



OPEN COMMS HELPING SECURE EUROPEAN MANUFACTURING JOBS

Manufacturing plants across Europe are being transformed by the adoption of Open Architecture control systems as the sector's recovery from recession continues.

Plant managers and control engineers are choosing to invest in the flexibility that will allow their production capabilities to easily adapt to changing demands over the coming years.

The trend is being followed by John Browett of the CC-Link Partner Association (CLPA), which promotes and develops the CC-Link open network technology.

"Interest in open networks, where equipment from a multitude of makers can freely exchange data, is continuing to increase," says Browett. "We are in our tenth anniversary year and have never been so busy. Our number of partners has now exceeded 1500 companies, making us one of the largest open network associations in the world."

He put this down to the resurgence of manufacturing that is helping economic growth across Europe as part of the recovery from global downturn of the last few years.

Looking at how Europe's national governments are setting their budgets it is clear to see that there is a renewed appreciation of how manufacturing creates high quality jobs that are better able to survive economic dips than that many other sectors. Economists confirm this from an intellectual standpoint, saying manufacturing enterprises are more robust than many others. Indeed, the German manufacturing sector is experiencing a rapid recovery partly due to government policies that helped it survive the downturn. And in the UK, while there has been mixed news about economic recovery, the manufacturing sector seems to be heading in the right direction.

"Modern manufacturing creates jobs both directly, and also in support industries such as science and engineering, packaging and design, distribution and logistics," explains Browett. "Thus manufacturing creates and distributes wealth and so helps stabilise the wider economy. And we also should not forget the positive impact manufacturing has on strengthening the service economy that depends on manufacturing workers."

With political and business leaders turning from the idea of quick profits to sustained returns, engineers now feel freer to suggest solutions that will better adapt to the changes that the future will inevitably bring.

Manufacturing is recovering or growing in most European countries, often at record rates. Browett points out that a vital characteristic of any modern factory is that it has to be able to quickly and efficiently change to meet new needs.

"In the past you would set up a plant to make a limited number of products in a continuous, indefinite run and expect the return on investment some years into the future. Now flexibility is the key, so that product changes can be made continuously".

"The Non-Stop Open Network™ capabilities of CC-Link allow factories to quickly be reconfigured to new products or new procedures with minimal disruption to production, by allowing easy reconfiguration. And once production is operating, CC-Link is designed to maintain production even in the face of adverse operating conditions and faults. This helps companies maintain response to the increasing demand."

"Manufacturing engineers have understood this for many years, but there has not been the will to implement open networks right up through the management chain. Now the tide is turning, and the technology is developing too."

Browett says the critical requirement is now simplification of industrial control network technologies. A plug and play format is required, the technology must also allow mixing of many manufacturers' devices and seamlessly connect shop floor to top floor. CC-Link offers this, as many plant integrators are now discovering.

The flexible topology and distributed control configuration reduces wiring cost and complexity significantly and thereby encourages continuous investment in production plants.



To enhance this even further the CLPA developed CC-Link IE, which redefines network performance by being the first to offer Gigabit Ethernet capacity. And although speed can be important, it is the ease of use that makes CC-Link IE really special. No specialist IT Ethernet knowledge is required of shop floor electricians who are often not skilled in that area.

"This makes control architecture simple to understand and to adapt over time. Maintenance and reconfiguration of control systems become very much easier, reducing the cost of ownership and extending system life".

"CC-Link IE is making control engineering a simple plug and play process that is no more difficult than updating your home computer, TV/Audio, or mobile phone".

About the CLPA

The CC-Link Partner Association (CLPA) is an international organisation with over 1,500 member companies worldwide. The partners' common objective is promotion and technical development of the family of CC-Link open network technologies. Over 1,100 certified products are now available from over 240 manufacturers. CC-Link is the leading industrial fieldbus in Asia and is becoming increasingly popular in Europe and the Americas. The European headquarters is in Germany, with offices throughout the continent.

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