and social media tools are designed to draw information out of people, to get them to talk," said IFS North America Chief Technical Officer Rick Veague. "This will become more of a business-critical issue as the current generation of senior manufacturing operations and maintenance professionals prepare for retirement, only to be replaced by a smaller, less experienced but more technologically sophisticated generation. Wikis, threaded discussion boards and other features of social media

will become common fixtures in enterprise software—including IFS Applications (the company's ERP product)."

According to Dan Matthews, chief technology officer at IFS AB, the company's Swedish-based parent, IFS is taking seriously the challenges presented by the aging and shrinking workforce, and is introducing functionality to address these needs. IFS has already evolved IFS Applications in this direction with its new usability-enhanced interface, IFS Enterprise Explorer, which includes embedded search tools and knowledge-capture devices including "sticky notes," which allow users to informally add and edit comments to any record.

OUTSIDE WISDOM

"We have been told that IFS is fairly unique in that we operate a Web 2.0 community for our users," Matthews said. "We are planning to integrate this community directly with the applications so that our customers can access the wisdom of users outside of their organization as they learn the finer points and more advanced features of IFS Applications. We are also working to structure our embedded help information not as static documentation, but in the format of wikis, so that our customers can document their business processes and indeed, capture the knowledge of senior people in a format that has lasting enterprise value."

The IFS study was based on a survey of more than 260 manufacturing software decision makers. IFS North America planned to release an in-depth report on the findings before yearend 2009.

Wes Iversen

